

Parents Organizing

PURE *TIP SHEET*

Why should parents organize?

The school is a critically important community institution, since the quality of education shapes not only your child's individual future, but also the future of your community and society. Your support of the schools is important; involvement and action by several parents in a group can influence school policy-makers and result in decisions and choices that can benefit many children.

The initial objective of a parent group should be to gain recognition by other parents that it is an effective organization working to benefit the children at your school. Recognition by school officials should be a second objective, and it will come as a result of being known as an effective voice for parent and student concerns.

You have too much at stake – *become involved!*

What are parents' rights to organize?

Parents have a fundamental right to organize in order to address their concerns. Silence can easily be misinterpreted as approval and agreement.

Voicing an opinion or concern, especially by a group of parents, may result in a better education for your child.

You do not need permission of school officials, the school board, or the state department of education in order to form a parents' group or organization. You may want to advise local school officials of your plans, but you don't need their approval.

*Adapted from "Parent Involvement",
Center for Law and Education 1992*

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What are the first steps for organizing a parent group?

- Form a **core group** of parents who have concerns similar to yours. You can start a group with only 4 or 5 committed parents.
- Agree on the **purpose** of your group and set some short- and long-term goals. Some groups begin to address a specific problem or issue, and others seek to work on overall school improvement.
- **Recruit more parents** to join you, by telephoning neighbors and friends, talking to other parents at school meetings, and/or posting a notice in the newspaper or at a neighborhood-meeting place.

Then what?

- Choose a **name**; the name should be chosen by the members and should reflect the goals or special role of the group.
- Decide on **procedures** for your group – the frequency of meetings, the operating procedures for the meetings, how decisions will be made, who is eligible to vote, and affiliations with other groups.
- Write **bylaws**. A set of approved bylaws will clarify your purposes and operating procedures.
- Select **leadership**. Give notice to all members of the meeting at which officers will be selected. Encourage those with leadership potential to serve.
- Four jobs which may be filled:
Chairperson Newsletter Editor
Secretary Treasurer
- You may also wish to create **committees** to be responsible for working on the issues your group has chosen as priorities. Give every interested person an opportunity to be involved in a specific task. Responsibility should be shared rather than relying on one or two persons to do the work.
- Find a **meeting place**. Your group may be able to meet in a public place – the school, a religious facility, a community meetinghouse, a library. Or, meetings may be held in homes of the members.

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What can the group do to become visible and effective?

- Publicize the group's name, leaders, address, and purpose so that school officials, parents, and others can get in touch with you.
- Send a one-page press release to the newspaper, announcing the formation of your group and inviting all interested parents to attend the next meeting.
- Have members contact the administrators of the school to talk to them about the group and its goals.
- Send representatives to the school board meetings and look for opportunities to participate in policy making activities.
- Look for support from community organizations, local businesses, and media.
- Begin to plan your strategy for change, gather data and information on the issue you are trying to influence, prepare a report or sponsor a public event to present your issue, consider ways to influence school and other officials.

More tips for creating an effective parent group

1. **Start small.** For a first activity try to choose something which is easy to accomplish and visible to all the community. Win one issue at a time. Develop a track record of small victories for children and parents. Work for basic changes that will help your children learn better.
2. Always be **well informed** about school policies, state laws, and parents rights. Educate yourselves about what should be going on in an effective school; gather accurate information about a problem and alternative solutions before taking action. Look for good points and try to project positive things that are happening in your school.
3. **Stay committed.** Be patient and persistent, even when the going gets rough. If your first effort is not successful, explore other projects. You may have to work patiently over a period of months and years before you see major results of your effort.

Questions parents ask about organizing a group

Do we need a group or are existing organizations effective?

In Chicago, Local School Councils have been very effective in providing a forum for parent concerns and ideas and involving parents in school improvement. However, only 6 parents can be elected to an LSC, so many schools with LSCs also have a PTA, PTO, or other group with a larger membership. PTA's and PTO's may be organized mainly for social purposes or fund-raising and may serve as a "rubber stamp" for existing policies. Parents can question and try to change school policies and practices, whereas teachers are not as free to oppose the school which employs them. Many parents form a new group – one that can work closely with the PTA, but which focuses on helping parents know and exercise their rights and responsibilities.

Can we limit membership to parents only or should we allow teachers and administrators to be active members of our group?

You have the right to decide who is eligible to become a group member of your group. Many parent groups choose to limit voting membership to parents, so that they can fully represent the parents' point of view.

How should we decide which issues to start with?

- *How urgent is the problem?
- *Will it unite (rather than divide) parents?
- *Is it "winnable"?
- *Is the problem of interest to a majority of the members of your group?
- *Is the problem only a symptom of a more basic issue which should be addressed?

Should our group become incorporated?

*If your group is formed for limited, volunteer efforts, and does not intend to engage in fund-raising activities, you may decide to remain as an unincorporated association.

*Incorporation as a nonprofit organization has these advantages:

- individual members cannot be held personally liable for any actions of the group.
- it is easier to file for federal tax-exempt status.

*It is advisable to seek the services of an attorney to submit articles of incorporation to the appropriate state office

How can our group obtain tax-exempt status?

*As a nonprofit organization you can seek tax-exempt status under Section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code by submitting the proper application forms to the Internal Revenue Service.

*Tax-exempt status means your group does not have to pay taxes on your income or receipts; contributors to your organization may take a tax deduction for charitable contributions, and you are eligible for reduced mailing rates.

*Assistance from a lawyer will facilitate the process. Be sure to check with your lawyer about the legality of such activities as working to elect a school board candidate, if you are operating as a tax-exempt organization.

What if we experience negative action from school officials against our children because of our activism?

*Raise this issue with the principal, superintendent, or school board. Emphasize that parents, as consumers and taxpayers, have every right to form a group and to question the policies and practices of the school if you disagree with them.

*Highlight the positive and constructive things you are doing. Focus on common goals with the school, to improve the quality of education for all children.

* Consult a lawyer if you have serious concerns about your children's situation.

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