

# **THE POWER OF PARENT PARTICIPATION**

How to Create a Powerful Parent Organization

**PARENTS UNITED FOR RESPONSIBLE EDUCATION (PURE)**

2002



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**Appendix:** School Reform Act, Illinois school code sections  
*describing local school council elections, operations, and powers and duties.*

## **PURE's mission and programs**

Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE) exists to build support for and enhance the quality of public education in the city of Chicago by informing parents about educational issues, bringing the views of parents into the decision-making process, and acting as an advocate for parents in their relationships with the school administration. PURE is a citywide organization, run by and for Chicago Public School (CPS) parents.

PURE's Board of Directors, membership, staff, and constituency are multiracial, multi-cultural, and economically diverse. Each year, PURE provides direct assistance or referrals to hundreds of parents and local school council (LSC) members calling our hotline for help and information.

PURE provides workshops for LSCs in all areas of their responsibility. PURE also offers a variety of workshops to meet parents' expressed needs. PURE publishes four newsletters, produces cable tv shows, and runs a web site to keep parents, LSC members, and other school leaders informed of current educational changes and issues. PURE works actively to focus attention on the parents' perspective in any discussion of critical school problems through such means as press conferences, public testimony, and editorials.

**This book outlines some of PURE's history and successful activities  
to increase powerful parent participation in the schools.**

**It is dedicated to the thousands of Chicago parents and local school  
council members who work every day, often against tough odds,  
to improve their children's education.**

# The Power of Parent Participation

## How to Create a Powerful Parent Organization

### Introduction

Research has proven beyond a doubt that parent involvement in a child's education is a key factor in the child's academic success. Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE) is an effective parent-organized, parent-run group established in 1987 and based in Chicago. PURE's overall goal is to assure a high-quality education for all children. Our main strategy is to support active, informed, meaningful parent participation in the public schools. This book outlines some of PURE's history and successful activities to increase powerful parent participation.

**PURE's strengths center on several key components.**

- *Diversity.* PURE has been active in every Chicago neighborhood. Our Board of Directors and constituency has always reflected the racial, ethnic and economic diversity of Chicago public school families.
- *Authentic base.* PURE is recognized as a group of parents who work with and for parents.
- *Grounding in the law.* PURE helped to write the legislation that created local school councils (LSCs), the governing bodies elected at each local public school in Chicago. PURE provides ongoing training for LSCs and for other parents on their legal rights and responsibilities.
- *Credibility.* PURE staffers are experts in the law and school administrative procedures. PURE does research in key educational issues and presents accurate, helpful information to parents in a user-friendly format. PURE prepares materials in both English and Spanish.
- *Strong action.* PURE organizes parents and implements legal strategies when necessary.

PURE has learned:

- *Parents are powerful:* Parents can do just about anything given the right tools and support.
- *Parents are essential voices in school reform:* Through participation in school governance activities, working with teachers to enhance classroom instruction, or lobbying political representatives, parents make a difference.
- *Education is hard.* The education arena is full of jargon, disagreement, and politics. Parents have to learn how to work in and with the educational system. Absorbing and using this information is a challenge, but with effort and support, parents can learn what we need to know.



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## I. How PURE Started

Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE) originated during a 19-day Chicago Public School (CPS) strike in 1987. The primary organizers of PURE were parents and teachers from Chicago's Inter-American Magnet School, led by parents Joy and Bernie Noven. Bernie was also a CPS social worker. PURE organized weekly meetings at a city park which quickly attracted several hundred people. We held a teach-in for our children outside of the Mayor's office in City Hall and, eventually, a 1,000-person march on City Hall. At the end of that march, we met with Mayor Harold Washington who assured us that the schools would open the following Monday. They did.

After the strike ended, school reform advocates across the city agreed that sweeping changes were needed to improve our schools. PURE continued to hold regular meetings to keep parents actively involved in planning these changes. In the spring of 1988, we were invited, along with other group and individuals, to the office of Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan to hammer out the school reform law. The cornerstone of the new law was the creation of elected local school councils (LSCs) at each school.

### **Great opportunity: parent majority local school councils**

PURE developed our own list of 13 objectives we wanted to see incorporated into the law. One of our most significant points, resisted by other groups, was that the majority of LSC members should be parents. All 13 of our objectives were written into the law.

Until the law was passed, our efforts went towards lobbying for passage of the law, informing the public about the law, and combating special interest groups which were trying to sabotage our efforts. We also filed a lawsuit charging the Chicago Board of

Education and the Illinois State Board of Education with misuse of \$2 billion of State Chapter I money, funds which were supposed to help low-income students.

After the law was passed, we organized parents and gave workshops to encourage parents, teachers, and community members to run for the LSCs. More than 17,000 candidates ran in that first election. After the election we trained thousands of LSC members in the details of the new law. We held other citywide workshops in areas of interest for LSCs. We began to published a newsletter which provided up-to-date information about education and school reform issues.

By 1988, PURE had established by-laws, a permanent Board of Directors, and a paid membership which has grown to nearly 800 members in 2002.

### **What are Local School Councils (LSCs)?**

LSCs are elected bodies at nearly every Chicago Public Schools (CPS) elementary, middle and high school. The LSC has 6 parents, 2 community members who are not parents of students at the school, 2 teachers, the principal, and, in high schools, a student member. The parents and community members are elected by the parents and community residents around the school. Teachers are selected by the school staff. These members serve for a two-year term. High school student members serve for one year. By law, the LSC chairperson must be a parent representative.

The LSC's major responsibilities are to approve the school budget and annual strategic plan (called the school improvement plan), to evaluate the principal every year and to decide every four years if they want to renew the principal's contract or hire a new principal. This is the strongest site-based management system in the nation.

LSCs usually meet about once a month, though they may also hold special meetings to vote on budget and other items. The meetings are open to the public with a few exceptions (in cases where the LSC discusses personnel issues, for example) and the meetings must be posted with an announcement giving the time, date, and location of the meeting and what will be on the agenda. Parents and other interested people should also be able to call the school and find out when the meetings are held.

LSCs can be very effective in making change happen at schools. Many LSCs have committees where non-LSC members can participate. The public can also go to LSC meetings and speak out about what's happening in the school.