

## School Councils

### Parents as Partners in School Decision Making

Just as parents are important to their children's success in school, schools also do better when parents are fully respected and engaged as partners with schools. To be involved as a partner means that parents' help make important decisions about their children's education and about the school program.

#### State Law Recognizes Parents' Role

The *Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993* (MERA) is the major state law governing public education in Massachusetts. MERA requires that **all** public elementary, secondary, and independent vocational schools establish a School Council<sup>2</sup>.

The purpose of the School Council is to ensure that parents and communities have a meaningful role in shaping school policies and programs through shared decision making. Councils give parents the opportunity to shape school policy by giving them an equal voice—along with teachers, principals, and community partners—in school decision making.

Schools give different names to these Councils, such as "School Site Councils," "School-Centered Decision Making Teams," or "School Advisory Teams." Since the law refers to them as "School Councils," that term is used in this *Bulletin*.

#### School Council Membership

A School Council is a representative, school building-based group. "Representative" means that the key groups

that are part of the school must have a place on the Council.

MERA specifies that Council membership must include:

- The **school principal**, who is the co-chair;
- **Parents** of students attending the school who must be elected by the parents of the students in the school;
- **Teachers** selected by other teachers in the school;
- **Community members**; and
- At the high-school level, **students**.

The law requires that parents "have parity with professional personnel" on Councils. "Parity" means that parents must be equal in number to the teachers and the principal. The law also states that Councils should represent the racial and ethnic diversity of the school and community.

#### Responsibilities of the School Council

Each school principal is responsible for establishing a representative process for selecting Council members. As co-chair, the principal must set a date for the first meeting. It must take place no later than forty days after the first day of school. At this meeting, a second co-chair is to be selected by the Council as a whole.

The law lists these major areas in which Councils are to assist principals:

1. Adopting educational goals for the school



#### All Parents' Voices Matter!

While School Councils give parents a voice in school matters, they are not parent organizations. Massachusetts law requires that parents on School Councils be elected by parents of students attending the school at elections held by the "local recognized parent-teacher organization," such as the school's PTA, PTO, or Parent Advisory Council. Therefore, the strength of the parent voice on the Council is dependent upon there being a strong, inclusive parent group at the school where the diversity of parent voices is invited and respected.

Parents who are not members of a parent-teacher or parent organization are still free to run for election and vote for parent representatives to the Council.

2. Identifying educational needs of students in the school
3. Reviewing the annual school building budget
4. Developing a school improvement plan which must correspond to the district improvement plan

<sup>1</sup> In addition to a natural parent, MERA includes a legal guardian or other person standing in for parents, such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the child's welfare.

<sup>2</sup> M.G.L. Chapter 71, Sec. 59C.

5. Reviewing the student handbook each spring to determine if any changes are needed in the Code of Conduct or disciplinary policy for the next school year. (Councils for high schools only)

Although the law describes the role of Councils as “assisting principals” in the above areas, it goes on to state that elected school committees at the district level may grant additional authority to School Councils in the area of educational policy.

## School Improvement Plan

The most important work of the School Council is the development of the School Improvement Plan. It is in this

work that the entire school community develops goals and plans strategies to address identified needs. In developing the School Improvement Plan, parents can have an important impact by making sure that issues important to them and their children are addressed. Areas of interest might include:

- Class size, its impact on student learning, and a plan to reduce class size;
- Training to help school staff work effectively with families;
- Designing and implementing parent/family involvement activities;
- Providing information, training, and materials to help families support their children’s education at home;

- Establishing a welcoming school environment;
- Extra-curricular activities; and
- Meeting diverse learning needs of the students, including students with disabilities and students who are English language learners.

The Council annually submits the School Improvement Plan to the local school committee for review and approval. If the school committee does not review the school improvement plan within thirty days of receiving the plan, the plan is automatically approved.

## ALL PARENTS HAVE A RIGHT TO HAVE THEIR VOICES HEARD IN THEIR CHILDREN’S EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS!

Working together in partnership with the school principal and School Council members is an important way for parents to contribute their strengths and have their concerns addressed. Parents can raise questions and concerns that otherwise would not be heard.

This *Bulletin* outlines steps that schools must take to make sure that parents’ voices are heard. Here are things you can do to be involved:

- Find out what parent organizations are active in your school. If there is more than one—such as a Title I Advisory Council, Special

Education Advisory Council, an advisory group for students who are learning English, or a group for migrant families—pick one that suits your interests and join it. Make sure your group’s special interests are voiced at the School Council meetings.

- If there is no parent organization, talk with other parents about starting one. Ask the principal how parents are elected to the School Council.
- Find out when your School Council meets. The meetings are open to the public. Attend.

- Get to know your School Council parent representatives.
- Some Councils have a stronger governing or policy setting role than others. Find out if your School Committee has granted additional authority to School Councils in your district.
- To learn more about School Councils, please call the Massachusetts PIRC toll-free at (877)-471-0980 for a copy of the “Massachusetts School Council Handbook.”

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