

# Building Successful Partnerships



**Increasing  
Parent/Family  
Involvement  
Through  
Local School  
Councils**

**Georgia  
PTA<sup>®</sup>**  
*everychild.one voice.*



# Increasing Parent/Family Involvement Through Local School Councils

*A Guide for Parent Teacher Associations*

## INTRODUCTION

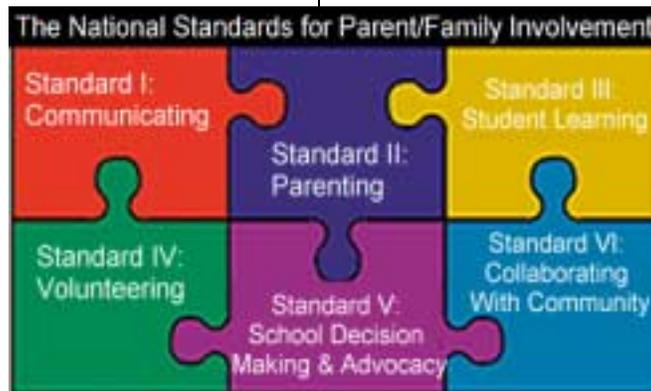
Research overwhelmingly supports the fact that a high-quality education cannot be successfully achieved without active parent and family involvement. When parents are involved, students tend to achieve more, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents' education level. Students generally have higher grades and test scores, better attendance, and more consistently completed homework. Schools with a high degree of parent involvement have more support from families and better reputations in the community.

Parental involvement also positively impacts student behavior and motivation. Students with involved parents are less likely to drop out of school, use alcohol or drugs, or exhibit other antisocial behavior.

The PTA has long recognized the need to involve parents and families in their children's education. In 1997, the National PTA adopted the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs to help schools establish partnerships with parents and the community.

Each standard addresses a different type of parent involvement:

- **COMMUNICATING** – Communication between home and school is regular, two-way and meaningful.
- **PARENTING** – Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
- **STUDENT LEARNING** – Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
- **VOLUNTEERING** – Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought.
- **SCHOOL DECISION MAKING AND ADVOCACY** – Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
- **COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY** – Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.



The formation of local school councils in Georgia is consistent with many of the standards. This booklet will help PTAs and parents understand how the local school council functions, and explain how PTAs and parents can interact with the local school council.

Local school councils are one piece of an effective parent involvement program. Effective programs will implement all six standards for parent/family involvement in order to have their most powerful impact.

## WHAT IS SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT?

School-based management is a strategy to improve education by transferring decision-making authority from the state or school district levels to the local school. School-based management emphasizes shared decision-making between all stakeholders of the school - teachers, parents, community members, and even students – with the main goal of improving student achievement. School-based management should also result in more efficient use of resources, greater creativity in program design, improved morale of teachers, and increased community and business support for schools.

The decisions empowered to school-based management teams vary greatly across the country. Local school councils in Kentucky are an example where the school-based management team has absolute control over many decisions at the local school. The Kentucky councils are empowered to make policy decisions concerning school budget (including staff salaries and professional development), curriculum and textbooks, assignment of students to programs, discipline and classroom management. The councils have diminished the power of school boards and superintendents, often resulting in conflicts and confusion related to school policies and personnel issues.

In Georgia, local school councils exist to *advise and make recommendations* concerning policy issues. According to Georgia law, council decisions are subject to the review of the local board of education, and the principal is the leader of the school. The local school council provides a forum for the school, parents, and the community to discuss and make recommendations to improve student achievement. Although local school councils are advisory bodies, with proper training and direction, the council will have a positive impact on students and schools.

## WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL?

The A+ Education Reform Act of 2000 established local school councils to “bring communities and schools closer together in a spirit of cooperation to solve difficult education problems, improve academic achievement, provide support for teachers and administrators, and bring parents into the school-based decision-making process.” [O.C.G.A. 20-2-85]<sup>1</sup> The council is comprised of seven members – two parents or guardians of students enrolled in the school, two certified teachers, two businesspersons, and the principal. The members serve two-year terms from July 1 to June 30. The members of the council are accountable to the constituents they serve and shall:

- Maintain a school-wide perspective on issues;
- Regularly participate in council meetings;
- Participate in information and training programs;
- Act as a link between the school council and the community;
- Encourage the participation of parents and others within the school community; and
- Work to improve student achievement and performance. [O.C.G.A. 20-2-86 (k)]

### *Parent Members*

Parents or guardians of students enrolled in the school are eligible to serve as parent members of the school council. If a parent is an employee of the school system and works at the same school their child attends, they are not eligible to be a parent member of that council.

The Georgia PTA encourages its members to seek election on school councils. PTA members and officers may serve on the council if they meet the eligibility requirements. The electing body is

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<sup>1</sup> O.C.G.A. is an abbreviation for the Official Code of Georgia Annotated – the listing of all statutes passed by the Georgia General Assembly. The unannotated version of the Georgia Code is available online at: [www.legis.state.ga.us/cgi-bin/gl\\_codes\\_detail.pl?code=1-1-1](http://www.legis.state.ga.us/cgi-bin/gl_codes_detail.pl?code=1-1-1)

comprised of all the parents and/or guardians who are eligible to serve as a parent member.

### *Teacher Members*

Teachers must be certificated, employed fulltime (at least four of the six school segments) at the school, and not be in an administrative position to be eligible to serve as a teacher member of the school council. The electing body is comprised of all teachers who are eligible to serve as a teacher member.

### *Business Members*

An individual must be employed by a business partner of the school, or if there are not business partners of the school, by a local business in the community to be eligible to serve on the school council. The local board of education is responsible for defining “business partner” and “local business community”. The definition could include senior citizens, clergy, civic organization, and other community members. The local board of education selects one business member and the five non-business members of the school council select the other business member.

### *Election Procedures*

The law specifies that the election of the council shall occur in May, with at least a two-week notice of the meeting to the electing bodies. The principal is responsible for conducting the elections. The election should not be held *during* a PTA meeting, because only PTA members can vote during PTA meetings. However, it is acceptable for the principal to conduct the election prior to or after a PTA meeting.

In keeping with our nonpartisan policy, PTAs should not endorse candidates for local school council positions. It is appropriate for PTAs to provide information to the voters concerning the background and viewpoints of the candidates.

The Georgia School Council Institute has further information on election procedures in its Georgia School Council Handbook. The handbook may be downloaded from the Institute’s website ([www.gsci.org](http://www.gsci.org)). Click on Council Resources from the menu.

## **WHAT IS THE LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL’S ROLE?**

The local school council’s role is to:

- Focus on improving student achievement by recommending changes to school policies and programs;
- Review budget requirements to ensure efficient use of resources;
- Analyze and recommend strategies to improve the school’s learning environment (safety, discipline, extracurricular activities, facilities, etc.); and
- Recommend strategies for increasing parental and community involvement in the school.

The council will review the school improvement plan, reports from the principal concerning student achievement, and the results of audits conducted by the Office of Education Accountability.

To help accomplish these goals, the council may appoint committees, study groups or task forces and may utilize existing or new school advisory groups.

There are a few specific tasks assigned to the council by law. In the case of a vacancy in the position of school principal, the council will make a recommendation to the school board from a list of qualified applicants submitted by the local board of education and the superintendent. When the Office of Education Accountability awards bonuses to schools earning an “A” or “B” on their report cards, the council will be responsible for distributing the award among the non-certificated personnel. The council will also be involved in hearings and on-site evaluations that may be required for low performing schools.

## **WHAT IS THE PRINCIPAL’S ROLE?**

The principal plays a critical role in the leadership of the council. Under the law, the principal serves as chair of the local school council. The principal must also:

- Set the agenda for meetings after consulting council members;

- Ensure that the elections for the council are conducted;
- Ensure that the council receives training;
- Ensure that meetings are conducted in accordance with the Open Meetings and Open Records Act;
- Develop the school improvement plan and submit it to the council for its review;
- Provide the council with budgetary information;
- Speak for and represent the council before the local board of education; and
- Communicate all council requests for information and assistance to the superintendent.

## WHAT IS THE LOCAL BOARD OF EDUCATION'S ROLE?

The local board of education is responsible for establishing local school councils. By October 1, 2003, all schools in Georgia must have local school councils.

The local board of education supports the councils by providing requested non-confidential information, including budget documents. The local board also ensures that a school system employee is available to attend council meetings as requested to respond to questions about board policies and action, administrative procedures, and other information provided to the council.

The local board of education “shall receive all recommendations of the school council, including the annual report, and shall have the authority to overturn any decision of the school council” by majority vote. [O.C.G.A. 20-2-86 (q)] The board must give public notice and written notice to council members at least seven days prior to consideration at a board meeting. Council members must be given the opportunity to present information in support of the school council’s decision.

Although the council is an advisory body, this section of the law does lend added importance to

council decisions. Many council recommendations will be within the principal’s authority to approve; however, some recommendations may require exemptions from certain board policies and procedures to be implemented. This provision provides a mechanism for councils to pursue these exemptions.

The local board of education may also delegate additional decision-making authority to the local school council after the council has been successfully operating for two years, and upon the school’s receiving a high performance designation by the Office of Education Accountability.

## TRAINING – THE KEY FOR SUCCESS

A study conducted of 14 schools governed by local school councils in Chicago found four types of governance had evolved:

- Limited governance – minimal participation by parent and community members and usually dominated by the principal, with the support of teacher members.
- Moderate governance – significant discussion generated by at least one parent or community member. These councils were generally dominated by the principal, but were able to rise to meet crises when required.
- Balanced governance – genuine leadership shared between the council chairman (a parent serves in this role in Chicago) and the principal, and broad and deep participation by most council members in discussions, committee meetings and decisions.
- Excessive governance – characterized by excessive conflict and intrusion into the school’s day-to-day administration. These councils were dominated by parent and/or community members, met more frequently and for longer periods of time than most councils, and engage in discussions that

frequently are adversarial and full of conflict.<sup>2</sup>

A balanced governance structure can be best obtained by ensuring adequate training for all school council members. The Georgia School Council Institute has recommended that this training include parent involvement strategies, problem solving and conflict resolution, school-community communication strategies, sources of funding and school budgets, factors affecting student learning and school board policies. The law requires that council training be offered by the local board of education at least twice during the school year.

## HOW SHOULD PTAs INTERACT WITH LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCILS?

Part of the PTA's mission is to *support and speak on behalf of children and youth in the schools, in the community and before governmental bodies and other organizations that make decisions affecting children*. It is the PTA's responsibility to participate in local school decisions to assure access to an equitable and quality education for all children. With parent and PTA support, local school councils will have a greater chance for success.

The PTA should appoint a PTA/local school council liaison to follow the activities of the local school council. This person would be responsible for:

- Attending local school council meetings;
- Keeping PTA members and parents informed about the activities of the local school council; and
- Sharing parental and community reaction to school policies and programs with the local school council.

If there is an active PTA member serving on the local school council, he/she might be willing to also serve as the PTA/LSC liaison.

### *Attending Local School Council Meetings*

Local school councils must follow the requirements of the Open Meetings Act [O.C.G.A 50-14-1].

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Weiss and Todd Ziebarth. "School-Based Management"; Progress of Education Reform. Education Commission of the States. Vol. 2, No.5, April-May 2001

Council meetings must be held monthly at the school. The time, place and dates of regular meetings of the council must be announced prior to the meetings and posted within the school. Council members must receive notification of meetings at least seven days prior to the meeting. Special called meetings of the council must be posted at the school at least 24 hours in advance; however, council members must receive seven days prior notification.

PTAs should be able to easily find out the meeting schedule for the local school council; however, determining the agenda may be somewhat more difficult. An agenda for the meeting must be posted sometime prior to the meeting and shall be made available upon request. The law still allows items to be discussed during the meetings that are not on the agenda.

Council meetings are open to the public, unless the council votes to close the meeting to consult with legal council pertaining to pending litigation, to discuss future acquisition of real estate, to discuss the status of an employee, or to consider a matter that involves disclosure of an individual student's record. These exceptions will generally exceed the scope of the council's work. Visual and/or sound recordings of the meetings are allowed.

Opportunities to address the local school council during meetings depend on the adopted agenda. PTAs should encourage local school councils to set aside a portion of the meeting for public input, similar to the procedures established by many local boards of education.

Local school councils must follow the requirements of the Open Records Act. PTAs may request to review and copy documents, papers, reports, and similar material received by the local school council. The school district may charge a copying fee, not to exceed 25 cents per page.

### *Keeping PTA Members Informed*

The parent members of the council are accountable to the parents in the school and are charged with acting as a link between the council and the community. The PTA can help the parent members of the council achieve these goals by offering established methods of communicating with

parents. Encourage council parent members to publish articles in the PTA newsletter about council activities. Invite them to PTA meetings to keep parents informed and solicit input on issues. Improving communication between the council and the parents is a great way for the PTA to show support for the council and to increase parental involvement in council decisions.

If the parent council members are reluctant to work with the PTA, the PTA/local school council liaison should be responsible for keeping PTA members informed about council activities.

### *Sharing Parental and Community Feedback With the Local School Council*

A potential barrier to obtaining parental and community feedback regarding council decisions will be time. PTAs should encourage council members to allow adequate time between council decisions to solicit community input.

If the PTA/local school council liaison is also a council member, it is obviously easier to provide feedback to the council. If the liaison is not a member of the council, then the PTA should rely on techniques used to communicate with other decision-makers – write letters, ask to speak at a meeting, call or meet with individual council members. Be sure that the position you are advocating for has been adopted by your PTA or is an existing position of the Georgia or National PTA.

### *Bringing Issues to the Council*

PTAs should consider the local school council as an avenue for addressing issues of school-wide concern. The principal develops the agenda for each local school council meeting, so PTA representatives may need to meet with him/her to explain the issue. Be prepared to explain why this issue is important to the students and parents, what research has been obtained about the issue, and the PTA's position. Request that the local school council consider the issue and that a PTA representative be allowed to present the PTA's position.

If the PTA is not successful in getting on the agenda, approach council members. Any item may

be added to the agenda of a local school council meeting at the request of three or more council members.

### *Advocating for Parent/Family Involvement Policies*

The local school council is a logical place to examine parent and family involvement in the school. PTAs should share information about the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs with council members. Arrange for council members' participation in a Building Successful Partnerships (BSP) workshop and purchase a copy of the National PTA's book; *Building Successful Partnerships: A Guide for Developing Parent and Family Involvement Programs* for the local school council members.

The local school council may appoint committees, study groups, or task forces. PTAs should suggest that a committee or action team be appointed to develop and draft a comprehensive parent/family involvement policy and to develop action plans for implementing the policy. Further information on the developing an action plan can be found on the National PTA's website ([www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)).

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

*CAN PTA BOARD MEMBERS SERVE ON THE LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL?* Yes! PTA members, if otherwise eligible, are encouraged to seek election to school councils.

*HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT REPRESENTATIVES TO THE COUNCIL DO NOT HAVE HIDDEN AGENDAS?* An informed voting body is the best means of ensuring the best candidate is elected to the local school council. Educate parents, teachers and the community about the role of the local school council and the election process. PTAs can even publish information about the candidates and their views on different issues.

*CAN PTAS ENDORSE CANDIDATES FOR LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL POSITIONS?* PTAs should not support or oppose candidates for local school councils because of our nonpartisan policy.

*CAN A PTA PROVIDE FUNDING FOR A LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCIL PROGRAM?* PTAs should not be considered the funding source for local school councils; however, PTAs are encouraged to partner with local school councils to focus on student achievement.

As with all PTA expenditures, funding allocations should promote the mission of the PTA and have the approval of the PTA membership. PTAs should also fully investigate the ramifications of any equipment purchases regarding ongoing maintenance and repair. Generally, donated equipment will become property of the school district. PTAs should *never* fund school employee salaries, directly or indirectly, because of liability and equity issues.

*HOW ARE LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCILS GOVERNED?*

Many of the requirements for local school councils are established in the A+ Education Reform Act of 2000. Local school councils also adopt bylaws that may contain more specificity about certain procedures, such as the election process.

*ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS REQUIRED TO HAVE LOCAL SCHOOL COUNCILS?* Charter schools already have a unique governance structure requiring parental and community involvement. Charter schools do not have local school councils.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION...

More information on the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement can be found on the National PTA's website at [www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org), under "Parent Involvement." Contact the Georgia PTA office at 404-659-0214 or 1-800-PTA Today for information about BSP workshops.

More resources concerning local school councils can be found on the Georgia School Council Institute (GSCI) website at [www.gsci.org](http://www.gsci.org). The website also contains several reports that allow users to analyze assessment data for their schools. GSCI offers training in test data analysis and school improvement plans. Contact GSCI at 770-690-9797 for more information.

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