

# Two School Councils Making a Difference

by Dawn Benson

## Chicago's Reforms: A Council with "Teeth"

Linda's story first. Her name is at the top of a list of ten names on the wall of the main entrance in a Chicago inner-city school. The list is of the "Local School Council" (LSC) and Linda, a parent at the school, is the chair. School councils have been established at each Chicago school as a result of the Chicago School Reform Act sometimes called "the most radical experiment in the history of public education". These LSC's have been given true decision-making powers.

Linda's school council is composed of six parents, two community representatives, two teachers and the principal. Parents are elected for a two year term by a vote of the parents with children attending the school. Parents who are also employees of the system are not eligible to vote or to serve on the LSC as a parent rep.

Linda and a set of concerned parents and teachers decided that they would run as a "slate" in the last election. Their mandate: to make some changes at the school. They had specific concerns about the administration of their school and wanted to make sure that "the educational needs of children and accountability for what happened at the school" would become a top priority of the school administrator. Both parents and staff members were seeking more collaboration and consultation in all areas of decision-making and planning.

They were surprised and thrilled when they were elected! And the "making a difference" began immediately. The first impact was the resignation of the school principal when he discovered who had been elected! His management style (described as heavy-handed), coupled with his seeming (to the parents) lack of interest in their children and their education, had not made him popular with the newly-elected council. Previous councils had seemed to be under his influence and had not seemed as committed to the students as these parents wanted.

During the first week of May 1997, the council was in the middle of the job-search for "their" new principal. From the over one hundred applications received, Linda was confident that the school council would be able to choose a principal to care deeply about their school and work diligently on behalf of their children.

## An "Advisory" Council Making a Difference

Jane is the chair of a parent council in a province where councils have advisory powers only. The Parent Advisory Council (PAC) meetings at her daughter's school had seemed boring and tedious and the topics not important to her and so, previous to this year she had rarely attended. The absence of parents willing to serve on this year's executive and her work involvement in an educational field led several parents to ask her to take "her turn" serving as the PAC chair.

Jane saw the role of parents as being much more than hot-dog helpers and decided that, if she was going to be the one organizing the meetings, then she would create the type of meetings that she would enjoy attending! For starters, she changed the format of the meetings. Committee reports were dealt with in as expeditious a manner as possible. Sometimes they were shared through written communication, sometimes at the end of the meeting, and always as succinctly as possible.

The focus of the meetings became: "What educational topics are really important to us?" Then she made sure that the focus or topic for the evening was not a "lecture-format" (she said she was tired of parents being lectured at or "talked-down-to" by educators) but instead some kind of interactive session or involvement by a speaker who came to talk "with" — not "to" — the parents! One of Jane's requests of the principal and the school staff was that the parent council be informed of the school's provincial test results and the action plans the school would be establishing in relation to the test scores. Needless to say her request was not met with great enthusiasm!

When her PAC newsletter advertising a meeting to examine the school's performance on this provincial testing and to discuss academic goals for the next year was ready to go out to parents, she found the school staff upset about the newsletter because some of the school's test scores were included. Initially, the teachers were unwilling even to give the newsletter to their students. They wanted the newsletter rewritten (either without test score information or else with the inclusion of information on testing that they approved). The parent council had to insist that if the letter wouldn't be distributed by the school, then the PAC parents would hand the letters out to students as they left the school grounds! The advertised meeting did take place, and more than 60 parents (a record number for a PAC meeting) showed up to talk about the school's academic performance.

Jane continues to seek for ways for the parent group and the school staff to talk and work together about improving student performance. The staff as yet is unwilling to include the parents' input in any part of their school growth plan and Jane feels that they still aren't listening to the parents regarding "educational" issues. The administrator has asked Jane to be patient because before she came along this year, no one had ever asked the questions she has been asking! Jane feels that the parents' requests are still "put down" but she is hopeful that their quest for more measurement will eventually be successful and until this happens she says, "We are still plugging away".

*(Mrs. Benson (dbenson@sd83.bc.ca) is a PhD candidate who has done research in the area of parent involvement in schools.)*