

Power Analysis: Who Can, Who Should, Who Will

Schools and school districts have many decision-makers, both groups and individuals. Sometimes their authority and responsibilities are clear-cut; other times they overlap or are shared. This section gives a general overview of who these people and groups are and what they control. Remember, though, that school districts differ from place to place. To understand the division of authority and responsibility in your school district, begin with some research online or at the library. Look at your city's "government services" or "elected officials" listings for a description of how the schools are run and managed. Then, you can follow up with specific questions in a phone call or meeting with local or district information officers.

At The School

Principals lead schools, academically and administratively. A good principal can set a school climate that is conducive to learning and intellectual engagement – not just for students but for the teaching staff as well. Large schools also may have **deans** or **assistant** or **vice principals** who share in these leadership responsibilities.

The amount of freedom a principal has to make decisions and shape a school's atmosphere varies from district to district. Usually they have a great deal of leeway within policy guidelines set by boards of education and superintendents. The exception to this generalization may be curriculum. The move toward state standards and federal tests has heavily circumscribed flexibility in this area.

It doesn't take long, when you enter a school, to begin getting a flavor of the school "climate" or "culture." Is it a place where students, teachers and administrators are respected and challenged? Is it a functional office that provides its "workers" what they need to do their jobs? Schools are work sites for teachers, support staff, paraprofessionals and others. As such, the climate created by building leadership affects all who work there, as well as students who attend the school, and their parents. In a well-run

In Denver, New York and other cities, organized parents have won campaigns to replace school principals, help choose new school leadership and ensure better management and higher expectations within schools. Perhaps the most radical organizing to change school culture has been done by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Texas, where a network of “Alliance Schools” focuses on establishing a learning community that engages students, parents, teachers and other staff.

school, **teachers** may work together in teams by grade, or subject level in an effort to strengthen coordination between classrooms and provide an opportunity for teachers to learn from each other and critically reflect on their work. In other buildings, there may be no sense of collegiality: classroom doors are closed, teachers work largely on their own and are suspicious of efforts by parents or other teachers to sit in the classroom to monitor or provide support. These buildings typically fail to provide an intellectually stimulating environment for teachers and students, and result in high teacher turnover and low student achievement.

The degree of autonomy teachers enjoy to shape their classroom teaching depends on multiple factors, including class size, student attributes, the principal, the level of support she provides, and any standardized curriculum mandated by the school district. Increasingly, as standardized exams become more influential in decisions about promotions and graduations, teachers are under pressure to “teach to the test” and therefore have less leeway in how they convey their course material.

In most school districts, teachers and other school staff (custodians, paraprofessionals, cafeteria workers) are unionized.¹ **Unions** work to protect faculty and staff from inequitable labor practices, and negotiate wages and benefits through collective bargaining. In some school districts, the local teachers union includes teachers as well as paraprofessionals, cafeteria workers, bus drivers and other school personnel. In other districts, non-teaching positions may be represented by other unions, including the Teamsters, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) or others.

Most teachers unions have “building representatives” or “shop stewards,” who serve as the union liaison and leadership within each individual school building. These elected building “reps” sit on a district-wide council that helps decide on union activities and positions. It is usually worth building relationships with these leaders. That way, when an issue seems to present a conflict between staff interests and student needs, activists may be able to find solutions that satisfy both. Also, some issues may be of concern to both parents and teachers, providing the opportunity to work together to resolve problems.

Dozens of organizing groups have begun their work on education issues by targeting small but meaningful changes at the building level – perhaps addressing safety for children walking to and from school, playground facilities, or other issues. These campaigns should be conducted strategically as a way to build parent interest in the school, develop alliances with teachers or administrators and establish a presence for the group.

For a good description of the kinds of campaigns that groups often start out with, check out “Unlocking the Schoolhouse Door,” a report by the National Center for Schools and Communities (April 2002) that looks at how community groups typically begin their engagement on education concerns. [<http://www.ncscatfordham.org/binarydata/files/unlockingschool.pdf>]

Teachers unions engage in collective bargaining with the school district to create a contract that guides their working conditions. Contracts are typically negotiated every one to three years, but portions of the contract may be reviewed or renegotiated on an annual basis. Most union contracts determine wage and salary scales, but teachers’ contracts also may influence building assignments, evaluation processes, and tenure policies and practices. Increasingly, unions are insisting on the right to bargain around additional issues such as class size, facilities conditions, the composition of school and district decision-making teams, professional development and others that directly affect student learning. Contracts are public documents that should be available from the district and/or union office. Some local unions post contracts or summaries on their web sites.

Some states (Arizona, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia) do not allow collective bargaining by teachers. In these states, decisions about salaries and working conditions are decided by the district administration, with varying degrees of influence by teachers depending on the district leadership. Nevertheless, these states all have teacher union affiliates. But the unions typically are far less powerful than those in states where collective bargaining is guaranteed.

Some states have laws that proscribe what can and cannot be included in collective bargaining agreements. To find out what your state’s “scope of bargaining” policies are, go to this link, which contains a state-by-state table on collective bargaining policies for teachers:

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/37/48/3748.htm>.

Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), also known as Parent Associations or Parent-Teacher-Student Organizations, are sometimes seen, particularly by administrators and teachers, as the primary vehicle for parents to participate in the school. The national PTA was founded in 1897 as the National Congress of Mothers. It was a radical concept at the time, when social activism was scorned and women did not have the vote. The PTA has been instrumental as a national lobbying force around issues such as access to kindergarten, school meals, child labor and other issues. In the last several years, many school-based parent organizations have formed independently of the national PTA, though they play similar roles at individual schools.

In Spokane, Washington, the Washington Rural Organizing Project (now known as Spokane Interfaith and Education Alliance) organized the PTA at Sheridan elementary school, and won District funds to coordinate activity around vehicular traffic outside the school, among other issues. The effort dissolved, however, when the organizing group turned their attention to a school funding levy and the District withdrew its support.

PTAs are almost always unstaffed, and work with extremely limited resources. They often thrive or falter based on the skills and personalities of a few hard-working parents. In low and moderate-income communities, school PTAs are not often seen as welcoming or representative of the school population as a whole. PTAs tend to be dominated by whites – even in majority-minority schools – and by more middle class families. They are often seen by community groups as relatively conservative bodies that focus on fundraising support for the school. School principals often heavily influence the PTA, and can control their access to school resources to some degree, which also contributes to the frustration that many community organizing groups have with the tendency of PTAs to be fairly conflict-averse.

Many organizing groups have successfully worked with or through established PTAs on a range of issues. However, where PTAs do not reflect the overall demographic makeup of the school, or are substantially controlled by a small subset of parents or the principal, community groups have found them to be unhelpful and some times even obstructionist.

Site-based decision-making, also known as shared decision-making or school-based management, exists in many districts and schools. The concept was brought over from private-sector “participatory management” innovations—to place more power, autonomy and accountability at the school level and allow for greater decision-making by teachers, and sometimes by students, parents and community members as well. These structures differ widely in their responsibilities and effectiveness. At one end of the spectrum is Chicago (*see box below*) where neighborhood residents elect local school councils that in theory can hire and fire principals and other staff and exert significant control over school budgets. Some site-based structures also have control over curriculum and programming decisions. In other places planning teams and similar committees may be advisory only, not accountable to anyone, allowed to address a limited range of issues, controlled by administrators or frustrated by uncooperative staff.

District Level: Administrators and Elected Officials

Superintendents, occasionally known as chancellors, chief executive officers or chief administrative officers, are legally obligated to carry out the policies of the board of education or in some cases mayors or county executives. Superintendents are usually a district's most visible representative and are critical in defining its culture, shaping decisions, encouraging innovation and improvement, and creating a supportive work environment for faculty and staff. The superintendent, with the **administrative, district, or central office staff**:

- Monitors school progress and budgets and reports to the board and the public;
- Selects curriculum and materials (within the confines of state law);
- Oversees training and development of principals and teachers;
- Negotiates contracts with employees unions;
- Manages facilities;
- Ensures equitable distribution of materials, equipment and information to schools;
- Creates short- and long-term plans;
- Hires, assigns and fires principals and other staff, usually with board approval; and
- Prepares budgets for the board's approval.

In federal parlance, the district administration is known as the "Local Education Agency" or LEA.

Boards of education, known in some places as school boards or school committees, typically set budgets, policies and goals for their districts. They can usually levy taxes, and must issue regular

financial reports. Boards determine the school calendar, approve curriculum, make decisions about buildings and renovations and decide many other issues.

School boards are not usually involved in day-to-day operations, but *are* accountable for ensuring that local, state and federal laws are obeyed. These requirements range widely, covering academic standards, the licensing of teachers and other staff, health and safety, employment law, and much more. A board's key responsibilities are to:

- Raise funds, approve district budgets and oversee expenses;
- Authorize contracts with employees and their unions;
- Hire the superintendent, other top administrators and, in some smaller districts, principals;
- Communicate with the public about public education and local schools.

Ideally boards also should provide vision and a philosophy or approach to education. They should answer hard questions on the content of curriculum, the best ways to meet the needs of the district's students, and ways to engage the community and attract the best staff.

Many boards are elected, but a growing number of mayors, county executives and city councils have won the right to appoint them. Their argument has been that since they are responsible for budgets and the success or failure of schools, they should determine who governs them. Some activists have struggled against this trend believing elected boards are more accountable. Others have supported change arguing that school districts are too complex to be run by lay people or that elected school boards are open to corruption.

Local government's primary role in education is creating and refining funding mechanisms, most often property or real estate taxes. (See section on, [School Funding](#)) In addition, many cities, counties, and other local entities have regulations that apply to schools, for example fire codes and rules about health, safety and building occupancy.

Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) sometimes hold power at the district level. Often, individual school PTA presidents come

together in a district-wide body, which may be anointed by the superintendent or school board as the “official” voice for the community and parents.

Site-based decision-making. In some places, participatory decision-making extends to the district-level. In most of New York State, for instance, districts are required by law to have a district-level planning team in addition to teams for each school. These teams are supposed to include community, parents, administrators, support staff, and teachers. For more on site-based decision-making, see *Building Level* above.

Unions represent faculty and staff in most school districts. In many large districts there are four or more unions – one each for principals; teachers and other professional staff; paraprofessionals such as teachers’ aides; and maintenance or custodial workers; as well as specialized unions for the trades, such as electricians. As mentioned above, guidelines for how districts negotiate with unions – and the parameters of collective bargaining – are usually set by states. Wages, salaries, and benefits account for about 85 percent of a typical district’s budget. Conservatives charge unions with getting in the way of school change, accusing them of protecting their own members (with contract language on teacher placement, seniority rights and due process provisions) over ensuring student achievement. In recent years, though, a growing number of local unions have begun to assert the role of teachers in changing schools for the better and leading the focus on student achievement. These locals say they have a responsibility to make sure all kids learn and to help get rid of teachers who can’t or won’t support this goal. They also are forging alliances with parent and community groups. Some of these locals belong to the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), www.turnexchange.net.

In a number of cities, local community organizations have developed good working relationships with their teachers union locals, and are engaged in joint efforts to reform schools. The Center for Community Change’s “Partnerships for Change” project supports and learns from these alliances [*for more information on Partnerships for Change, see a brochure on the project at www.communitychange.org/issues/education/partners/*].

Winds of change in Chicago?

The Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 was a response to demands for better schools and increased parent and community involvement. Local school councils (LSCs) established by the Act gave parents and community activists responsibilities that those in other districts could only dream of. These included the right to: select and evaluate principals, help develop and approve school improvement plans, and control discretionary budgets averaging \$500,000 per school.

LSCs include six parents and two community representatives elected by parents and community residents, two teachers elected by school staff, the principal, and in high schools a student elected by his or her peers. The district requires LSC members to have 16 hours of training. Several Chicago-based non-profits provide this training, as well as additional workshops and support.

Are they working? A 1997 study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that 50-60% of LSCs are “high functioning” and that another 25-33% are doing well though in need of more support. Studies also suggest that elementary schools with sustained improvement in reading test scores during the 1990s had “effective” LSCs as judged by school staff. At the same time, schools taken over by the central administration in the late 1990s showed “very limited” achievement gains.

Despite this promising view, LSCs remain controversial. District office staff have been known to interfere with the LSCs, and the district’s chief operating officer has publicly belittled them. This has undermined the public’s support of LSCs, discouraged people from running for seats on the councils, and demoralized those who do serve. It has also made them less effective. In 2004, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley announced a plan to restructure as many as 60 Chicago Public Schools, abolishing the LSCs in those schools. Community groups are fighting the so-called “Renaissance 2010” plan.

Many school reform groups and foundations that pushed for the 1988 Act, as well as LSC members, continue to believe in the potential of the LSCs to improve schools. They fought off attempts to weaken the Act and are working to strengthen LSCs. Members and experts alike recommended more training for LSC members, especially on conflict resolution, teaching and learning and consensus building, and groups like the Chicago School Leadership Cooperative have received substantial grants to try to fill the gap.

Sources: **Chicago’s Local School Councils: What the Research Says**, Donald R. Moore and Gail Merrit, Designs for Change, January 2002, www.designsforchange.org.

Catalyst: Voice of Chicago School Reform, *Growing up: Local leaders say it’s now or never for LSCs* and *Prescriptions for improved LSCs*, both by Mario G. Ortiz, March 2002, www.chicagocatalyst.org.

State Level: Education Departments, Courts, Legislatures

Governors and **legislatures**, the chief decision-makers in state government, have primary responsibility for public education at this level. States, through budgets set by governors and legislators, contribute the largest share of funding for schools – as much as 50% of school budgets. Most states also set requirements for teacher certification and licensing, create accountability systems such as standards and tests, set the rules for school bonds, develop standard courses of study, and determine the parameters of negotiations and benefits policies for school employees. Beyond these issues, there is wide variation in how much control states exert.

Governors and/or legislators usually appoint **state boards of education** and **state superintendents**, though these are elected positions in a few states. Superintendents and state boards or departments of education (in federal parlance, known as “State Education Agencies” or SEAs) typically create guidelines for how districts implement education legislation on topics such as those listed above. How active they are and how much influence they have over the actions of the governor and the legislature varies from state to state.

A good source of information specific to your state include local “education funds” – a network of progressive education advocates affiliated with the Public Education Network (PEN). There are ed funds in 34 states. You might also contact your state PTA and state teachers’ unions. Many states also have fiscal analysis institutes that are excellent sources of information about budgets and tax equity issues. Contact information for each of these resources are listed in the Resource section. [PEN is at www.publiceducation.org].

Parent Teacher Associations (see other levels, too) often have state-level staff who lobby the governor or state legislature. Some also provide technical support to local chapters.

School boards usually have a state association, made up of district boards, that lobbies governors and state legislators.

Unions are major players in most states. The teachers’ unions in

particular usually have professional lobbyists and contribute generously to political campaigns. The two umbrella groups for local teachers unions are the American Federation of Teachers (www.aft.org) and the National Education Association (www.nea.org). Both organizations typically have state-level offices in each state, though one may be dominant, based on the number of members/locals it has within the state.

State court decisions can affect school policies on school funding, materials, student access and assignments, civil liberties issues such as dress codes and drug testing, freedom of speech, religion and more. In the last 30 years state and federal courts also have issued many rulings defining the states' responsibility for providing free public schools and the distribution of available resources. (See, [Suing for Equity](#), in the School Funding section.)

Federal Level: Department of Education and Congress

Department of Education In 1979 the federal “office of education” became a department and the secretary of education achieved cabinet-level status. “Ed,” as it is referred to, conducts research, administers programs – including grants to schools and other groups – and represents the President in matters relating to schools. The secretary of education under George W. Bush is Roderick Paige, former superintendent of the Houston, Texas, schools.

Federal court decisions, including those made by the Supreme Court, may influence a wide range of school policies and practices from dress codes to drug testing to school prayer. For more information see **Courts** in the **State Level** section above.

Federal laws applying to schools include those that define and outlaw discrimination based on race, sex, or disability and those that protect employees – for example, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the Americans with Disability Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The federal government also regulates how schools use federal funds.

The largest federal program that provides funding for public schools is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

of 1965. It created and regulates most federal K-12 programs. Title I, designed to improve achievement among poor children and children of color, is the heart of ESEA and provides the most funding, about \$13.8 billion in fiscal year 2003. Congress allocates funds for ESEA each year and must reauthorize the law every five or six years. In addition to Title I's focus on disadvantaged children, ESEA also typically addresses programs for bilingual students, education on military bases and Indian reservations, funding for special programs such as dropout prevention or drug programs, and other provisions.

Until the 2002 reauthorization of ESEA, known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), federal involvement in school policies and practices was minimal beyond the areas listed above. However, the new ESEA/NCLB requirements on assessment, school performance and teacher quality will significantly influence schools across the country. Under the new law, Title I schools face sanctions for failing to meet the new mandates.

The current version of ESEA dictates, to an unprecedented degree, practices historically controlled at the state and local level. Many educators and parents view this federal "intrusion" into local school policy as particularly invidious, made more so by the President and Congress' failure to fully fund the authorization levels set in the law. Despite the onerous mandates required of districts by NCLB, the federal share of local school funding remains at about 7%. (For more information on the law's major provisions, see the section of this Action Guide called "No Child Left Behind".)

National Association of State Boards of Education

(www.nasbe.org) and the **National School Boards Association** (www.nsba.org) are the major national organizations of school boards. They lobby at the federal level and publish journals and other materials. For instance, **The American School Board Journal** (www.asbj.com) is written without a lot of jargon and frequently has useful articles.

The National Parent Teacher Association (see other levels) lobbies at the federal level, publishes a magazine and other materials and maintains national offices in Chicago and Washington, DC (www.pta.org).

Unions (see other levels) are also major players in Congress. The teachers' unions have government affairs offices, professional lobbyists and make generous campaign contributions.

Getting to a Power Analysis

As you begin to look at and hear about issues within the schools in your community, develop a plan for leaders to conduct a local power analysis. Look at who's on the local school board; who contributes to their campaigns; what authority do individual schools (through principals or site-based management councils) have over the issues that you're concerned about? Meet with a representative of the teachers union to evaluate their interest in working with community residents. Sit down with a district official, or see if the district publishes a guide to district finances and school budgets. These fact-finding exercises will help you and your leaders figure out how to approach the issues they care about.

In addition, it's important to be aware of many parents' reluctance to approach schools or engage in issues that directly affect classroom practice. Cultural or historic experiences sometimes make parents uneasy about approaching teachers (cultural differences between mostly white, mostly middle class teachers and the communities from which their students come are often legion), or feeling that they might not have anything to offer the school. Schools are good at sending subtle messages about the limits of parent involvement. Some organizing groups have found that the level of leadership development needed to engage in campaigns addressing real instructional issues is much higher than with many other issue campaigns. Take your time. Get active inside the school house only as your leadership and membership are ready. Most organizing groups begin with "outside the school" issues such as facilities or safety first. Building relationships, learning about education reform and getting comfortable with you instincts about what goes on inside a classroom or school takes longer.