

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.