

Parent Advisory Councils:

Elevating Family Voice and Leadership in Education



Introduction

Parent councils have been called multiple names and have been used for a variety of purposes, but at their core they are mechanisms for parents and caregivers to receive information from agencies and share their perspectives. Socio-political efforts, primarily the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty in the 1960s, encouraged citizen participation in the social programs serving them (Mapp, 2012). For example, Head Start's parent councils were originally conceptualized as a way for parents to organize for larger political change and make decisions about how their Head Start centers operated (Taub, 2018). From the early 1970s until 1981, amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) required all districts and schools served by Title I to establish parent advisory councils to be involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of Title I programs (Mapp, 2012).

States have mandated parent councils for a variety of purposes, including planning school improvement plans, supporting children with disabilities, and supporting English language learners. Parent council participation provides an opportunity to enhance parent leadership skills and represents a deeper level of engagement within the family engagement continuum. Although family engagement is aimed at providing children and families with voice and agency throughout educational systems and within communities, family leadership involves opportunities to improve and enhance the leadership and advocacy skills of parents. However, parent participation with parent councils can be challenging because parents may view council engagement as having less impact on their own child compared to other forms of family engagement (Hindman et al., 2012). This work is accomplished alongside the education and community systems that serve them.

The purpose of this brief is to review what is known currently about parent councils in the United States—both in their implementation and impact—in order to provide parents, educators, and family engagement practitioners with guidance on building better parent councils. Here, we focus on parent councils in education rather than other fields such as healthcare. The term 'parents' refers to the adults that play a caregiving role in the lives of children, including biological parents, foster or adoptive parents, stepparents, grandparents, and other family members or community members who are primary guardians for children.

Purpose and Goals for Parent Councils

Parent councils can be sponsored by various agencies and are formed for differing reasons. Examples include federally funded implementation of family engagement (through local and state efforts or Title programs); nonprofit organizations that support education with advisory councils at the national, state, and local levels; and community or school district efforts that implement family advisory councils for different initiatives. What level the advisory council serves (local, regional, state, etc.) depends on the sponsoring agency. Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires each state to implement a statewide advisory council composed of practitioners and parents to advise state offices of special education, such councils are not required at the local level (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2018).

In some cases, states like Massachusetts have opted to require parent councils within special education (Special Education Parent Advisory Council, 2025). In other cases, the federally funded Statewide Family Engagement Centers (SFECs) have stipulated that at least 51% of members on statewide advisory councils must be parents (McCallum et al., 2024). These councils serve a broader purpose of ensuring that family and community voices are meaningfully integrated into the planning, implementation, and evaluation of family engagement strategies.

Several national education organizations recognize parent leadership as an important contributor to a high-quality learning environment. Cultivating parent leadership is a best practice and is often included in accreditation or performance standards for early childhood through secondary schools.

Examples include, but are not limited to:

- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2010) found that successful early childhood programs promoted parent decision making and participation in program-level efforts. Parent involvement in advocacy and decision-making efforts is one of the six principles of exemplary programs.
- The Division of Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children (DEC, 2014) frames their recommended practices for working with families in three domains: family-centered, family capacity-building, and family/professional collaborations. Informing parents on how to be advocates and participate in leadership roles is one of the ten recommended practices.
- The National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE, 2022) developed core competencies for family-facing professionals and outlined leading alongside parent leaders as a core competency.
- In their national standards for strong family-school partnerships, the National Parent Teacher Association describes advocating for parent leadership under the Sharing Power standard. In particular, the standards emphasize the importance of shared decision making, where policies, practices, and programs are co-designed with families (National PTA, 2022).

- The largest school accreditation agency, Cognia, described schools supporting parent leadership roles by “including families as members and active participants in the school’s governing or advisory groups” (p. 48) as a key performance standard for Early Learning in 2018.
- The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement framework outlines families as advocates and leaders within the learning community as one of their program performance standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Applying leadership skills is part of the parent engagement continuum. Head Start’s performance framework defines parent leadership as the degree to which parents “participate in decision-making, policy development, and organizing activities in communities and states to improve children’s safety, health, development, and learning experiences” (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2018, p. 10).

What stands out from these standards is that the existence of an advisory council with parent representatives does not necessarily translate to a parent leadership opportunity. A parent serving on an advisory council could be operating in a passive role where they are receiving information and not integrated into the governance or decision-making process. Moreover, built-in power dynamics may discourage them from expressing their views. In other words, “inviting citizens to the table does not ensure that they will express their views, let alone challenge inequities” (Prins, 2005, p.17). The descriptive performance standards emphasize the shared leadership role and responsibility of parents and staff in decision-making.

Existing Evidence on the Impact of Parent Councils

There are multiple reasons why increasing parent leadership through parent councils may be connected to student outcomes. As parents gain the skills to become advocates for their children's education, those skills lead to improved trust and communication between schools and families. When parents are able to navigate the education setting effectively, they become more skilled at communicating the needs of their children and are better able to see leverage points for action within the system. Second, as educators and parents build trust, both may see the other in a more holistic manner that minimizes deficit assumptions and builds dual-capacity for educators and parents in working towards shared goals (Douglas et al., 2019; Gellar, 2015).

Research on parent leadership and family outcomes is largely qualitative. McAlister and Geller (2017) developed a framework of indicators to assess the impact of parent leadership and make a case that a qualitative approach such as using narrative storytelling, as well as participatory action research, is important in measuring what matters. These approaches involve the parents in the process of reflection and change while illuminating the conditions under which parent leadership grows. Because of how parent councils operate, the preponderance of research in this area focuses on capturing parent experiences and perspectives of their influence on the decision-making process. These contextual methodologies provide insights into the complexity of studying parent councils and their impact.

Research has focused on the parent council members themselves and their perceptions of whether the councils had an impact on the school or topics addressed by the council. However, few studies have externally validated parent councils' impact on school or student outcomes. Although empirical support that parent councils are transforming schools is limited, there is evidence that parents believe membership has benefited them personally in terms of civic skills and social capital. Parent council members report feeling better informed about their school and having increased confidence when interacting with educators and school staff (Melaragno et al., 1981). There is evidence parent council members develop skills that may be applied in the workplace, like working with budgets, complying with federal guidelines, and expressing themselves in writing (Ellsworth & Ames, 1995). Participants have also expressed that after serving on a parent council, they view school-related issues from a more holistic perspective (Downer, 1997). Other studies have found that parent council participants report increased self-advocacy, knowledge about the school system (Alves, 2016), and feelings of empowerment (Morillo-Campbell, 2006). Parent councils also offered a path to create social networks of support (Morillo-Campbell, 2006). Teachers have reported that parent council members show increased involvement in their child's education (Alves, 2016), and teachers who participate in parent council meetings have reported improved relationships with parents (Melaragno et al., 1981).

To date, there has been very little research on the outcomes of parent councils beyond self-reported change or satisfaction. The expected impact of parent councils on student outcomes is indirect, but they can create conditions that support improved outcomes. By strengthening family-school partnerships, advising on policies, and elevating parent voices,

these councils can help create open, responsive, and supportive learning environments. Over time, these changes may contribute to better student engagement and achievement, but the connection is typically indirect and influenced by many other factors.

Meta-analyses of parent engagement, including both parent involvement at home and at school, have shown a positive relationship with student literacy and math achievement (Van Voorhis et al., 2013), and increased parent leadership in general has been shown to have a positive impact on children's school attendance and grades (Chrispeel et al., 2008). Parent advisory councils, often required as part of an accountability system, are widely-implemented but with few required conditions related to processes. This may be why studies that examine the connection between parent councils and improved achievement have found an inconsistent relationship (Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Stein, 2009). Exploring the dynamics of parent councils has revealed that the influence of power imbalances within the meetings relates to how agenda topics are chosen and the manner in which they are discussed. These findings coincide with other research on participatory structures that have found authority figures within a community can influence the degree to which participation among all members is distributed or imbalanced through the protocols and processes set within the structure (McCullum et al., 2004; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003). Despite staff training on school councils, parent council meetings vary largely depending on school culture and historical context of family engagement that had operated in the school. When a school exhibited a healthy, vibrant relationship with families in other areas outside of parent councils, then their parent council also operated with intentional and authentic inputs from parent council members. When a school exhibited exclusionary or adversarial history with families, then the parent council also reflected minimizing roles for parent members (Leithwood et al., 1999; Parker & Leithwood, 2000). In other words, parent councils are embedded in broader power relations that structure how members interact and participate. Past experiences of mistrust and social divisions influence how members view their ability to create social change (Prins, 2005).

Motivation for Parents and Educators

The lack of a clear impact of parent councils on school or student outcomes warrants a closer look at the factors that influence why parents participate in advisory councils and what their expectations are when they volunteer to be a parent council member. There are multiple ways for parents to be involved in their children's education (Epstein, 1995). At the most basic level, parents are familiar with the compliance aspects of school involvement, such as completing forms, signing report cards, attending parent-teacher conferences, and other school-directed tasks assigned to families. The next level of engagement opens more two-way communication between families and educators, where parents may be volunteering, helping with homework, or fundraising. At this stage, parents and school staff are communicating mostly around logistics of scheduling, and interactions are largely transactional. The deepest level of engagement occurs when parents and educators interact at the governance level with parents co-leading or co-designing alongside educators.

At each level of engagement, there are contextual and motivational factors that influence parent involvement in ways that can promote or hinder deeper levels of engagement. For parents, myriad factors may influence the level of engagement, including time; access to transportation; number of children; work schedules; sense of school connectedness; school satisfaction; stress; and social, economic, and cultural capital (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Hindman et al., 2012; Lareau, 2003). Moreover, obstacles are especially prevalent in lower-income households where families may be juggling multiple jobs and have fewer opportunities to access school invitations.

Race, culture, and class impact the power dynamic in family-school relationships (Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Stein, 2009). One challenge with parent councils is making sure that they represent the diversity of the school population (Stein, 2009). A study of parent councils in Florida found that members tended to be people with similar backgrounds and interests as educators who ordinarily already have access to the school (Huie, 2000). This may be related to parent council recruitment methods. A Texas parent council case study found that the methods used to recruit parents to the council (via newsletter) meant that volunteers were those already engaged (Peña, 2000). Furthermore, multilingual learners or parents with limited language skills, face not only language barriers, but also emotional and systemic barriers—such as feeling unwelcome or unfamiliar with school norms—that discourage participation (De Gaetano, 2007; Lareau, 2003; Peña, 2000). This influences which parents are most represented in schools. Consequently, without intentional efforts to reduce barriers, parent leadership opportunities that require more time and resources may not have representation from families with diverse backgrounds.

For school educators, the Dual Capacity Framework presents an approach to help schools create positive conditions for family engagement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013); yet there are no clearly defined roles for parent councils. Parent council members have reported confusion about the role of the parent council, and a survey of parent council members in Los Angeles found that there was only a 43% agreement between teachers, parents, and principals on what the council's functions should be (Butler, 1976; Stein, 2009). Parent councils' purposes can range from educational to advisory to authoritative. Parents and educators may come into a parent advisory council with different understandings of what their group intends to accomplish. If different members are expecting and working towards different things, it is no surprise that outcomes are not as robust as might be hoped.

Even when the role of parent councils is written into federal and state policy, as was the case for Title I councils, discrepancies between the written role and the enacted role of the council are common. Surveys have found that few councils were actively involved in decision-making about the school's Title I projects for school improvement plans, the express purpose of their parent council (Butler, 1978; Melaragno et al., 1981; Stein, 2009). Rather than being caused by differing expectations, this is likely related to challenges with power dynamics when parents are charged with making decisions to change their school.

There is some evidence that parents are more interested in an advising role where they can voice their opinions and influence school decisions, rather than having the final say in school decision-making. Many parent council members want to support their school

rather than reform it (Johnson, 1997) and are motivated to avoid conflict (Serico, 1998). A study of Florida parent councils found members were comfortable with an advising and influencing role and did not want a more authoritative role (French, 1994; Serico, 1998). Other studies have found parents expressing deference to educators because they respect that educators are the ones who will have to implement the parent council's decisions (French, 1994). They believe that education professionals have more experience and knowledge about the school than they do and doubt whether they know enough to make a meaningful contribution to the decision-making process (French, 1994; Serico, 1998). Even when they might want to, parents report not feeling empowered to dissent (Peña, 2000, Serico, 1998). In parallel, principals report being reluctant to release control to parent councils when they know they will be held accountable for the impact of those decisions, and they also doubt that parents have enough knowledge to make informed decisions (French, 1994; Peña, 2000).

Other studies have found that parents are dissatisfied when they volunteer for a parent council but do not believe that membership comes with any voice or power. Although some state and Title I parent councils were mandated to guide school projects and improvement plans, their role in practice may only be “symbolic and political” (Huie, 2000, p. 120). A study of five middle school parent councils found that members felt their participation was simply a “rubber stamp” and did not understand or help create the school improvement plan they were charged with preparing (Del Monte, 2001, p. 113). Similarly, a study of a Head Start parent council found that they were presented with planned proposals to be voted on, rather than to be discussed and developed within the council itself (Ellsworth & Ames, 1995; Grimesey, 1991; Huie, 2000). Some parent council members are unsure if their perspectives are seriously considered before final decisions are made (Grimesey, 1991). They perceive that school administrators are only going through the motions and are not listening with an intent to act on what they hear (Benson, 1998).

Parent Councils in Health

Outside of education, another field that has been exploring the value of parent advisory structures is the health industry. Healthcare providers and health education researchers have evolved over the last few decades to incorporate patient voice into processes so that knowledge translation from research to practice is more effective and, in turn, leads to improvements in health outcomes (Hartling et al., 2021; Hartling et al., 2024). When families have to interpret complex, technical information and make health-related decisions for their child, incorporating parent voice and feedback can help improve the quality and accessibility of information provided to families.

The insights from parent advisory groups in more recent research in the health industry have yielded information that could apply to the education sector. Healthcare studies have examined how parent advisory groups can co-develop, revise, and communicate health-related information across priority topics related to childhood illnesses (e.g., asthma, fever, concussions). These studies have found that understanding the motivation

or the reason for participating in an advisory council is paramount. As noted earlier, studies find that families have little unclaimed time, especially those families from lower-income backgrounds or families who have children with disabilities. Parents on these councils expressed their primary reasons for volunteering were personal experience with a healthcare provider, a desire to help the health industry's communication with families, or an interest in health research (Hartling et al., 2021). Furthermore, researchers learned that maintaining the advisory group was a challenge.

As a result of the research, they recommend the following:

- **Over-recruit:** With over 40% attrition during the course of a year, starting with a larger group increases the likelihood of adequate membership across the period of service. Attrition data showed that members left largely due to lack of time. To maintain a group of 8-10 active members, it was necessary to recruit more than 20 parents over the course of the project (Hartling et al., 2024).
- **Intentionally recruit for different perspectives:** Hartling et al. (2021) found that women with college degrees and from higher-income households were most likely to stay engaged in the advisory council. Intentional recruitment of fathers, single parents, and those from lower-income backgrounds are needed for any project involving family representation. Using peer recruiters; communicating via multiple modes (e.g., electronic, print, personal outreach); offering flexible, low-barrier opportunities that fit different schedules; and addressing practical needs like transportation, childcare, and language access should be included in all recruitment efforts.
- **Assign a full-time coordinator:** The logistics of coordinating convenings that serve families involve a multitude of skill sets and tasks, including effective planning to remove barriers (e.g., transportation, childcare), facilitating the details of the meetings (e.g., food, technology, materials), handling the administrative duties associated with financial incentives (e.g., reimbursements, gift cards, stipends), communicating clearly, and actively listening. Assigning coordination duties to a staffer who has this skillset and can serve as a single point-of-contact is paramount.

Over the course of these studies, researchers found positive outcomes with significant increases in parent understanding of health research, knowledge of how to access resources to make health care decisions for their child, feeling like they made a difference in improving resources for healthcare providers to use with families, and connecting with other parents. Because long-serving parent members may eventually not represent a “typical” parent, implementing membership term limits is one way to increase fair representation so that different parents have an opportunity to assume leadership and advocacy roles within the council and school system.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Research on parent councils has largely been qualitative and suggests that continued attention is needed to ensure quality implementation of councils and that this quality is rooted in the overall approach of family engagement as a whole. Parent councils in a school or district setting do not exist in a vacuum; they exist within the ecological structure of a continuum of family engagement practices, as well as social, class, and socioeconomic inequalities (Lareau, 2003). Like any school improvement approach, the success of a parent council depends on whether it is implemented with a compliance mindset or a growth and empowerment mindset. Factors such as defining a clear role for the parent council, educator and family member training, and inclusive recruitment and support are considerations when designing a parent council.

This brief highlights the challenges that parent councils face when their roles are ambiguous or when school leadership does not genuinely empower them to make decisions. Without a shared understanding of the parent council's function, members may become disengaged, and their contributions may be undervalued. Additionally, school administrators play a crucial role in determining the impact of parent councils. When school leaders view parent councils as valuable partners, they are more likely to integrate parent recommendations into school policies and foster meaningful collaboration.

To enhance the effectiveness of parent councils, schools and other public organizations should consider enhancing the conditions to foster better parent councils:

- **Clearly define the role of parent councils**

The sponsoring organizations must co-design a shared understanding of the council's purpose among all stakeholders, including parents, educators, and administrators. Clearly outlining the council's responsibilities and decision-making authority will lead to more engaged and satisfied members.

- **Nurture a culture of inclusive family engagement**

Principals, school administrators, and family-facing practitioners should shift from a top-down leadership model to a collaborative approach that empowers families across different domains of school operations, which include parent advisory councils, among others. Providing professional development on consensus-building and shared decision-making can help school leaders support parent councils more effectively.

- **Provide training and resources for council members**

Many parents and practitioners may not be familiar with—or comfortable with—educational policies, shared governance structures, or group decision-making processes. Organizations and schools should offer training sessions on relevant topics and provide accessible, jargon-free resources to ensure parents and practitioners can make informed contributions.

- **Ensure transparent and ongoing communication**

Regular communication is essential for member success. The convening schedule should be consistent, include structured agendas and shared meeting summaries, and utilize multiple communication channels (e.g., newsletters, social media, email) to keep parents engaged.

- **Encourage Broad Representation**

Parent councils benefit from having broad representation and different perspectives. All families from a community should have a fair opportunity to participate in a parent council. Organizations and school districts can achieve this by ensuring they communicate through multiple channels and remove barriers to families by planning for childcare costs, making information accessible, and reimbursing participants for travel or time.

- **Develop shared vision, goals and actionable outcomes**

Parent councils should set a clear shared vision and develop attainable goals that address key school and community issues, such as improving parent-teacher communication or advocating for student support programs. Tracking progress and celebrating successes will help sustain engagement.

- **Regularly evaluate and adapt**

Organizations and schools should assess parent council effectiveness through surveys and feedback sessions identifying areas for improvement, and making necessary adjustments to enhance participation and impact. A dedicated family engagement coordinator can assist with these tasks. As seen in the health sector, a coordinator can be instrumental in ensuring that recruitment, communication, meetings, and evaluation activities are implemented with intentionality and inclusivity.

The studies suggest that a focus on high-quality family engagement practices and culture is essential for communities to foster collaborative and inclusive parent councils, and in turn, strengthen their overall parent-school partnerships. More research is needed on high-quality, well-implemented parent councils to examine their long-term impact on practices, policies, and educational outcomes. Investing in parent councils as a platform for parent engagement can help ensure that families have a meaningful say in shaping education policies that can affect their children's learning experiences.

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