

PARENTS DISMISSED

An Analysis of Manhattan's Community
Education Councils and the New York City
Department of Education's Role in
Engaging Parent Leaders

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Manhattan Borough President
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About Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer

Scott M. Stringer, a native New Yorker and a product of the New York City public school system, was sworn in as Manhattan's 26th Borough President in January 2006.

Prior to taking office, Borough President Stringer was a member of the New York State Assembly for 13 years. During his tenure, he was Chair of the New York State Assembly Committee on Cities, and served on several other committees, including Education and Higher Education. As an Assemblymember, he authored the following research reports:

- “Homeless Students Dismissed: An Investigation of New York State Education Department’s Failed Education of Homeless Children and Youth in New York City”, September 2004.
- “Ranking Banking: The 2003-2004 Consumer Bank Scorecard”, March 2004.
- “Public Housing Policy Brief: An Investigation into Long-term Vacancies in New York City’s Public Housing Stock”, December 2003.
- “Failing Grade: Health Education in NYC Schools, An Analysis of K-8 Health Education in New York City’s Public School System”, June 2003.
- “Faces of the Budget Crisis: How Much Pataki’s Budget Really Costs NYC Families”, February 2003.
- “Total Collapse: How NYC Department of Buildings Failed Policies Contribute to Crumbling Buildings”, November 2002.
- “Report on Assessor Practices and Assessment Administration in New York City”, May 2002.
- “Reading is Fundamental: The Textbook Shortage in New York City’s Public Schools”, April 2002 (with an update issued in April 2003).

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Executive Summary

In 2002, Mayor Bloomberg assumed authority over the New York City public school system. Simultaneously community school boards, which had been responsible for giving parents and communities a voice in the school system for decades, were abolished. While mayoral control was intended as a way to ensure greater accountability, there was apprehension that parents would not be empowered to play an important role in the city's public schools under this new system. In an attempt to meet these concerns, the State Legislature created Community Education Councils (CECs) in 2002 and granted them legal powers and responsibilities to represent parents. Specifically, CECs are charged by State law to:

- Measure, track, and evaluate the academic and financial performance of school districts and evaluate supervisors and superintendents
- Comment on the capital and educational plans for schools
- Approve or disapprove changes to school district zoning

This report is the first critical analysis of New York City's Community Education Councils since their inception. It documents the fact that CECs are *not* performing the integral, legally mandated functions for which they are created. Specifically:

- 61% of surveyed CEC members in Manhattan said their council was not enabled to fulfill one or more of its responsibilities mandated by New York State Education Law.
- 37% did not hold or participate in legally mandated capital plan hearings.
- 18% did not understand what constitutes a change to zoning lines within a district.

The reasons CECs are not performing these critical functions are striking:

- 92% of respondents had not been trained on one or more of the CEC state-mandated functions to date, nor has the Chancellor promulgated regulations on training, as authorized by state law.
- The New York City Department of Education has failed to consistently link parent leaders to one another: 50% of respondents stated that DOE has not provided them with contact information for other parent leaders in their district.

As a result of DOE's systematic disinvestment in CECs, parental and public participation are suffering. In this past year:

- 42% of respondents stated their council did not make quorum at least once.
- 71% of respondents said that one or more members had resigned from their CEC.
- 92% of those surveyed said, on average, twenty-five or fewer members of the public attend their monthly council meetings.

- 50% of eligible voters in 2004 did not vote in CEC elections; 66% in 2005 did not cast ballots.

Parents who are committed and engaged are dispirited and are calling out for improvements:

- 74% of survey respondents believe the CEC election process can be improved.
- 37% do not believe CECs meet their mission to promote parent engagement.
- 84% stated that CECs should have powers and duties they do not currently have.

This study, based on one-on-one interviews with nearly 70% of Manhattan's CEC members, finds that CEC members are struggling to fulfill their mission. However, DOE can take several steps in the short- and long-term to ensure that parents have an increased and meaningful role on the school, district, borough, and city levels, including:

- Dedicating time and resources to parental engagement
- Clarifying and improving CEC duties and training
- Expanding the formal roles and responsibilities of CECs
- Improving communication between DOE and CECs
- Broadening the eligibility criteria for CEC members and selectors

Recent reorganizations within DOE provide further evidence of the Department's lack of commitment to ensure that CECs genuinely participate in decision-making. As of May 2006, CECs, formerly under the purview of the Deputy Chancellor of Teaching and Learning, are now overseen by the Senior Counselor for Public and Community Affairs, removing them from direct contact with the personnel who continue to be responsible for instructional policy and parental engagement.

Lip service about the importance of parental involvement in City schools is not enough for our children. A real commitment and investment in ensuring parents have a seat at the table when financial, policy and administrative priorities are addressed will translate into better schools and markedly improved futures for our children. In fact, a 2006 Harvard Family Research Project study showed parental involvement is correlated with higher student achievement outcomes. Without empowered, effective CECs, our city's parents have no real voice in the City school system. It is time for the Mayor and DOE to wake up to the reality this survey presents: parents have been dismissed and it is time to call them back. ■

Introduction

When the Mayor assumed authority over the New York City school system in 2002, few disagreed that the largest school system in the United States was one in need of dramatic reform. Nevertheless, many at the time openly questioned whether or not the re-centralization of the school system was the right answer. Four years later this debate continues. However, notwithstanding all the discourse about student achievement, accountability, and efficiency, those who have most closely watched our public school system over the last few years largely agree on one point: today, parents do not have a strong voice in the debates and decisions made for the school system, both locally and city-wide.

In the 1960s, New York City's educational system was de-centralized in response to parental and community discontent with a school system that was viewed as too centrally controlled and out of touch with parent and community needs and concerns. Those reforms created 32 community school boards, which initially had substantial decision-making powers over personnel, budgetary, and instructional matters. Over time, changes in legislation curtailed many of these powers and scandals undermined the reputations of certain school boards. As a result, the public increasingly perceived these bodies as ineffective and highly politicized.

In 2002, the State Legislature replaced the school boards with 32 Community Education Councils (CECs) that the Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education (DOE) promised

would have a “parent-based focus.”¹ Each CEC would be composed of nine parent members elected by the Parent Association/Parent-Teacher Association (PA/PTA) officers of schools within the school district, two community members appointed by the respective Borough President, and one non-voting high school senior. In addition to the 32 CECs, two citywide education councils were established: a Citywide Council on High Schools (CCHS) with ten parent members and one voting high school student member and a Citywide Council on Special Education (CCSE) with nine parent members, two members appointed by the Public Advocate, and one non-voting high school senior. All education council members are volunteers.

Although the terms of the first citywide and community education council members were initially set to commence on December 1, 2003, the establishment of these bodies was stalled from the beginning by a delay in the U.S. Department of Justice approving the selection process for education members; the absence of PAs/PTAs in more than 20% of public schools²; and a lack of candidates for the councils. As a result, the first terms for the councils did not commence until July 1, 2004, a full seven months later than originally intended. Based on data released by DOE, only about 50% of the PA/PTA officers who were eligible to participate in the selection of the first members of the education councils actually participated in the election process.³ Additionally, while 1,500 parents ultimately nominated themselves for 307 seats, newspaper articles suggested that some of

these parents were pressured into running by school officials who were dissatisfied with the initial low number of candidates.⁴

Because the first term for education councils began so late, DOE officials decided that this first term would last one year and subsequent terms would last two years. As a result, in the spring of 2005, 307 parent members of education councils had to be selected once again. Parent participation in the election process for this second term was even more discouraging than it had been for the first: nearly 66% of PA/PTA officers eligible to select education council members did not cast ballots.⁵ Even in school districts with histories of strong parent activism, parent leader participation in the selection process of CEC members plummeted in 2005. For example, in Manhattan, voter participation in District One fell from 75% to 38% and in District Three from 63% to 42%.⁶ Additionally, some parent advocates asserted that, discouraged by the lack of power of the councils, as many as 50% of the original members of bodies failed to seek a second term.⁷

Almost halfway into the second term of the education councils and in anticipation of the expiration in 2009 of the law that created these bodies, this report reviews quantitative and qualitative data gathered by

the Office of the Manhattan Borough President with the objective of answering the following question: How effective are Community Education Councils at providing parents with a voice and the opportunity to provide meaningful leadership for their schools as prescribed by law? While the data contained in this report are specific to CECs for the six school districts in Manhattan, anecdotal information and qualitative data suggest that the findings and conclusions of this report reflect, to a large extent, the experiences of many councils citywide. The CECs in Manhattan provide a meaningful cross section of the 32 community education councils; the borough's six school districts embody much of the variation that exists in districts citywide with respect to academic performance, geographic size, and demographics and size of pupil population.

The survey administered to members of Manhattan's six CECs solicited responses on a range of different issues including, but not limited to, the duties and responsibilities of CECs, collaboration with other parent leaders, training of CEC members, and general opinions of CECs.⁸ Interestingly, responses not only varied from district to district, but also in some instances among members of the same CEC. The survey results follow, as do recommendations based on the findings. ■

Methodology

The principal means of obtaining information for this report was through an oral survey administered to current members of Community Education Councils representing School Districts One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six in Manhattan. Staff of the Office of the Manhattan Borough President contacted members of each CEC and requested assistance in identifying other members who would participate. The survey was conducted over the phone by staff between 4/13/06 and 5/12/06. Participation was voluntary; of the 56 individuals who were members of Manhattan CECs during the time the survey was administered, 38 or 68% were surveyed.⁹ The rate of participation on individual councils ranged from 33% to 100%. ■

Survey Results

Duties & Responsibilities of CECs

The powers and duties of CECs are outlined in Section 2590-e of the New York State Education Law. While the law restricts the executive and administrative powers as well as the functions of the councils, it does impart key responsibilities and duties to them with respect to all pre-kindergarten, nursery, kindergarten, elementary, intermediate, and junior high schools and programs administered by their respective community school district. Most of these responsibilities and duties relate to the review, assessment, and furtherance of the academic progress of the district; the evaluation of instructional supervisory personnel in the district; the approval of zoning lines; and the public review and approval of the district’s annual capacity plans.

School District Report Cards

According to New York State Education Law, CECs are responsible for preparing and making public an annual School District Report Card. The School District Report

Card, completed each year, provides information to the public on student performance on State and City administered standardized tests and other measures of school and district performance. Knowledge obtained from the report card on the strengths and weaknesses of an individual school and district as a whole can be used to plan professional development, improve curriculum, and allocate resources.

- 61% of respondents indicated either they did not know what a School District Report Card was, or that their council played no role in developing one this academic year.

Community District Superintendent Evaluations

According to New York State Education Law, each CEC is responsible for completing and submitting to the Chancellor an annual evaluation of the community district superintendent for its respective school district.

Adriana’s Story¹⁰

Adriana has served on her CEC since July 2004 and she believes the criteria on which DOE instructs the councils to evaluate Community School Superintendents are unfair. As Adriana points out, Community School Superintendents are not responsible for overseeing all schools within a district; rather, as with all Local Instructional Superintendents (LISes), they are responsible for a specific network of schools. The remaining schools in the district are overseen by other LISes. If there is a problem at a school outside of the Community School Superintendent’s network, he/she has little power to resolve it. Adriana asks, “How can we really evaluate Community School Superintendents regarding how well they respond to the concerns we bring to their attention when they have little power to address some or most of them? It doesn’t make sense. The evaluation criteria DOE provided to us seem to be in conflict with the existing structure so our CEC is trying to develop its own.”

Evaluations of Instructional Supervisory Personnel

CECs are mandated to submit an annual evaluation developed by the Chancellor for all instructional supervisory personnel who have responsibility for more than one school within the district.

- Only 45% of respondents stated that their councils were evaluating their district's Local Instructional Superintendents.
- Of those who responded they are evaluating, 53% did not know what criteria should form the basis of these evaluations.
- Some of the CEC members surveyed said they found evaluating Local Instructional Superintendents particularly challenging because DOE did not provide them with a description of the responsibilities and duties of these instructional personnel.

District Comprehensive Education Plan

CECs are required to meet at a minimum of once a month with the community superintendent to discuss the progress made toward the implementation of the District Comprehensive Education Plan (DCEP). The DCEP, which is prepared annually by the District Leadership Team (comprised of DOE staff and parents), identifies educational goals and objectives for all schools within a district.

- 29% of respondents did not know what a DCEP was.

Public Hearing on Five-Year Capital Plan

Each CEC is required not only to hold an

annual public hearing on the Amended Five-Year Capital Plan (the capital budget for school projects city-wide), but also to submit its comments and recommendations regarding the modified document.

- 37% of respondents stated that either their council did not hold a public hearing on the Amended Five-Year Capital Plan during the 2005-2006 school year or they were unsure whether their council held such a public forum.
- Several CEC members reported that this school year DOE failed to provide them in a timely manner with the information regarding the physical condition, enrollment, utilization, and capacity of the school buildings necessary to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the Amended Plan.

Approval of Zoning Lines

The law gives CECs authority over the approval of zoning lines. According to Chancellor's Regulation A-185, zoning lines are the boundaries that define the geographical area within a district on which the eligibility to attend a school is based.

- 18% of respondents said they were unsure what truly constituted a zoning change in their district.
- Respondents stated that the concept is quite vague. As a result, some members expressed questions about whether certain changes to the admissions policies and grade configurations of schools in their districts were in fact zoning changes.

Milagros' Story

Milagros said that her CEC felt "rushed" in its efforts to carry out its responsibility of holding a hearing on the Amended Five-Year Capital Plan. She said that she believed "the School Construction Authority was very disrespectful (to the CECs) and did not give them enough time to review the Capital Plan."

Training

Every CEC member is required to participate in training and continuing education programs as defined and approved by DOE. More specifically, state law requires that all new CEC members receive training within three months of assuming office for the first time and, at minimum, on an annual basis thereafter.

While a majority of surveyed CEC members stated that they received some training within the first three months of joining the council and thereafter, a high percentage indicated that they had not received training on the legally mandated powers, functions, and duties of CECs. (*See Fig. 1*)

- **District Report Card:** 89% of respondents reported that they have not received any training on the District Report Card.
- **District Comprehensive Education Plan:** 76% of respondents reported that they have not received any training on the District Comprehensive Education Plan.
- **Evaluating Community and Local Instructional Superintendents:** 87% of respondents reported that they have not received any training on evaluating their community district superintendent while 89% of respondents reported they have not received any training on evaluating their Local Instructional Superintendents.
- **Zoning:** 82% of respondents reported that they have not received any training on zoning.
- **Assessing the Capital Needs of District Schools:** 63% of respondents reported that they have not received any training

on assessing the capital needs of the schools in their districts.

- **Data Analysis:** 79% of respondents reported that they have not received any training on understanding and utilizing enrollment, capacity, and utilization data for the school buildings in their districts.
- **Building Condition Assessment Surveys:** 92% of respondents reported that they have not received any training in understanding and utilizing Building Condition Assessment Surveys for the school buildings in their districts.
- 89% of respondents stated that they would like to receive more training.

State education law authorizes the Chancellor to promulgate regulations on training for CEC members.¹¹ However, more than two years after the creation of CECs, the Chancellor has failed to do so. By not issuing regulations and standards for training for CEC members on their legally mandated powers, functions, and duties, the Chancellor is in effect failing to ensure a system of accountability and the means for CEC members to become adequately acquainted with their responsibilities -- undermining CECs' ability to fulfill their legal roles and obligations.

Communication & Collaboration with Parent and School-Based Bodies

CECs are required to communicate with School Leadership Teams (SLTs) as necessary and provide them with assistance where possible. An SLT, which is comprised of administrative, staff and parent representatives, is charged with developing

and reviewing its school’s Comprehensive Education Plan. Additionally, DOE’s description of core CEC duties states that the councils should “meet with the Parent Association/Parent-Teacher Association (PA/PTA) officers at least quarterly to share information pertaining to matters of student achievement and the school community.”¹² Despite there being a clear requirement for CECs to maintain ongoing communication and collaboration with PA/PTA officers and SLTs:

- 50% of respondents stated that DOE had not provided them with contact information for all active PAs, PTAs, and SLTs in their districts.
- 37% of respondents reported that their councils meet less than quarterly with the PA/PTA officers in their school districts.
- 16% of respondents said that their councils have never met, or met only yearly, with PA/PTA officers.

superintendent; the purpose of these meetings is outlined in Section 2590-c of New York State Education Law. The objective of the first meeting, commonly referred to as the “business meeting,” is to discuss the current state of the schools in the district and the progress being made toward the implementation of the district’s Comprehensive Education Plan. The purpose of the second meeting, commonly referred to as the “calendar meeting,” is to provide a venue at which the public may speak “so that parents and the community have a voice and a public forum to air their concerns.” However:

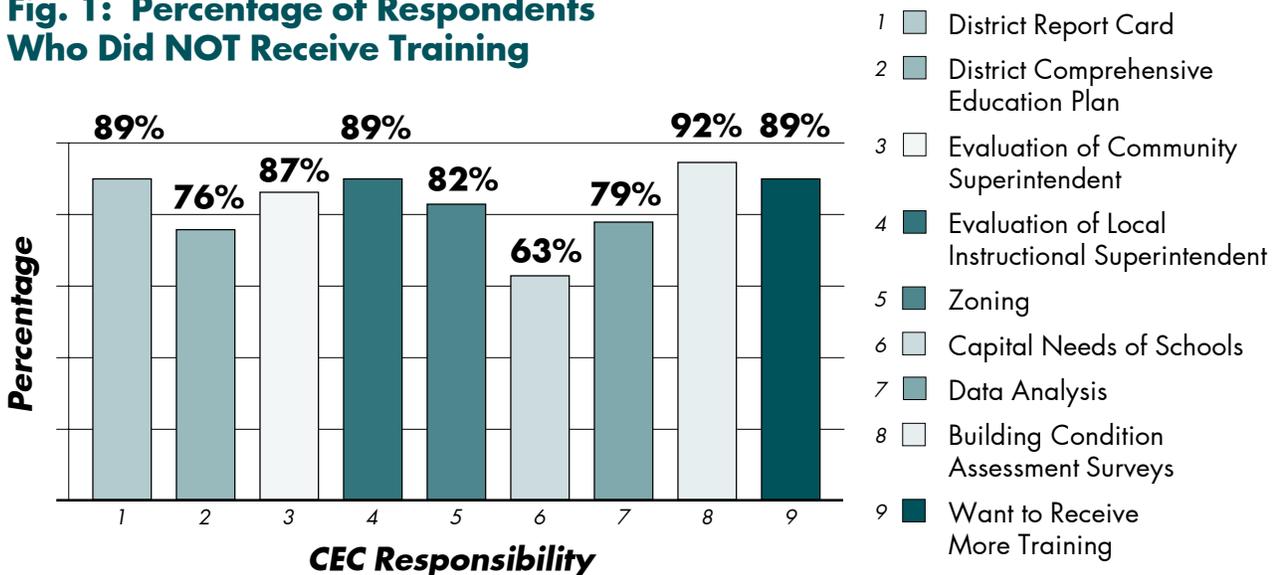
- 92% of respondents stated that, on average, 25 or fewer members of the public attend their monthly calendar meetings.
- 23% of these respondents indicated that, on average, fewer than 10 members of the public attend their monthly calendar meetings.

Meetings

Each CEC is required to hold two meetings a month with its community district

The quorum for every monthly CEC meeting is six individuals irrespective of the number of vacancies that may exist on a given

Fig. 1: Percentage of Respondents Who Did NOT Receive Training



council.¹³ As such, if a CEC has five vacancies and has only six voting members, its quorum is still six. The survey revealed the following:

- 42% of respondents reported that their council had experienced trouble reaching a quorum during this school year.
- Of respondents who indicated their CEC had trouble reaching a quorum, 31% of them indicated that their CEC was unable to reach quorum two or more times.
- According to respondents, councils were unable to reach a quorum primarily because of absences/lateness (63%) and vacancies (31%).
- 71% of respondents reported that one or more members had resigned from their councils this school year. 56% of these respondents indicated that two or more members had resigned this school year.

Composition of CECs

Many of the school districts in Manhattan are ethnically and racially diverse and span different neighborhoods. In order to fulfill their mandate of serving as a voice for parents and the community on education matters, it is essential that every CEC be representative of the students, schools, programs, and neighborhoods within its particular school district. According to the survey, however:

- 39% of surveyed CEC members do not believe that their council is representative of the school population in their school district in terms of race and ethnicity.

Malik's Story

Malik said that because his CEC had so many vacancies this school year, quorums were often not reached. He estimated that there were at least five meetings at which business could not be conducted because there were fewer than six members present.

- 34% of surveyed CEC members stated that the composition of their council is not representative of the different neighborhoods in their school district.

New York State Education Law and the Chancellor's Regulations prohibit individuals from serving on CECs concurrently with their service as PA/PTA officers and SLT members. However, many respondents said that such eligibility rules force parents to choose between serving their individual schools or their school districts. Furthermore, respondents also noted that by deeming PA/PTA officers and SLT members ineligible, these rules have the effect of precluding many of the most dedicated, knowledgeable, and involved parents from serving on CECs. The survey found that:

- 42% of respondents believe PA/PTA officers and SLT members should be allowed to concurrently serve on CECs. Another 8% of respondents believe SLT members (and not PA/PTA members) should be allowed to serve concurrently on CECs.

Under the current law, of the eleven voting members of a CEC, only the two individuals appointed by the Borough President may be non-parents. The results of the survey, however, suggest that many CEC members think that eligibility rules in this area should also be revised:

- 55% of surveyed CEC members believe that more non-parents should be permitted to serve on the councils.

CEC Election Process

Perhaps no other aspect of CECs has received greater attention by the media than the election process established by DOE for the nine parent seats on the councils. In particular, both the lack of parent voter turnout and lack of transparency have been cited as problems undermining the election process.

The selection process for CEC members is outlined in Regulation D-140 of the Chancellor's Regulations.¹⁴ According to the regulation, the selectors of the nine parent members of a given CEC are limited to the three PA/PTA officers (i.e. President, Secretary, and Treasurer) from every school in the district. Each selector is provided with a ballot of all the nominees for the CEC and permitted to vote for two of them. In selecting members for the CEC, Regulation D-140 states that selectors must attempt to ensure that:

- the membership reflects a representative cross-section of the community and the diversity of the student population, including those with particular educational needs; and
- the enrollment figures in the district and the potential disparity of such enrollment from school to school are considered.

The results of the survey suggest that many CEC members are dissatisfied with the current election process. More specifically, the survey revealed:

- 74% of respondents believe the election process for council members can be improved. The three most common suggestions for how it can be improved were 1) allowing more parents to partake in voting; 2) expanding the eligibility requirements for council members so more individuals can run; and 3) improving the publicity of the work of councils to attract a greater number of individuals to serve.

Members' Perceptions of CECs

According to DOE, Community Education Councils “were designed to ensure that parents have a voice and are able to provide hands-on leadership and support for public schools.” However, when asked if they believe their CECs are fulfilling this goal, members were split:

- 37% of respondents stated they do not believe their councils fulfill their described purpose.
- 5% of respondents said they were unsure whether or not their councils fulfill their described purpose.

A majority of surveyed CEC members also think that the powers and responsibilities of CECs should be expanded. More specifically:

- 84% of respondents said they thought the councils should have powers and duties that they currently do not have. The most

Oscar's Story

“The [election] process for CECs needs to be opened up to more parents, such as those serving on PAs and SLTs. Now parents are forced to choose between serving their specific schools or their districts. If parents could do both, the array of available parents would be broadened.”

frequently cited powers and responsibilities that respondents indicated they would like to have are:

- greater influence over personnel matters in the district;
- greater authority over zoning and school siting decisions; and
- greater input on instructional and curriculum matters in district schools.

Surveyed CEC members had several suggestions when asked how DOE could better support their councils. The top four responses were:

- DOE should make a commitment not only to inform CECs about issues in a timely manner, but also to consider their input more seriously;
- DOE should provide additional training to CEC members;
- The autonomy, powers, and role of the CECs should be expanded under the law; and
- DOE should make a stronger and more sincere commitment to parent engagement. ■

Recommendations

The survey conducted by the Office of the Manhattan Borough President indicates that Community Education Councils are struggling to fulfill their goal of ensuring that parents have a voice in the public school system and are able to provide hands-on leadership and support. The results of the survey also make clear that the perceived, and in some cases real, ineffectiveness of the councils is not the fault of the hundreds of parents and community members who volunteer their time for the betterment of their respective school districts. While there are immediate solutions to some of the challenges that are undermining the effectiveness and success of the councils, other challenges that these bodies face may necessitate longer term solutions. Below is a set of recommendations to address the problems plaguing CECs.

Dedicate time and resources to parental engagement.

Many surveyed CEC members indicated that DOE could support the efforts of their councils by making a stronger and more sincere commitment to parental engagement. CEC members pointed out that many public school parents feel frustrated by DOE's lack of responsiveness and, as a result,

cease being involved. DOE should make a commitment to proactively meet with parents to listen to their concerns and recommendations.

Currently all personnel charged with parent engagement responsibilities are employees of the New York City Department of Education. Some CEC members who were surveyed pointed out that at times these individuals' ability to truly advocate on behalf of parents is compromised by the fact that they are DOE employees. Lawmakers should consider whether or not the transfer of these positions to another city or state agency may be necessary to ensure that those charged with parent engagement responsibilities can better fulfill their obligations. In the meantime, DOE should increase the number of staff it has working on parental engagement initiatives.

Some surveyed CEC members expressed frustration over the fact that there are different bodies simultaneously vying to be the "true representatives of parents." These same CEC members believe that the infighting among parent bodies results in a dilution of parent power. Parents must join together and develop a framework of representation that stresses focus and

Randy's Story

Randy thinks the fact that there are so many different parent groups, actually hinders parental engagement and input. "Right now parents' voices are diluted – there are CECs, Presidents' Councils, and the Chancellor's Parent Advisory Council. If CECs – or some other parent groups – want to be effective, they must be made the authority for parents. Parent power must be focused through a specific group so there is a consolidated parent voice."

collaboration and rids itself of duplicity that, at times, impedes parent organizing.

Clarify CEC duties and improve training.

Some of the duties of CECs that are outlined in New York State Education Law are not detailed in the description of responsibilities that DOE provides to CEC members. For example, according to State Education Law, CECs are responsible for preparing and making public District Report Cards while, according to the description of duties provided by DOE, the councils are only responsible for making the cards public. Several surveyed CEC members stated that the sections pertaining to zoning in the law are vague and thus they were unsure what does and does not constitute zoning. CECs' duties and responsibilities must be clearly defined and consistent.

Furthermore, although a majority of CEC members receive DOE-sponsored training, this training does not appear to prepare them to carry out their major responsibilities as outlined in Section 2590-e of the New York State Education Law. Making matters worse, the Chancellor has failed to promulgate regulations on training, which he has the authority to do. The Chancellor should develop and issue regulations regarding the content and the implementation of training for CEC members and certification of training providers as provided in the law. Otherwise, there is no accountability or structure for ensuring such training is adequate, legally compliant, and available. Additionally, DOE should actively

seek input from CEC members regarding additional training that might be useful. Surveyed CEC members expressed interest in receiving training on topics such as organizing and assisting parents in navigating New York City's public school system. To the extent possible, training should be tailored to the needs of individual CECs (including training in languages other than English) and should also be offered in the daytime and evening on weekdays and weekends to accommodate the schedules of as many CEC members as possible.

Expand the formal roles and responsibilities of CECs.

Many CEC members expressed frustration over the councils' powerlessness and cited their lack of authority as one of the reasons the councils have a hard time not only in attracting and maintaining members, but also in being perceived as effective bodies. The current State statute regarding CECs is effective until June 30, 2009. Some time before that date, legislators will have to decide whether or not any amendments need to be made to the law. Based on the concerns raised by CEC members, the State Legislature should seriously consider broadening the powers and duties of the councils.

Improve communication between DOE and Community Education Councils.

A commitment needs to be made on the part of DOE to ensure that CEC members are provided with information they need in a timely manner and that their opinions and input are fully considered. In the past, CECs

Jocelyn's Story

"CECs have no power. The perception of CECs is that they are not too effective. The combination of lack of power and the poor perception of the CEC make it frustrating to continue serving."

have been stymied in assessing the capital needs of schools because DOE and the School Construction Authority (SCA) have failed to release information about student enrollment and the physical condition of school buildings in a timely way. DOE must also actively encourage input from CECs on matters that affect schools within their districts. DOE should examine the possibility of establishing district and regional-level committees that include CEC representation to provide on-going advice on policy matters. Finally, DOE must provide the contact information for active SLTs and PAs/PTAs to every CEC member at the beginning of each school year.

Broaden the eligibility criteria for CEC members and selectors.

Under the New York State Education Law and the Chancellor's Regulations, PA/PTA officers and SLT members are prohibited from concurrently serving on CECs. Many surveyed CEC members stated that one way the election process for CEC members could be improved is by expanding the eligibility to serve on these councils. For example, service on an SLT can provide a parent with a wealth of information regarding

instructional and budgetary matters at the school level and, given the duties and responsibilities of CECs, this knowledge would be beneficial. Additionally, a majority of CEC members thought that more non-parents should be allowed to serve on the councils. As a way to increase the pool of individuals who run for seats on these councils, the state legislature should consider increasing the number of non-parents seats.

Section 2590-c of the New York State Education Law states that only PA/PTA officers can take part in the selection of the nine parent members of CECs. Surveyed CEC members believe that one way to improve the CEC election process is to allow all parents the opportunity to vote. In addition, more outreach and education by DOE about the election process is critical. As the last two elections have shown, turnout for elections is unacceptably low (50% of voters cast ballots the first the first year; 35% the next) while extremely expensive for the city (the 2004-2005 CEC election cost \$1.4 million).¹⁵ To increase accountability and to promote diversity of council members, more must be done to encourage eligible parents to cast their ballots. ■

Conclusion

Nearly halfway into the second term of Community Education Councils, many of these bodies are struggling to fulfill their mission of ensuring that parents have a voice and leadership role in supporting public schools. It is important to stress that the results of this survey do not suggest that the fault of the ineffectiveness of these councils lies with the hundreds of parents and community members who volunteer their time to serve on these bodies; rather the problems plaguing the CECs are due in substantial part to the lack of training and support members receive from the New York City Department of Education.

Irrespective of mayoral control, parents and community members can and should have a greater role in making the decisions that affect our public schools. At their best, the 32 Community Education Councils and two Citywide Education Councils have the potential to provide parents and community members with a significant leadership role in our public school system. The state legislation pertaining to education councils expires on June 30, 2009. We have a challenge, an opportunity, and a responsibility before us in the next few years to take an honest and critical look at whether these councils are meeting their mandates, and make some concrete changes so that the voices of parents and the public at large are not absent in future debates and decisions regarding our city's public school students. ■

References

- ¹ Elissa Gootman, “Schedule Set for Replacing School Boards,” *New York Times*, 15 January 2004, Section B, p. 2.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Kathleen Lucadamo, “Key Vote Draws Few Parents,” *NY Daily News*, 14 May 2004, Suburban Section, p.1.
- ⁴ Ellen Yan, “Wanted: Parents’ Help,” *Newsday*, 9 March 2004, p. A08.
- ⁵ David Andreatta, “Scant Turnout in Vote for School Panels,” *New York Post*, 14 May 2005, p. 14.
- ⁶ David Herszenhorn, “Fewer People Voted in Races for Parent Councils in ’05,” *New York Times*, 12 January 2006, Section B, p. 4.
- ⁷ Deborah Kolben, “Parents Dropping Out of Education Councils at Precipitous Rate,” *New York Sun*, 1 December 2005, p. 2.
- ⁸ The complete survey can be found in Appendix A.
- ⁹ Throughout the report, surveyed CEC members are referred to as “respondents.”
- ¹⁰ All CEC members’ names in this study have been changed to protect anonymity.
- ¹¹ Section 2590(e)(7)(4) of the New York State Education Law.
- ¹² Community and Citywide Education Council Professional Development Institute Binder, New York City Department of Education, June 2005.
- ¹³ The Manhattan Borough President currently has two open CEC appointment slots; both are in the process of being filled.
- ¹⁴ <http://docs.nycenet.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-87/D-140.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Joe Williams with Michael Saul, “Parents Might Sit Out Vote Mad at Mike for Monday Massacre,” *Daily News*, 24 March 2004, Suburban Section, p. 1.

Appendix A: Survey Instrument

CEC Member: _____

CEC: _____ Date Surveyed: _____

Interviewed By: _____

INTRODUCTION

Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer believes that parental and community input is essential for strong schools. Community Education Councils play a key role in providing this input and the Borough President wants to ensure that they are able to carry out their duties and make a significant contribution to their school districts. The purpose of this survey is to provide Borough President Stringer's Office with information that will help him to better support and advocate on behalf of Community Education Councils. Your specific responses to the questions will remain confidential though general answers may be used in an analysis prepared by this office.

DUTIES

1. What was the date of your appointment to the CEC?
2. a) Do you know what a District Report Card is? Yes___ No___
b) [If Yes] What role, if any, has your CEC played in developing one for your district?
3. a) Is your CEC evaluating your community district superintendent this school year?
Yes___ No___ Don't Know___
b) [If Yes] What criteria are you using in your evaluation?
4. a) Is your CEC evaluating your local instructional superintendents this school year?
Yes___ No___ Don't Know___
b) [If Yes] What criteria are you using in your evaluations?
5. a) Do you know what a District Comprehensive Education Plan is? Yes___ No___
b) [If Yes] What role, if any, has your CEC played in developing one for your district?
6. a) Did your CEC hold a public hearing on the capital plan this school year?
Yes___ No___ Don't Know___
b) [If Yes] How did you make the public aware of the hearing?
c) [If Yes] Who testified at the hearing?
7. a) Since you have been a member of your CEC, have there been any zoning changes in your district? Yes___ No___ Don't Know___
b) [If Yes] What role, if any, has the CEC played in the zoning changes?

COMMUNICATION/COLLABORATION WITH PAs & SLTs

8. Has DOE provided the members of your CEC with contact information for all active Parent Associations and School Leadership Teams in your district?
Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

9. How often does your CEC meet with the Parent Associations in your district?

CEC STRUCTURE

10. a) This school year, has your CEC ever had trouble reaching quorum for meetings?
Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

b) [If Yes] How many times?

c) [If Yes] What were the reasons your CEC was unable able to reach quorum?

11. Does your CEC have a:

a) President Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

b) Vice President Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

c) Secretary Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

d) Treasurer Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

12. a) Are you an officer? Yes___ No___

b) [If Yes] What office do you hold?

c) [If Yes] Were you provided with any training/guidelines specific to carrying out the responsibilities of your office? Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

13. a) Does your CEC have committees? Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

b) [If Yes] What committees?

c) [If Yes] Do you think the committees help the work of the CEC? Yes___ No___

14. a) Have any members of your CEC resigned this school year?

Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

b) [If Yes] How many?

c) [If Yes] What reasons, if any, did the members cite for resigning?

15. a) Have any members of your CEC been removed this school year?

Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

b) [If Yes] How many?

c) [If Yes] What were the causes for their removals?

PARENT & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

16. Aside from members, on average, how many people attend your CEC's monthly meetings?

17. How does your CEC advertise its monthly meetings?

18. a) During this school year has your CEC sponsored a forum or an event?

Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

b) [If Yes] What topic(s) did it cover?

c) What was the attendance at this event?

19. a) Does the Office of Parent Engagement provide assistance to your CEC?

Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

b) [If Yes] What kind of assistance?

c) Does your district's Parent Support Officer provide assistance to your CEC?

Yes___ No___ Don't Know___

d) [If Yes] What kind of assistance?

TRAINING

20. Since you have been on the CEC how many trainings provided by DOE have you attended?

21. How soon after you became a member of the CEC did you attend a training provided by DOE?
22. Has DOE provided you with training on any of the following?
- a) The District Report Card
Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - b) The District Comprehensive Education Plan
Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - c) Evaluating Your Community Superintendent
Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - d) Evaluating Your Local Instructional Superintendents
Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - e) Zoning
Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - f) Assessing the Capital Needs of the Schools in Your District
Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - g) Understanding and utilizing the Blue Book
Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - h) Understanding and utilizing Building Condition Assessment Surveys
Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
23. Would you like to receive more training? Yes___ No___
- a) [If Yes] In what areas?

OPINIONS OF CECs

24. Do you think that your CEC is representative of the student population in your school district in terms of:
- a) Race/Ethnicity Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - b) Balance of Different Neighborhoods Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
 - c) School Level (Elementary/Middle) Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
25. Do you think that PA officers and SLT members should be allowed to serve on CECs?
- Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
- a) Do you think more non-parents should be allowed to serve on CECs?
- Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
26. Do you think the election process for CEC members can be improved?
- Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
- a) [If Yes] In what ways can it be improved?
27. According to DOE, Community Education Councils “were designed to ensure that parents have a voice and are able to provide hands-on leadership and support for public schools.” In your opinion, does your CEC fulfill that goal?
- Yes___ No___ Don't Know ___
28. Are there any powers/responsibilities you believe CECs should have that they currently do not?
29. Do you have any suggestions on how DOE could better support your CEC or CECs in general?
30. Is there any specific support/assistance you would like the Office of the Manhattan Borough President to provide to your CEC or CECs in general?



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