Parent Empowerment Toolkit: Tools for Effective Advocacy
Overview

As advocates, leaders, and community members, parents are capable of providing unique grassroots educational leadership in our schools. We cannot create high-quality schools without the partnership of parents. Empowering the voices of parents in our education system is critical to the success of our students.

Creating and establishing parent organizations are a useful and effective way to organize parent voices and amplify their power in the educational landscape. Effective advocacy involves identifying the purpose and objectives of the work in the communities, understanding the issues and opinions behind the causes, investing in the power of the advocates, and strategically leveraging available tools and skills to maximum utility.

This toolkit provides an outline of how to create and establish a parent organization with the right structure, leadership, and procedures for your school through the following steps:
1. Knowing the Issues
2. Understanding the Terms
3. Getting Started
4. Connecting Advocacy to Action, Goal/Agenda Setting, Establishing Mission & Vision
5. Nuts and Bolts – Establishing Procedures and Operations
6. Funding and Budgeting
7. Building Relationships and Partnerships, Establishing Trust, and Fostering Effective Communication
8. Diversity and Recruitment
Step 1:
Knowing the Issues
Knowing the Issues

What are the citywide issues? (i.e. education, service, etc.)

What are the issues that your Ward/neighborhood is dealing with?

What issues are most important to you? (i.e. child’s schools, etc.)
Why is it important to understand the issue[s]?

To recruit allies

To understand opponents

To win arguments

To plan strategy and goals

Community Tool Box
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/advocacy-principles/overview/main
When planning strategy & goals

Know where to gather information about the issue [s]

Understand where people stand of the issue[s]

Understand how your community response to change

Know if the issue[s] divides and links the community

Do your research

Community Tool Box
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/advocacy-principles/overview/main
Step 2: Understanding the Terms
Advocate


1: one that pleads the cause of another; specifically: one that pleads the cause of another before a tribunal or judicial court

2: one that defends or maintains a cause or proposal

3: one that supports or promotes the interests of another

Synonyms:
Campaigner
Defender
Promoter
Proponent
Supporter
Spokesperson
Upholder
Advocacy


1. the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal: the act or process of advocating something
2. the action of advocating, pleading for, or supporting a cause or proposal
3. the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal: the act or process of advocating something

Synonyms:
Advancement
Assistance
Backing
Aid
Defense
Encouragement
Justification
Promotion

Recommendation
Justification
Urging
Champion
Campaigning for
Upholding
Pleading for
What is Advocacy?

- Advocacy is active promotion of a cause or principle
- Advocacy involves actions that lead to a selected goal
- Advocacy is one of many possible strategies, or ways to approach a problem
- Advocacy can be used as part of a community initiative, nested in with other components
- Advocacy is not direct service
- Advocacy does not necessarily involve confrontation or conflict

Community Tool Box
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/advocacy-principles/overview/main
Ingredients for Effective Advocacy

Include:

- The rightness of the cause
- The power of the advocates
- The thoroughness with which the advocates researched the issues, the opposition, and the climate of opinion about the issue in the community
- Their skill in using the advocacy tools available
- The selection of effective strategies and tactics

Community Tool Box
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/advocacy-principles/overview/main
Lobbying

“Lobbying is the practice of trying to persuade legislators to propose, pass, or defeat legislation or to change existing laws”
From: http://www.senate.gov/reference/reference_index_subjects/Lobbying_vrd.htm

“The act of attempting to influence business and government leaders to create legislation or conduct an activity that will help a particular organization.”
From: http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/lobbying.html
Step 3: Getting Started
Getting Started

Set the emotional tone

Know your objective going in
What do you hope to accomplish with this conversation? Develop the desired objectives and what are the non-negotiable points; plan for any obstacles to the desired outcome.

Don’t assume you know everything about the situation - Listen
We do not know all sides of the story; approach this conversation with an open mind and try to understand where the other person is coming from.

Approach the conversation from the perspective of collaboration
Frame the conversation in terms of both of working together to solve a common problem. Work to define the issues that are common.

Ensure neutrality
Select a facilitator that can play a neutral role; ask clarifying questions to help a group delve more deeply, but does not weigh in with opinions on what is discussed.

Sources:
https://interfaithhousinginitiative.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/crihi-community-conversation-toolkit.pdf
Libraries Transforming Communities: Community Conversation Workbook
connect.ala.org/node/241879
Getting Started

Diversity
A healthy cross-section of voices at the table is vital.

Safety
Create a safe space by establishing clear rules and ensure every participant is heard.

Patience
Resist the tendency to rush or to control things. Plan enough time to allow for ‘slowness’ where good thinking and reflection can take place.

Listening
Emphasize that everyone has something to contribute, so we must all be able to both hear and be heard.

Next Steps
Listening creates expectations for action. A measurable set of next steps must become clarified and implemented as follow-up to the conversation.

Sources:
https://interfaithhousinginitiative.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/crihi-community-conversation-toolkit.pdf
Libraries Transforming Communities: Community Conversation Workbook
connect.ala.org/node/241879
Getting Started: Resources

Creating and establishing a parent organization can be a daunting task. The resources below outline exactly what you need to know and do in order to start the process.

Determining the Right Parent Organization for an HISD School.pptx

Start a PTO Fact Sheet

How To Start a PTO

How Do I Start a PTO

How to Start a PTO in Your School

6 Steps to Start a Parent Organization at Your School

My Role in the PTO

Suggested PTO Leadership Roles

PTO Checklist

Sources:
https://interfaithhousinginitiative.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/crihi-community-conversation-toolkit.pdf

Libraries Transforming Communities: Community Conversation Workbook
connect.ala.org/node/241879
Step 4: Connecting Your Advocacy to Action

Goal/Agenda Setting – Establishing a Mission & Vision Statement
Goal-Setting

Setting and defining clear goals for your organization are the very foundation of a successful organization. Goals define what the organization is trying to accomplish.

- Provides Focus,
- Increases Motivation,
- Improves Group Cohesion,
- Clarifies the Groups Identity,
- Promotes Buy-in,
- Provides Mechanism for Accountability,
- Creates Openness and Transparency,
- and Ensures Progress is Measurable.

Goals should be:

- **S** – Specific (or Significant).
- **M** – Measurable (or Meaningful).
- **A** – Attainable (or Action-Oriented).
- **R** – Relevant (or Rewarding).
- **T** – Time-bound (or Trackable).
Goal-Setting

How to Get Started:

① Know the issues and their relevance
② Know the strengths and weakness of the group
③ Know where you want to be within a specified amount of time
④ Determine who is contributing and their role
⑤ Establish how the goals will be communicated – what is the messaging?
⑥ Build in time to reflect and evaluate if the goals
⑦ Develop an Action Plan[s]: action plans describe the specific steps to be taken in order to achieve the goal.
Organizational Mission

“A mission is an organization's purpose or reason for being. The mission answers the question[s]”
① Who are we?
② What do we do?

“The mission is ongoing and does not change unless the core [function of the organization] changes…”

“A mission statement may be rather broad…[but]…provide[s] adequate definition of the organization. The mission does not change or get replaced as problems are solved… it is not as time bounded…”

Principles of Organizational Goal Setting
Organizational Vision Statement

“A vision is an ideal image of a possible and desirable future state of the organization as it carries out its mission.”

“Values are a part of a vision statement…and represents an ideal rather than a specific achievement.”

Principles of Organizational Goal Setting
Goal-Setting & Action Plan: Resources

Setting concrete goals and clear action steps is the very foundation of a successful organization. Goals and action plans define what the organization is trying to accomplish.

Determining Objectives for Your Parent Organization

Action Plan Template

Organizing Parents: Building Family Advocacy Organizations
Step 5: Nuts and Bolts - Establishing Procedures and Operations
Nuts and Bolts: Resources

After establishing the organization, the next step is to maintain procedures and operations in fully functional and collaborative ways.

School Meeting Marketing Checklist

Sample Articles of Incorporation

Bylaws Worksheet and Example

Conflict Resolution Protocols

Parent Organization Voting Procedures for Leadership Roles and Bylaws

Roberts Rules Of Order

How to Apply for Tax-Exempt Status

How to Make Your PTO Tax-Exempt
Step 6: Funding and Budgeting
Understanding how funding and budgeting work is essential to establishing and maintaining a parent organization long-term. The resources below will help explain how funding works in DC and how school organizations can advocate for funds.

DCFPI At-Risk Funding One Pager

DCFPI DC School Finance Primer

DCPCSB Report of the Use of At-Risk Funds in PCS
Step 7:
Building Relationships and Partnerships

Establishing Trust and Fostering Effective Communication
“A community convening (or conversation) is a first step in building relationships and rebuilding trust. [These] dialogues [must]...be part of a sustained community effort” or strategies.

Source:
Discover and Define Ideal Outcomes

Discover your ideal outcomes by finishing the following four sentences:

1) Coming into this conversation, we see the following needs and challenges...
2) Inside this conversation we want people to engage with each other in these ways...
3) At the end of this conversation, we want these things to be clear...
4) Following this conversation, we want these things to happen...

Source: Libraries Transforming Communities: Community Conversation Workbook
connect.ala.org/node/241879
How to Engage the Community to Understand

Engage the community to understand:

• People’s aspirations for the community.
• People’s concerns.
• How people think and talk about a given issue in relation to the community.
• The changes needed to reach our aspirations for the community.
• What people believe we can do, and who they’d trust to take action.

Community Conversation themes help inform how you:

• Engage the community: Inviting new people opens the door to new relationships.
• Find new partners: Sharing public knowledge creates coalition opportunities.
• Develop strategies: Work on the issue AND build capacity to work together.
• Mobilize resources: Create natural pathways for people to contribute.

Source:
Libraries Transforming Communities: Community Conversation Workbook
connect.ala.org/node/241879
Pathways for Effective Communication
Effective Communication 101:
Fostering an Effective Relationship With Your Child’s School

It’s A Partnership
As a starting point, always consider your relationship with your child’s school, a partnership. This will allow you to foster a relationship with your child’s teacher that will continue to be nurtured throughout the school year.

Create a Plan of Action for Communication
Make sure to share your expectations for communication with your child’s teacher. Remember to have patience – teachers and school administrators can have a variety of things on their agenda daily, but should always respond to your requests for communication.

Always Follow Up
Calling multiple times in a day is not the best strategy for communication but following up the next day, or even in two days, after making a request to communicate with your child’s teacher, or school administrator, would be valuable. Make sure to ask when you can expect for your message to be returned.
Effective Communication 101: When Conflict Arises

Clearly Identify the Problem or Concern

Organizing yourself and being prepared will ensure that you are able to clearly share your concerns.

Understand the Rules

Take time to understand what the school rules and/or expectations are for your child. Also, be clear on the expectations that school has for parents. If those expectations do not sound appropriate do not be afraid to ask questions and offer suggestions.

Listen

Remember to actively listen to what other perspectives might be offered.

Ask Questions

Do not be afraid to ask questions – never leave confused, always ask for clarity.

Find Common Ground

There is always room for compromise. Remember the good in reaching a solution that is in the best interest of your child.

Create A Plan of Action

If there is an issue that needs to be more formally addressed, talk with the teacher, or other school personnel about developing a plan to specifically address the issue. Clearly outline each person’s responsibilities and ways to follow up.

Gather Information, Organize Yourself, Be Prepared

Talk with your child to get their perspective. Take some time to organize your thoughts prior to communicating with your child’s teacher or school – preparing the questions you have for the teacher or school in advance might be a useful exercise. Taking a moment to organize yourself will ensure that you do not forget to raise important points or questions.

Suggestions Are Welcome

In addition to questions, do not be afraid to offer suggestions or options that you feel are in the best interest of your child.

Have Patience

Solutions might not be immediate but having clarity of the timeline for solutions and getting answers to your questions is appropriate.

Remove Emotions, Share Facts

Talking to your child’s school about an issue can elicit a host of emotions. Take a moment to breathe before talking to the school – explain your concerns clearly and as calmly as possible. This will ensure that you have collected your thoughts.

Please visit our website for more useful resources and tip sheets. If you want one-on-one assistance, please feel free to call our office, we look forward to working with you!

Phone: (202)741-4692
Email: student.advocate@dc.gov
Web: www.sboe.dc.gov/studentadvocate
Twitter: @DC_Advocate
Effective Communication 101: General Tips to Know

Take Time To Inform:
Make sure that you clearly, and promptly, inform your child’s teacher, and other appropriate school personnel, of any issues your child is dealing with or any concerns that you might have – especially if the issue at hand might impact your child’s performance or behavior.

Find Ways To Get Involved:
Parent involvement is not only limited to parent organizations, ask about other opportunities to get engaged at your child’s school. Actively engaging at your child’s school also provides avenues for communication with not only your child’s teacher but also other relevant school personnel. Involvement can also foster positive relationships with other parents and uncover essential information that would be valuable for your child’s success.

Need help getting started? Consider trying a few of these sentence starters to engage your child’s teacher or school:
- “I’m concerned about my child’s...”
- “Help me understand...”
- “Have you considered...”
- “I’ve noticed...”
- “Her IEP provides her with ____. How does that look in the classroom?”
- “It seems as if he has a harder time doing ___ when ______.”

Ask For Help:
There are times when you need help. It might be help that you need from your child’s teacher or school, but also on occasion you might need assistance that the school may not have the resources or capacity to provide. Nurturing relationships with your child’s teacher, other parents, or even other individuals might lead you to the organization, agency, or resource that can give you the exact assistance that you, or your child, need.
Building Relationships and Partnerships: Resources

Collaboration between and amongst parents, teachers, and school members will catapult organizations from functional to effective.

Keys to Success in Family-School Partnership

Nine Truths to Parent Involvement

Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships
Step 7: Diversity and Recruitment
Diversity and Recruitment: Resources

In today’s environment, and particularly given the inherent diversity of the DC educational landscape, parent organizations must understand how to work with the range of issues and communities they serve.

Preparing Teachers to Work With Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children

Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement

Diversity: School, Family, and Community Connections

Family and Community Involvement: Reaching Out to Diverse Populations

Getting Off to a Good Start: Positive Interactions with Diverse Families

Potential Community Partners and Locations for Parent Outreach Activities in Diverse Communities

Strategies for Success in Local Early Childhood Parent Outreach Activities Among Diverse Cultures
Diversity and Recruitment: Resources

In today’s environment, and particularly given the inherent diversity of the DC educational landscape, parent organizations must understand how to work with the range of issues and communities they serve.


Communication Matters: Communicating Effectively with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Cultural Competence: Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Overcome the Language Barrier: Effective Strategies Parent Groups Use to Reach Out to Non-English-Speakers

Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections?