

Hearing on Parent Involvement
Testimony to the New York City Council Education Committee
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Testimony Submitted By: National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) and the
Urban Justice Center Human Rights Project

I want to thank the Education Committee of the New York City Council for this opportunity to testify. I am here on behalf of the Urban Justice Center Human Rights Project and the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI).

As key stakeholders in the educational process, parents and communities have a fundamental human right to participate in the running of schools. The human rights system, grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights treaties, recognizes that participation is essential for holding school systems accountable when they fail to guarantee the right to education. The United States has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees all people the right to participate in government affairs that impact their rights, including the right to education. When the US “ratified” this treaty, it obligated state and local governments to guarantee all the rights included in the treaty.)

The current approach to parent involvement in the Department of Education does not guarantee parents and communities the human right to participation. In 2003, staff at NESRI contributed to a report documenting the failure of NYC schools to guarantee the right to participation (See report *Civil Society and School Accountability: A Human Rights Approach to Parent and Community Participation in NYC Public Schools* at www.nesri.org). Over the past 3 years, little has changed, and in some ways, things have gotten worse. Structures for parent involvement, in particular in low-income communities of color, do not have a clear mandate and do not give real power to parents to influence decision-making. Parents are denied access to school buildings and school staff, and are not provided with the training needed to participate effectively.

Underlying these barriers is a culture in the school system that fails to respect and value the contributions parents want to make to their children’s education. In order to ensure parents’ right to participate, a shift in this culture has to take place. Parent involvement must not be viewed as a mechanism for simply supporting decisions made by the administration, but rather it must be a mechanism enabling parents to shape those decisions.

In order for the school system to meet its human rights obligations, parents must have their rights to: 1) power to impact decision-making; 2) capacity building for informed participation; 3) a welcoming environment in the school system; and 4) access to schools and information.

First, human rights require that structures are in place to give parents and communities power in decision-making. Current parent involvement structures provide superficial parental and community engagement with little real effect or impact. For example:

- District Education Councils have no clear mandate or power to influence key decisions, such as appointment of superintendents, expansion of charter schools, or budgetary issues. Furthermore, the Councils are elected from a limited pool of parents denying the broader community representation.
- School Leadership Teams in many schools are not functioning, do not have required parent representation and do not receive adequate training and support.

- Parent Coordinators have served as a useful mechanism for communication and basic information about schools, but do not function as an advocate for parents in reference to their school or as an avenue for parents to give input into decision-making. In many cases, they function primarily as a buffer between the principal and the parents.

The city should:

- Give parent structures approval or veto over key decisions and the authority to select and evaluate key administrators. For example, parents and communities should be involved in the hiring process from the beginning of superintendents, principals and assistant principals at the school and district level;
- End the disconnect between the district level parent structures and the regional administration. There should be a local source of authority that has power to work with parents and communities to make change.
- Provide these bodies with adequate resources; and
- Guarantee adequate representation of all constituencies, particularly low-income communities, immigrants and communities of color, in procedures for electing or selecting representatives to participation structures.

Second, parents and communities have the right to information and training to prepare and enable them to participate effectively. Parent Associations and School Leadership Teams do not receive adequate and timely training on how to interpret and develop budgets, or workshops to help empower parents to take leadership roles. The city should:

- Provide trainings on relevant topics, such as interpreting budgets and CEPs, and on the standards children are expected to meet and what parents can do to help their children meet those standards.
- Ensure that trainers are knowledgeable and skilled in communicating effectively with parents and communities. Schools should reach out to community-based organizations that have experience in disseminating and explaining information about the school system to parents and community members.
- Training sessions must be accessible and available in the key languages spoken by the community.

Third, the school system must create a welcoming environment that guarantees parents' right to dignity and to participate. Currently, many parents face mistreatment and are not valued as members of the school community. The city should:

- Create system-wide standards for a welcoming school environment and include engaging parents and communities as part of the job description of school administration and staff.
- Evaluate schools, regional offices and the Chancellor on their effectiveness in meeting these standards.

Finally, ensuring broad access to relevant information is essential in order for parents and communities to participate in school management, and monitor whether the school system is meeting its human rights obligations. Today, at the school and district level, parents struggle to gain access to information about their children's schools and curriculum, to talk to teachers or administrators directly, and to gain physical access to school grounds. Translation of materials and access to bi-lingual staff are also inadequate. The city should:

- Ensure access to budgets, curricula and other relevant information, and present the information in a way that is easy to understand and in a timely manner;
- Ensure physical access to school buildings and staff; and
- Ensure that information is translated into the primary languages spoken by the community and that bi-lingual staff are available to assist parents at all schools and district/regional offices. Funding should be made available through Parent Coordinators or other structures to ensure these services.

In order to help ensure that all of these rights are fulfilled, we urge the city to create parent advocates or ombudspersons within the school system. Around the world, there are human rights ombudsperson models that exist to protect and promote the rights of children and communities (See *Civil Society and School Accountability* report). An independent advocate is needed at the school or district level to ensure that parents are empowered and that mechanisms exist for parents to seek remedies when their rights are violated (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other human rights treaties guarantee all people, including parents and students, the right to timely and effective remedies when their rights have been violated). Such an office should be independent of the NYC Department of Education and the Mayor's office.

Finally, while today's hearing is about parent involvement, it is important to recognize that students also have a fundamental right to participate in the running of the school system. The city must ensure that students are empowered to impact decision-making.

Thank you.

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