Empowering Parents and Building Communities: The Role of School-Based Councils in Educational Governance and Accountability

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What is This?
Empowering Parents and Building Communities

The Role of School-Based Councils in Educational Governance and Accountability

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University of Michigan
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The New School

This article builds and explores the hypothesis that parent and community participation in school governance can have positive impacts on community development by fostering improvements in school performance and school–community relations and by acting as a catalyst for collective action around community-development issues. It does so through case studies of reforms for school-based management that have led to the creation of school-site councils that include parents and community representatives in Kentucky, Hawaii, Chicago, and El Paso. The article finds that the hypothesized outcomes can occur where parents are given meaningful decision-making authority in schools, nongovernmental organizations provide training and advocacy for parents, and principals actively facilitate parent involvement.

Keywords: school site councils; school community-based management; parent participation; community development accountability; governance

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy of the Bush administration has focused national attention on the question of school accountability and specifically its implications for the performance of schools in low-income urban areas. Yet the implications of school accountability go beyond student

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performance, and there are other means to hold schools accountable besides the high-stakes testing that is the centerpiece of NCLB. This article focuses on the relatively neglected role of schools as community-based institutions that play an important role in inner-city decline and revitalization. It addresses the question of whether direct parent and community participation in school decision making through membership on school site councils (SSCs) is likely to foster greater accountability by mobilizing community-based actors to become more involved in schools and school-reform efforts and giving them opportunities to provide input into school decision making. It further asks what types of participation are likely to lead to such accountability and whether this accountability leads to significant outcomes for the economic, social, and physical development of low-income communities.

The article is informed by the work of Clarence Stone and his coauthors, which has provided valuable insight into the politics of urban school reform (Stone, 1995, 2001; Stone, Doherty, Jones, & Ross, 1999; Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). Through a multicity study, they examine why and when efforts moved beyond interminable haggling between various interest groups—teachers unions, parents, principals, city administrations, businesses, and others—to shape reform that is driven by a shared agenda rather than the particularistic agendas of these actors. They employ the concept of civic capacity, which, they argue, emerges when there is

an ability to frame issues so that they present a series of winnable challenges,
an informal pattern of accommodation and cooperation among a range of stakeholders, and sufficient formal authority to make local elected leaders credible and reliable bargaining partners. (Stone et al., 2001, p. 142)

Elsewhere, Stone et al. (1999) focus on the often-troubled relationship between schools and neighborhoods. They characterize the improvement of school–community relations as an “assurance game” in which various actors gradually learn to engage in accommodation and cooperation by learning that “others will also and that such actions will succeed” (p. 350). This article is an effort to extend Stone et al.’s work by further examining the interaction between school improvement and community development. Specifically, we examine whether parent participation on SSCs might foster the development of such an assurance game and might lead to strengthened civic capacity for both school reform and community development.

The formation of SSCs has often been tied to reforms for school-based management (SBM), which have devolved a number of powers usually held by centralized bodies to the school level. Such reforms have been adopted
by school systems as diverse as those in Victoria, Australia; Memphis, Tennessee; Chicago, Illinois; Nicaragua; and Minas Gerias, Brazil (Connors & McMorrow, 1990). Within these efforts, SSCs have often been used to institutionalize the participation of parents, community members, teachers, students, and other role groups while holding principals responsible for academic performance. The theory behind SSCs is that providing a voice for various stakeholders in schools will lead to better decision making and a greater commitment from all groups to improved educational outcomes (Odden, Wohlstetter, & Odden, 1995).

The premise of our study is that parent involvement in SSCs may under certain conditions also create a virtuous circle of improved school–community relations and community development. We are specifically interested in two ways in which this might occur. First, parent participation may lead to new initiatives in schools that provide needed services to community residents such as health care, counseling, literacy assistance, or English as a second language instruction (Stone et al., 1999). Second, it may provide parents with opportunities to develop leadership skills, thereby acting as an impetus for leadership development in communities (Hess, 1992a; Stone et al., 1999). These outcomes are likely to be dependent in part on the degree of parent representation in decision making; models of parent participation significantly vary in the composition of SSCs and the extent of decentralization (Summers & Johnson, 1991). Some councils have a majority of parents, whereas others are led by school staff with some parental and community representation. Some have advisory or even perfunctory powers, whereas others can hire and dismiss the principal and set important school policies. Hence, we pose two research questions. First, what circumstances and reform models lead to effective parent and community participation in SSCs? Second, are there circumstances and reform models in which parent and community participation helps build the types of institutions and social capital widely thought to support community development?

Our study is based on an exploratory analysis of four jurisdictions (Kentucky, Hawaii, Chicago, and the Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas) that was intended to yield initial insights and to suggest further avenues for investigation. We do not claim to provide conclusive answers to the questions we pose. However, we present results with important implications for both what the answers may be and the evaluation and policy analysis needed to find them. Our findings suggest that where parents are giving meaningful decision-making authority in schools, where active nonprofit organizations provide training and advocacy support for parents, and where principals actively facilitate parent involvement, impacts on school improvement and community development may occur.
We begin by briefly describing the method that was used in this study. Next, we review the literature on SBM and develop a framework for analyzing the relationship among SBM, the role of parents on SSCs, and community-development outcomes. We then discuss the context in which reforms took hold and how this shaped the role of parents and community members in school governance. We analyze the extent of parental participation in schools in the two states and two cities and its impact on educational outcomes. In the final section, we discuss the relationship between parent participation on SSCs and community development.

**Methodological Note and Overview of the Cases**

The findings of this study are drawn from case studies of recent reforms that created SSCs in Chicago, El Paso, Kentucky, and Hawaii. The choice of method is informed by Yin’s (1994) view that case studies are an effective means to examine questions related to the hows and whys of complex “contemporary phenomena within some real life context” (p. 1). This approach is appropriate both because the study is exploratory, looking at relationships that are largely unexamined in previous studies, and because the phenomena being examined involve complex interactions among individuals, institutions, and neighborhood systems that are not easily captured through quantitative analysis. The multiple case design is chosen because it allows us to examine differences in results that emerge from different circumstances for predictable reasons, what Yin (1994, p. 46) refers to as theoretical replication.

We chose the four cases to shed light on two hypothesized sources of variation—the degree of parent representation and the scale at which the reforms were undertaken (district vs. state). Thus, we chose two state-driven reform cases and two city- or district-driven cases. We chose cases in which sufficient time had passed since reforms so that results are emerging that we argue can go beyond the short term. We also chose cases about which at least basic, descriptive studies have already been carried out. In addition, we chose cases with generally positive reputations in the scholarly and practitioner communities, though we reserve judgment as to whether or not the chosen cases are “success stories.”

The four cases embody very different models of SBM and parent representation in SSCs (Table 1). In some cases, SSCs are empowered to make binding decisions and establish policy regarding budget, curriculum, and extracurricular activities, whereas in others their role is advisory and their scope of authority more limited. Councils also differ in the groups they involve.
Table 1
Summary of Characteristics of School-Based Management in
Chicago, Kentucky, Hawaii, and Ysleta

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Composition of School-Site Council</th>
<th>Method of Selecting Parent Members</th>
<th>Extent of School-Site Council Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Six parents, two community residents, two teachers, the principal, one student (in high school).</td>
<td>Elected by community residents.</td>
<td>Sets policy regarding curriculum and instruction and extracurricular activities. Responsible for hiring and dismissal of principals, establishing school improvement plan, and allocating budget.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>Principal or head teacher, three teachers, two parents.</td>
<td>Selected by largest parent organization in school.</td>
<td>Sets policy regarding curriculum and instruction and extracurricular activities, but must work within curriculum guidelines established by standardized tests. Responsible for budget allocation and establishment of school improvement plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>To be determined by the principal at the school level. Must include principal, representatives of teachers, parents, community members, school staff, and students.</td>
<td>To be determined at the school level.</td>
<td>Responsibility for all aspects of school decision making at the school level, although the responsibilities of school site councils (SSCs) are determined at the school level. SSCs must apply for waivers and exceptions where decisions contravene Department of Education regulations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Paso</td>
<td>Half school professionals, half parents and community representatives. Actual size and composition to be determined at the school level.</td>
<td>Selected by principal with advisory assistance of school council.</td>
<td>SSC’s role is advisory and covers curriculum and instruction, personnel decisions, establishment of school improvement plans, and extracurricular activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
represent, which may include principals, teachers, parents, community residents, students, and school staff. In most cases, teachers and the principal form the majority of SSC representatives, and Chicago is the only large school system in the United States where they contain a majority of parent and community representatives. Chicago SSCs also have perhaps the widest range of powers, including the authority to hire and dismiss principals, develop and implement school improvement plans, and set the school budget (Bryk, Kerbow, & Rollow, 1997; Education Commission of the States, 2001). Kentucky’s SSCs embody a significant degree of decentralization of decision making to the school level, but parent representation on SSCs is modest (Kentucky Institute for Educational Research, 1995). In Hawaii, the reforms allowed for considerable flexibility at the school level, resulting in innovations in participatory school governance (Hawaii Department of Education, n.d.; Koki, 1998). In El Paso, SSC reforms have been relatively modest, and council powers are merely advisory, but in some cases community organizing groups have played a particularly powerful role in seizing on the potential of SSCs to make explicit the link between school improvement and community development (Shirley, 1997). We believed that weak representation of parents would generally present a significant obstacle to their effective participation both for the obvious reason that their voices and votes would carry less weight and because of dynamics in the interaction between parents and school professionals that will be detailed later in the article.

With regard to the scale at which the reforms were undertaken, both the state and the district levels are important sources of reform. We chose to select two cases from each type as we suspected that they would differ in the degree of parent and community participation. Specifically, we believed that reforms undertaken at the district level might reflect direct pressure from low-income neighborhoods about concerns regarding poor school–community relations and that this might result in reforms that embody a stronger role for parents and communities.

In each of the case study cities, the investigators conducted interviews with key informants, gathered secondary data (including reports of local advocacy groups, think tanks and universities, and government agencies and newspaper accounts), and observed one SSC meeting. Given resource and time constraints, the focus was on making an initial assessment of the relationship between SSCs and community development. Secondary sources were analyzed to look for evidence both of intent to affect community development and such outcomes in practice. We conducted interviews with 47 individuals, including 12 representatives of the school systems, 11 representatives of nonprofit organizations that work with schools, 10 principles and
teachers, 9 parent members of SSCs, and 5 academics who have studied SBM and parent participation in these school systems. Interviews averaged 75 minutes. Our initial questions focused on the origins of the reforms that created SSCs, the functioning of councils and relations among actors on them, and perceptions of the impacts of councils, and parent participation on councils, on both educational programs and broader community development. However, these interviews followed the method referred to by Rubin and Rubin (1995) as “interviews as guided conversations,” meaning that questionnaires were used for guidance, but the discussion was allowed to shift according to the interests and knowledge of the particular respondent. Respondents were identified through snowball sampling—key actors in school reform were initially identified through a review of the literature, then they in turn were asked to identify other actors who could help us answer our questions.

### Parent Participation in Schools and Community Development: A Review of the Literature

The literature on SSCs is at a formative stage, primarily consisting of case studies of a few well-publicized examples such as Chicago and Kentucky (Hess, 1992b; Pankratz & Petrosko, 2000; Wohlstetter & Briggs, 2001). This section will review the literature on SSCs and their role in SBM, develop a comparative framework for understanding the potential relationship between parent participation in SSCs and community development, and identify possible determinants of such outcomes.

The earliest experiments with SBM were initiated in the late 1980s in response to the perceived failures of school systems, including lack of accountability, the wastage of funds, and inappropriate and outdated curriculum and instructional practices (Hess & Easton, 1992; Pankratz, 2000). Proponents of parent participation through SSCs argued that these measures can help to address these issues by creating accountability while also providing schools the flexibility to be innovative and to customize programs to their own circumstances (Pankratz, 2000). This assertion is based on research literature that concludes that high-performing or effective schools are characterized by strong leadership, highly qualified and committed staff, a focus on learning, and responsibility for results (Creemers, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1994). SBM and SSCs, it is argued, can help to foster these outcomes by building relationships among clients (parents), policy makers, and service providers (school staff) and by creating a mechanism to hold decision makers accountable (Ladd, 1996; World Bank, 2004). By the mid-1990s, mandates for SBM were in
place statewide in Kentucky, Hawaii, Texas, Colorado, and North Carolina and city or countywide in Chicago, Miami, Memphis, Los Angeles, San Diego, Rochester, and Cincinnati. In practice, it has proven difficult to establish an empirical link among SBM, SSCs, and improved educational outcomes, and this article does not attempt to do so. Rather, we focus on accountability itself as an important goal of school reform.

The accountability of schools to parents and communities is particularly worthy of examination because school–community relations have important implications for both educational and community-development outcomes. Beyond poor school performance, students in low-income communities also face issues of the prevalence of single-parent households, the lack of formal education among parents, the stresses of poverty, and crowded and inadequate housing that create a home and community situation that inhibit academic achievement (Kaufman, 1994; Wilson, 1996). Parents and communities are thus critical to the school improvement process, yet poor school–community relations can create obstacles to their ability to play a role. As Stone et al. (1999) state,

Particularly in low-income communities, teachers voice concerns that parents fail to help educators do their jobs. For their part, many parents and community members experience the school as an alienating institution. . . . Enlisting schools in community development means first reversing the dissociation between schools and poor neighborhoods. (p. 340)

Recognizing the implications of the community context in which schools are embedded allows us to identify a number of ways in which accountability relationships can be improved and to understand the implications of school improvement for community development. Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework describing three potential impacts of parent participation on educational outcomes, school–community relations, and community development. First, parental influence may lead to curriculum and instruction that better meets the needs and capacities of communities. Second, collaborative decision making between parents and community members on one hand and among principals, teachers, and school staff on the other may enhance school community relations. This may lead to improved educational performance both because parents may become more aware of their role in their children’s education and educated about the influence of the home environment on student achievement and because parents and community members may commit increasing time and financial resources to schools. In addition, parent participation may have a direct influence on the physical, social, and economic
development of communities in three ways. First, participation in schools may lead parents to develop skills that enable them to take on leadership roles elsewhere in their communities. Second, perceptions of improvements in schools, and the sense of investment in the process that comes with participation, may help to slow or reverse the flight of families out of low-income neighborhoods. Third, participation in school improvement may act to facilitate community involvement around issues outside of schools, be they physical redevelopment, the lack of social services, or others. These assertions are conjecture, and some (notably the link between SSCs and educational outcomes) are controversial. However, we pose Figure 1 as a framework for investigating the relationship between school accountability through SSCs and community development. Testing all of these relationships is beyond the scope of this article. We thus undertake a more limited examination in this article of the more direct links between parent participation and leadership development and the development of new types of programs in schools that benefit communities.

Community-development outcomes are partially dependent on parents being able to effectively participate and assert meaningful influence on decision-making. Shaeffer (1994, p. 16) highlights the useful distinction between parent participation, which implies a relatively strong and active role on the part of parents and other stakeholders, and parent involvement, which connotes “passive collaboration.” For this study, participation by a stakeholder
group means that the group gains some power that its members consider important and can autonomously make decisions. Yet parents face a number of obstacles to participation, including resistance from teachers and principals and lack of access to relevant information, which may thwart their influence and render their experience demoralizing rather than empowering.

Research points to a number of factors at the school level that affect parent participation (Bryk et al., 1997; Odden et al., 1995). Perhaps the most important factor is principal leadership—principals who are effective leaders and employ a collaborative model of management may successfully engage parent participation even where SSCs have not been implemented. Second, parents are likely to exercise much more influence where they are organized and assert a common agenda, particularly where they have technical and political support from independent nonprofit organizations that work on issues of school governance (Davenport, 2001; Shirley, 1997). Finally, the relative representation of parents on SSCs and the degree of authority of SSCs have important implications for parent influence for obvious reasons.

Table 2 describes four organizational models of SBM that can be observed in practice that have quite different implications for parent participation and thus for community development. Three parameters define the degree of parent influence in each model. The first is the degree of authority decentralized to the school level, including the degree of autonomy in allocating the school budget, the extent to which important decisions can be made at the school level, and the degree to which schools are restricted by board of education regulations or collective bargaining agreements regarding wages, personnel decisions, or uses of school buildings. The second is the degree of authority of SSCs relative to principals—whether they are empowered to set policy and the extent of their mandate. The third is the representation of parents on SSCs relative to other groups. Where parents are a majority or plurality, they are more likely to exercise greater influence and are also more likely to be empowered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model of School-Based Management</th>
<th>Degree of Authority at School Level</th>
<th>Degree of Authority of Councils</th>
<th>Parent Representation in Decision Making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent participation</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School accountability</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal centered</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucratic oversight</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
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by the recognition of their preeminent role to play a more active part in leading and making decisions. These three factors shape the extent of parent and community influence and specifically whether parent participation occurs or more passive parent involvement. They consequently have implications for the potential community-development outcomes hypothesized in this study. Table 3 illustrates how this framework, which is further explained below, informs our analysis of the cases.

The four models are abstractions—no actual experience with SBM perfectly corresponds with any one of them. Nonetheless, they are useful for analyzing the models implemented in practice. Under the parent participation model of SBM, councils have a broad mandate to institute and implement changes in many aspects of school management. Parents are a majority on councils and are elected by parents or community residents. Such an arrangement creates the potential for participatory democracy within schools, although this outcome is dependent on a high degree of parent commitment, and organization and participation widely vary among schools (Bryk et al., 1997). There is considerable debate as to whether such participation leads to improved curriculum and instruction, but of more interest here is the question of whether it enhances the possibility that significant improvements in school–community relationships may occur and that parent and community representatives recognize a link between school improvement and community development. Because of political resistance from principals and teachers and skepticism regarding parent participation among lawmakers, this model is relatively rare, with Chicago being the sole example in a major school system in the United States (Bryk et al., 1997; Hess & Eaton, 1992; Ryan, 1997). Even Chicago, however, has stepped back from this model, as will be detailed in the following section.

The school accountability model tends to coincide with measures for increased accountability, such as high-stakes testing. It is premised on the need
to give various school-level stakeholders a voice to gain their acceptance of politically sensitive attempts to hold them accountable. Kentucky’s experience most closely corresponds to this model. Here, SSCs were instituted as part of a package of reforms that also mandated testing and instituted the development of explicit guidelines that schools must follow (Pankratz & Petrosko, 2000; Prichard Committee on Academic Excellence, 1995). The legislation thus attempted to recognize concerns among teachers and principals that they should be able to decide at the school level how these rigorous new demands should be met, whereas parent input was a secondary concern, and parent participation was consequently limited. Community-development outcomes are not a major objective for such a reform agenda, and opportunities for the types of explicit connections between parent and community participation and community development are limited, although the potential strengthening of education outcomes may have beneficial implications for communities.

Under the principal-centered model, power is decentralized, but school councils are merely advisory, leaving other stakeholders with little formal authority over principals. This model most closely corresponds to El Paso, where SSCs have no power to implement school policy. In the final model, the district-centered model, reforms bring little change as the educational bureaucracy gives up little budgetary discretion or decision-making power, limiting the authority of both principals and SSCs. None of the cases examined here fit this model, although the level of decentralization is somewhat more modest in Hawaii because of continued board of education control in schools (Auditor, State of Hawaii, 1998; Izu, Aronson, De Long, Cuevas, & Braham, 1995). Hawaii does not neatly correspond to any of these categories because the mandate for SSCs was left quite vague in the legislation. In fact, variations on the parent participation, school accountability, and principal-centered models can be witnessed in Hawaii.

The implications of these models for school–community relations and community development are apparent. Where councils have little authority and school autonomy is limited, there is little potential for collaborative decision making. Where parents have limited influence, they are less likely to gain leadership skills or feel encouraged to pursue other leadership opportunities. As a consequence, the outcomes for community development outlined in Figure 1 are less likely to be realized. However, even where the parent participation model prevails, the implications for community development are dependent on the success of SBM and SSCs; where there is conflict or continued decline in school performance, this model is unlikely to lead to a direct impact on community development. In other words, the realization of school revitalization as a tool for community development occurs where
parents, principals, teachers, and other actors coalesce around a vision of school improvement that recognizes a relationship between school improvement and community development. This occurs where, to borrow Stone et al.’s (1999) terminology, an assurance game is achieved wherein these actors each have meaningful decision-making authority and learn to trust each other and act based on common interests rather than on particularistic interests.

This is not to say that SSC models that do not conform to the parent participation model cannot succeed in school improvement but rather that this is unlikely to combine with an agenda of community development. In fact, most SSC models do not explicitly embrace community development and better school–community relations as an explicit goal. The next section will examine the contextual factors that shaped the reform in each city and will demonstrate that variations in emphasis on improved school–community relations in the reforms reflected variation in the degree to which this was considered central to school improvement.

The Origins of SBM in Chicago, Kentucky, Hawaii, and El Paso

Stone et al.’s (2001) analysis of 11 cities concludes that civic capacity exists and successful school reform emerges where “a wide alliance develops enough of a common understanding to work in concert” (p. 4) around a reform agenda. The following analysis will address two questions regarding the reform movement in the four case study areas. First, what degree of civic capacity existed in each? Second, to what degree was improved school–community relations through parent participation intended as a primary outcome of the reforms? We will argue that where civic capacity exists and reforms are implemented with the explicit objective of addressing the frustration and alienation of low-income communities toward the school system, parent involvement is likely to be stronger and community-development outcomes are more likely to occur.

Chicago

Chicago’s reforms were the product of a distinct set of factors—an acute educational crisis, socioeconomic and demographic change, the emergence of Black political power, and an active set of nonprofit and community-based organizations working on educational issues (Hess, 1992a; Stone, 2001). The central role of parents in SBM and the existence of a strong network of
organizations that explicitly recognize the link between school and community issues have fostered an atmosphere in which the community-development outcomes hypothesized in this study were realized on a larger scale than in any of the other case studies.

Like many urban school systems in “rust belt” cities, the Chicago school system experienced a crisis in the 1970s and 1980s brought on by increasing poverty, the flight of middle-class families to the suburbs, and a declining tax base. The results were persistent budget shortfalls and an increasingly impoverished student population. Between 1978 and 1984, the dropout rate stood at about 43%, reaching two thirds in some low-income neighborhoods, and half of graduates were reading below the ninth grade level (Bryk et al., 1997). Two events in 1987 acted to galvanize support for educational reform. The first was the death of Mayor Harold Washington, who had been elected 3 years earlier as the city’s first African American mayor on a platform of neighborhood development. Educational issues had become associated with Washington’s legacy following a series of educational summits that he convened in the mid-1980s. The second event was a 19-day teacher’s strike that shut down the schools. Pervasive distrust in low-income communities of city government and school professionals and concern for the poor performance of students created a groundswell of support for greater community control of schools. An effective grassroots campaign championed by a coalition of nonprofit organizations, academics, and business leaders led to the passage of the Chicago School Reform Act (CSRA) of 1988.

The hallmarks of the CSRA were its mandate of a high degree of parent and community participation, measures for teacher and principal accountability, and increased resources for schools (Hess, 1992a). Most significant, however, was the creation of the SSCs, which left significant power at the school level in the hands of parents and community residents, who are a majority of SSC members. The reforms also gave parents some voice in city-level school governance—board of education membership was changed from a system of 11 members nominated by the mayor to a 15-member board with representatives nominated by the School Board Nominating Commission that was dominated by parent and community representatives from local school councils (LSCs). The reforms met with considerable enthusiasm in communities. In the first elections for SSC representatives in October 1989, 313,000 people turned out to vote for 17,000 candidates for 5,420 LSC members in 542 Chicago schools.

Because of both controversy over the degree of community participation created by these reforms and the continuing fiscal crisis facing the school system, a new reform agenda was put in place in 1995 that provided the
mayor with much greater power over the composition of the board of education and expanded the board’s power to take over failing schools (Chambers, 2002-2003). Although parents retained their role on LSCs, these entities were stripped of much of their fiscal autonomy, thus leaving them with extremely limited formal power. Although the impacts of these reforms on educational outcomes remain a topic of heated debate, two apparent consequences of this reform agenda were the weakening of minority influence in the school system and demobilization of parent involvement in schools.

Stone (2001, p. 604) attributes only moderate levels of civic capacity to Chicago, arguing that the various actors were only “loosely allied” around the reforms. Nevertheless, because the initial round of reforms were a direct response to disenchantment with the lack of accountability of the school system to low-income and predominantly minority communities, they embodied to a greater degree than the other cases an explicit agenda of getting parents involved in school governance and improving school–community relations. Despite the 1995 changes, Chicago maintains an unusually high level of civic activism around schools.

Kentucky

Unlike the case of Chicago, Kentucky’s reform movement focused not on community disenchantment but on concerns among politicians and civic leaders about poor educational performance as measured by standardized tests (Pankratz, 2000; Sexton, 2000). There has consequently been a much more modest link between parent participation and community development.

The reforms were initiated in response to a ruling of the state supreme court that found the state’s educational financing system to be unconstitutional. The state had long had one of the most ineffective educational systems in the country.9 The state supreme court finding created a political movement for reform that was largely elite based. The most prominent advocacy organization was the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, formed by attorney Edward Prichard and consisting of a group of government-appointed members of a citizen’s committee on educational reform (Sexton, 2000). Although the group attempted to stimulate public involvement in the issue through televised public meetings on the school system and other means, it largely depended on support from prominent politicians and newspaper editorials in its lobbying effort.

The Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA), which was passed in 1990, led to extensive changes in school financing and governance. Funding for schools dramatically increased, and the state’s rank in funding per pupil
rose to 21st in the country by the mid-1990s from 48th in the late 1980s (Hunter, 1999). KERA also created Family Resource Centers to provide a variety of social services to families. Finally, it institutionalized SBM and SSCs, although their authority is more limited than in Chicago. Schools have the authority to shape curriculum and instruction and set the hours of instruction but must achieve certain goals in standardized testing or face restructuring by the state. Parents are a minority, and, where no strong independent parent organization exists, principals often exercise considerable influence in the choosing of parent representatives.

The Kentucky model reflected a conscious effort to use SBM to overcome political obstacles to increasing the accountability of educators and school administrations. This motive was accepted both by policy makers and nonprofit advocacy groups (Pankratz, 2000). One activist we interviewed who was involved in the lobbying effort put it this way:

Essentially there was a political bargain—teachers will accept responsibility, and accept accountability, in return for some control over the local decisions. I think Chicago started out with a different set of purposes, to return the schools to the community and deal with political frustration on the part of parents. We had that, but at the state level you are not going to come up with the same rationale you come up with in a city. We might have had community and parental frustration with the schools, but there was never an argument that called for the creation of mini school board elected from the community.

The limited mandate for parent participation in KERA also reflects skepticism about community control that partially reflects popular stereotypes of rural communities in Kentucky and particularly the Appalachian communities in the eastern part of the state. Although KERA sought to establish some balance of power among parents, teachers, and principals at the school level, interviews revealed that there was broad acceptance among advocates and policy makers that principals should remain the dominant power and that the state should remain the final arbiter of change. As one academic who had examined Kentucky school reform stated,

There’s an element of paternalism in the reform. Everyone has the image of Eastern Kentucky as a bunch of hillbillies sitting around drinking moonshine. These are distasteful stereotypes, but people locally know about them. People felt that school achievement in certain areas, especially eastern Kentucky, was so abysmal, that there was such an ingrained sense of good old boyism, that we had to break through all this. Even at an unconscious level, the mind-set was that we’ve got to drag those people, kicking and screaming, into the 20th and 21st centuries. And the only way we can get their attention is to say,
“You’ve got to improve your school achievement or we will take over your school and send somebody over there to tell you what to do.” So it was an attempt to try to pull achievement up, push it, pull it, cajole it, threaten, do something to pull us out of this lethargic situation.

Hence, schools have significant responsibility for setting curriculum and instruction yet have to follow strict guidelines set by the state. For example, they can set the number of hours of instruction but must retain enough instructional time to cover the considerable amount of material covered by the standardized tests. There is little inclination in SSCs to address school–community relations and community development both because the tasks of the SSCs are defined by instructions from the state on educational matters and because parent representatives are a small minority.

Hawaii

Hawaii’s school system is marked by considerable ethnic diversity. Those claiming native Hawaiian ancestry are disproportionately low income and are concentrated in rural communities such as the Waianae District on the island of Oahu. As in Chicago, the reforms for SBM were implemented in the context of considerable tension between communities and the state, and for some activists educational issues are inextricably linked with the movement for Hawaiian sovereignty. However, the reforms did little to address this frustration, and some interviewees argued that this led to the development of a spin-off charter school movement that has led to significant innovations in school–community relations, most notably Hawaiian language charter schools. Such schools represent a remarkable integration between goals of community-based cultural revitalization and SBM (this will be discussed in more depth in the next section).

Unlike the other case studies, the Hawaii reform agenda was instituted from within the Hawaii Department of Education without significant outside pressure. SBM was instituted statewide in 1989, and although it has never been mandatory, about 86% of schools had implemented it by 1998 (Auditor, State of Hawaii, 1998). The legislation is rather vague on the question of what SBM should look like, simply stating that schools should have a process that incorporates input from six stakeholder groups—principals, teachers, support staff, students, parents, and other community members (Izu et al., 1995). The most common adopted arrangement has been the formation of an SSC with a single representative of each group. However, some schools have chosen different mixes of representatives, and a few have adopted other decision-making frameworks, such as open meetings, that do not involve the formation
of councils (Pacific Region Educational Laboratory, 1992). Schools have been given considerable authority under SBM legislation in areas such as curriculum and instruction, school hours, extracurricular activities, and others. Unlike the other cases under study, however, there are no complementary measures to strengthen educational outcomes, such as increased funding or high-stakes testing. This is a standalone effort to bring new actors into school governance.

The vagueness of the mandate for SCBM is indicative of the modest objectives of this reform. The principle of one school that had embraced parent participation to an unusual extent argued that the state “had not thought through the empowerment implications of the reform. . . . They thought all we would do was tinker around the edges, that we would not try to enact radical change.” Although this particular school was able to exploit the opportunity to undertake a sweeping set of changes, the lack of a clear mandate for parent and community participation made it possible for many principals to maintain strict control over change in schools, and this meant that the potential for community-development outcomes has been limited. There has been little opportunity for the types of outcomes hypothesized in Figure 1—the development of leadership skills among parents and community leaders and the explicit connection between school improvement and community development.

**Ysleta School District (YISD), El Paso**

According to Stone (2001), El Paso represents a rare instance of high civic capacity in educational reform because a large number of actors, including school officials, politicians, business leaders, and community activists, engaged in an extended process of planning that led to the creation of a relatively unified vision of reform. Our research supports much of what Stone found but also concludes that the reform agenda did not encompass parent participation despite the fact that this was a perceived need in many communities. Although this has arguably led to improvements in educational outcomes in the city, it created limited possibilities for a school improvement–community development link. As in Hawaii, the lack of opportunity for parent and community participation led to the development of a spin-off movement calling for such participation (this will be discussed in the next section).

The Ysleta School District is one of nine school districts in El Paso County, Texas. The prevalence of Mexican immigrants in the district creates a unique set of issues—of the district’s almost 50,000 students, 86% are Latino, 27% have limited English proficiency, and 33% are low income
Thus, many students face unique issues with language and acculturation. The district also has an unusually large population of migrant workers whose children may change schools several times a year. Despite these issues, in 1998 Ysleta was the first urban district to be declared a Recognized District for its improvements on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test.

Texas mandated SBM at the state level in 1995. As with Kentucky, Texas’s model of SBM is largely focused on improving educational achievement and implementing standards-based reform. The Texas Educational Code establishes the use of monetary rewards and sanctions for schools based on performance. The code also makes SSCs responsible for establishing and reviewing campus educational plans, performance objectives, and classroom instructional programs. However, districts establish specific guidelines for the structure of councils and the extent of their authority. In YISD, although parents make up half of SSC membership, their role is advisory, and principals are the final authority in most decisions. In addition, the parent and community members are selected by principals with the advisory assistance of the SSC. In practice, SSCs have had a limited impact on school policy in most cases because of their lack of formal power.

**Comparison of Site-Based Management Models**

In each case study area, the content of the reforms was shaped by the content of the reform coalition that emerged, and we have argued that the discourses of school reform that emerged from each coalition had different consequences for school–community relations. In strong contrast to the other cases, Chicago’s reform movement was embedded in a larger movement for Black and Latino political power, and the debates around schools were explicitly focused on issues of race. In addition, organizations of civil society played a role not only in shaping the legislation but also in galvanizing public interest in reform and in bringing various actors at the school level to the table and ensuring that their voice was represented. In contrast, Kentucky’s reforms emerged out of a concern over poor test results. In Ysleta and Hawaii, SBM was initiated from within state departments of education and was only marginally linked to a broader reform agenda. In both cases, concerns about school–community relations existed that were not satisfied by the modest role accorded to parents and communities, and this led to a spin-off movement for parent participation. The following sections will review the implications of these differences for school–community relations and community development.
Parent Participation: Outcomes for School Improvement and School–Community Relations

This section will examine which models of SSC have led to parent participation and mobilization. What we observed is that there is a great deal of interaction between the building of strong schools and the building of strong communities. In several instances, we witnessed an iterative process in which parent participation in school governance fostered a groundswell of activism around school issues that led to significant change in schools, which in turn led to improved school–community relations and the development of community-based social capital. Two factors seemed to cut across these cases—the existence of a principal with a facilitative leadership style and the existence of civic capacity in the community at large.

Previous studies have identified a number of issues that emerge in parent and community participation. Principals and teachers often initially resist outside participation out of concern that parent and community representatives may make ill-informed or capricious decisions and that their job security may be threatened if parents are given a role in personnel decisions (Odden et al., 1995). As one Hawaii parent we interviewed noted, “Teachers in general are not very confident about dealing with the community and parents in a collaborative environment about issues outside curriculum and instruction.” However, research indicates that these concerns dissipate over time. An additional concern is that parents and community residents may not have the time or capacity to effectively participate—here again, survey research tends to dispel these concerns. There was some resistance to parent representation on SSCs in all of the case study cities and states, but there is increasing consensus in jurisdictions where parent participation is mandated that conflict can be overcome and parents can play an effective role.

Factors contributing to the effectiveness of councils, and the ability of parents to influence decisions, are much harder to assess. In a 1997 study, Bryk et al. found significant variations in SSC’s performance following Chicago’s dramatic reforms. They described three categories of schools. The first are those that have focused on specific issues, such as safety and security, school uniforms, peripheral educational changes, or “Christmas tree” programs that are not conceptualized within a broader educational philosophy. The second consists of SSCs that are largely nonfunctional, meaning that they frequently do not meet quorum, meet for less than an hour, experience significant conflicts between role groups, and spend most of the time during meetings discussing procedural issues. The final set of SSCs are those that systematically develop plans based on a well-defined
educational philosophy. They term these “emergent restructuring” schools and find that they represent about one third of all schools. Interviewees in Kentucky, El Paso, and Hawaii discussed similar categorizations. The following are some of the more notable changes to school policy and practices that have been put into place by SSCs:13

- In Hawaii, a number of schools have extended the school year to a calendar year and have made other innovative changes in scheduling.
- In Chicago, anecdotal evidence collected from interviewees indicates that SSCs have played a role in the substantially increased the number of African American principals.
- In all cases, SSCs have led to schools adopting national models of school improvement, such as Success for All, Comer Schools, and Accelerated Schools.

In addition to changes in curriculum and instruction, some schools have initiated programs to directly involve parents in the classroom. A notable example is the efforts of Community Organizing for Family Issues (COFI), a consulting group that works with community-based organizations in Chicago to train parents to be more involved in their communities (Davenport, 2001). COFI has organized parents in several schools to implement the Parent–Teacher Mentoring Program, which places parents in the classroom as assistants to teachers. The objective is both to assist teachers and to get parents more involved in their children’s education. Although COFI initially struggled to find enough teachers who would volunteer to mentor a parent, the program has gradually gained acceptance, and in some instances teachers have requested that SSCs make the program mandatory. Schools that have implemented this program report significant improvements in students’ achievement on standardized reading tests (Davenport, 2001). About 14 schools are in various phases of implementing the program.

What role did parents participation in SSCs play in these changes? We cannot conclusively answer this question, but studies do provide some evidence concerning how parents and other role groups perceive their influence. An evaluation of the YISD model of SBM, for example, concluded that a significant proportion of schools have become “democratic dictatorships,” in which SSCs coexists with the reality of principal dominance of decision making (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 1998). In Hawaii, 42% of parents, as compared to 75% of teachers, rate their influence on curriculum decisions as a 5 or 6 on a scale of 6 (Izu et al., 1995). In Chicago, in contrast, parents appear to be more confident of their role in decision
making. A study conducted in 1997 found that 91% of SSC members agree with the statement that the principal asks the SSC for its input, and 80% agree that the SSC is highly or moderately involved in the budget process (Ryan, 1997). This apparently reflects the greater representation of parents on SSCs in Chicago, although a national survey of SSC members would provide more comparable results.

What, however, explains the differences in levels of parent input between schools within the same district, city, or state? Research points to two factors. First, Bryk et al. (1997) argue that the presence of a principal with leadership skills and a collaborative style is the single most important factor, as their influence can help offset the potential for bias in decision making. As one El Paso principal we interviewed stated, even where principals and teachers have good intentions toward parent participation, they have insider knowledge that parents lack, and as a consequence “parents feel left out or misdirected or uninformed.” Overcoming this dynamic requires a principal who finds ways to systematically incorporate input from parents (e.g., by organizing community meetings) and can act as an advocate for parents and a mediator between parents and other members of SSCs.

A second important factor in effective parent participation is the presence of civic capacity in the community at large (Stone et al., 1999). Where recognized community organizations are present, they can help parents develop an agenda and train them to understand educational and budget issues and to articulate their positions. In Chicago, a number of organizations have focused on organizing and training parents and advocating for a strong parent role on SSCs. Their role has been controversial—two such organizations, Parents United for a Responsible Education (PURE) and the Chicago Association of Local School Councils, have lost the right to train parent SSC members, most likely because of their vocal opposition to many school board policies. Other organizations, most notably Designs for Change, have focused on research and advocacy for a continued strong role for parents.

Where at least one of these two conditions exists, substantial parent participation is possible even where SBM legislation does not focus on the role of parents. This can in turn lead to the iterative dynamic discussed earlier. An example is the Waialae Elementary School in Honolulu, Hawaii. Located in an upper-middle-class neighborhood of predominantly single-family homes, Waialae was the first school in Hawaii to implement SBM (Izu et al., 1995; Pacific Region Educational Laboratory, 1992). Parent involvement subsequently contributed to a number of changes, including experimenting with portfolio-based assessment, replacing report cards with parent-teacher conferences, and significant changes in curriculum. Waialae’s
early adoption of SBM was initiated through collaboration between a community-based organization called Friends of Waialae School, but the principal’s unusually facilitative leadership style was the deciding factor in the reform effort. Major changes were discussed at length in open forum meetings, to which all community residents were invited. One parent recalled that the principal frequently refused to state an opinion during community meetings, because “if she said anything that would cut off the conversation or steer it in a certain direction. . . . These subtle things about her leadership were important to allowing us to realize our voice and motivating us to participate.” The level of mobilization in the community was such that, in 1995, 90% of parents were aware of SBM, and more than half had been to an SBM open forum meeting (Izu et al., 1995). In sum, the changes that were made reflected the convergence of a number of fortuitous events and an exceptional level of commitment from both parents and educators.

Where neither of these conditions exist, parent input is generally limited. In Kentucky, Hawaii, and Ysleta, even where parents are confident and articulate, their role is primarily one of gadfly and watchdog, ensuring that funds are used responsibly, that school professionals remain accountable, and that a parent perspective is represented. These roles are important but do not represent a potential for dramatic improvement in school–community relations. Again, this is not a condemnation of the reform movements in these localities. Each appears to have led to school improvement. However, they have not achieved the dynamic of parent involvement in school and community change that is the focus of this article.

In school systems where parent participation in SSCs has been minimal, alternative models of school governance have sometimes emerged. Two such models are the charter school movement in Hawaii and the Alliance School movement in El Paso. The charter school movement in Hawaii is in many ways a direct outcome of disenchantment with what some see as the lack of a meaningful parent and community role.14 As one principal put it, “People learned about the possibility of empowerment from SCBM, and they were willing to take the next step in charter schools.” Many communities have seized on the flexibility of the guidelines in the charter school legislation to develop highly inventive new models of school management and curriculum. Of the 24 new schools created, about half have Hawaiian language and cultural programs (Auditor, State of Hawaii, 2001). A number of Hawaiian-language immersion schools have been formed, in which instruction is entirely in the Hawaiian language, requiring the translation of a large amount of English-language material. Here, community organizers have focused on schools as a central element in the rebuilding of Hawaiian culture and
language in community life. The effort has been controversial, and some are concerned that graduates will be ill equipped for future education and employment. This tension between the role of schools in producing productive citizens and their role in building stronger communities is common to discussions of parent participation. Although the debate is important, it is also necessary to remember that the two goals are not necessarily in conflict.

The Alliance School initiative was organized by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and by 1997 was being implemented in approximately 100 schools in Texas (Shirley, 1997). In El Paso, the El Paso Interreligious Service Organization (EPISO), a community organizing entity that is affiliated with the IAF, has been the main actor. EPISO has been active in a number of community development and infrastructure delivery issues in the local colonias, low-income areas on the fringe of the city that are primarily populated by first- and second-generation Mexican immigrants.

The Alliance School model involves much more intensive parental involvement than conventional SBM models and departs from conventional SSC models in important ways (Shirley, 1997). Community organizers first identify potential leaders among parents who will form a core committee that also includes principals and teachers. These parent leaders are encouraged to organize “house meetings” of 10 to 15 people to discuss issues of concern to them. These meetings are meant to broaden the dialogue regarding school policies and increase awareness of educational issues. Frequent public meetings are held to discuss issues and provide parents with an opportunity to raise concerns. “Parent academies” are held with prominent speakers on educational, social, economic, and political issues in an effort to enhance understanding of how these issues might inform decisions in local schools. “Accountability sessions” are also held with local political leaders and representatives of the school district so that parents have an opportunity to articulate their concerns in a forum explicitly designed to their advantage. Parent leaders also become active in the lobbying efforts of the Alliance School initiative. The model puts parents at the forefront of policy making at the school level and in political lobbying efforts at the district and state levels. One teacher articulated the objectives of the Alliance School model in the following way:

It teaches parents how to interface with institutions, understand institutional texts, and to use that to make changes to the system. Once they start understanding how institutions work, they can make a contribution in the school, they started to feel they can do this in the community as well. And that energizes a lot of these parents.
The initiative has resulted in several major educational innovations. Among them is the NetSchools Constellation Program, which began at Ysleta Elementary School. By a unanimous vote at an open meeting attended by about 500 parents, teachers, students, and community activists, the school decided to provide all students between the third and sixth grade with a personal laptop computer. The initiative came about when parents identified the lack of computers in the predominantly low-income households in the neighborhood as a major obstacle to academic achievement. The NetSchools initiative is now being implemented throughout YISD. Ysleta Elementary has also constructed a new school building with significant design input from parents. There has also been an increase in the number of advanced placement courses. Advocates also argue that Alliance Schools have experiences above average increases in the percentage of students passing state standardized tests (Interfaith Education Fund, 2001). The implementation of the Alliance Schools project requires both strong leadership from the principal and the presence of strong community organizations, in this case one with a faith-based component. As stated by an EPISO organizer,

The reason there is a relationship with a community-based organization, like EPISO or Austin Interfaith or another group, is that principals are constantly being told by the school district to control their parents. And there has got to be an independent base of power that can hold the school district accountable and allow talented principals to take some risks in organizing their parents. The congregation base in EPISO provides that independent political base.

This quote highlights the major conclusions from the preceding analysis. Simply stated, building stronger schools and building stronger communities cannot be separately viewed—they are part of an iterative process. SSCs are one practical policy lever for fostering relationships but (a) they are only part of a more complex process and (b) the devil is in the details. Strong SSCs require a certain extent of awareness and mobilization within the broader community and can be further strengthened where the mobilization of parents meets with a cooperative and facilitative attitude from a progressive principal. Likewise, where central administrations provide opportunities for involvement of civic organizations, this can facilitate the strengthening of local social capital and consequently parent mobilization and involvement in schools.

SBM and Community Development

The final section of this article will assess the direct impact of parent and community participation in SSCs on community development. We have
already listed a number of ways in which such an impact may occur: through enhanced leadership skills among parents, through increased awareness of issues in the socioeconomic and physical environment of the community that discourage educational achievement, through the opening up of schools for a number of functions and services that may benefit communities, and through improved school-community relations. We will address each of these issues in turn.

There is little doubt that leadership development is a beneficial externality of SBM. At any given time, 5,400 parents and community residents in Chicago, 2,500 in Kentucky, and hundreds more in Hawaii and El Paso are playing leadership roles in school governance. For many of these people, this is a first experience in a leadership role. Whether the SSC experience leads to a true sense of empowerment, however, rests on the question of how much influence parents can realistically exercise and how much support they receive in their efforts from other council members, parents, and the broader community. In all four case study areas, interviewees related anecdotes about parents who had gone on from SSCs to play leadership roles at the community level and sometimes at the city level. These include cases of parent SSC members who ran for local school board or other elective posts, who found employment in community-development organizations or social service agencies, and who became teachers or other school professionals. This has been true to some extent with traditional parent-teacher associations for some time, but the much greater degree of responsibility accorded to parents in SSCs, and their opportunities to interact with school professionals, arguably leads to a stronger sense of commitment and greater potential for leadership development than these more established modes of parent involvement in schools.

Once again, Chicago provides the paradigmatic example. The strong parent role in school governance creates an incentive for parents to participate, and the city’s dense infrastructure of civic organizations has capitalized on the reforms as a potent issue around which to organize parents. The COFI group, discussed earlier, has explicitly attempted to capitalize on the synergy between neighborhood organizing and SBM. Likewise, PURE and other nonprofit organizations have recruited staff from among SBM members to engage in lobbying efforts.

The Alliance School initiative in Texas makes leadership development an explicit goal. It deliberately places parents in roles that require them to exhibit leadership (e.g., in house meetings) and confront people in leadership positions (e.g., in accountability sessions). Many parents who have been associated with Alliance Schools attribute a personal transformation to the experience and take pleasure in recounting their conversion from passive
parent to active advocate for their children. One parent recounted her role in EPISO’s efforts to lobby the state senate for expanded funding for arts programs:

Before the Alliance School initiative came along, I was the one who would just park in front to drop off my kids, and pick them up when it was time to go home. Now I am running down the hallway with a senator telling him how important this money is for this for the school, I am fighting for my kids. They are getting ready to vote on this bill, and we are pulling them off the senate floor.

Particularly in predominantly Latino immigrant communities, where linguistic and cultural issues can present obstacles to civic involvement, such experiences can play a critical role in building the foundation for broader civic and political participation.

With regard to the role of parent participation in schools as a means to raise awareness about other community issues, the Alliance School model again provides an intriguing case. The Alinsky model of organizing is premised on the belief that once people are organized to solve an issue in their community, they will inevitably come to recognize the interconnectedness of this issue with other problems they face. The task of the organizer is therefore to identify those issues that are most likely to act as a catalyst for community activism (Alinsky, 1989). This approach has experienced considerable success in El Paso. As one teacher stated, “The school was central to getting EPISO an audience they could tap to say, ‘Yes education is important, but could you also be involved in the community and your child’s life in the community as well?’” As a result, he continued, “There are so many ways that parent involvement in parent academies spilled out into the community, from improving roads, to running water out to the colonias, to getting out the vote.” In Ysleta Elementary School, for example, parents successfully lobbied to change traffic patterns and increase the number of stoplights in their neighborhood after a girl was struck and killed by a truck on her way home from school. A number of Alliance Schools have developed other initiatives, including adult education, health screenings for community residents, and a prekindergarten programs, after parents identified the importance of the health and well-being of the family in children’s education. In the colonias of Socorro, one of the poorest parts of El Paso, parents raised the inability of school busses to navigate local streets in their successful effort to get the streets paved and widened. More generally, the Alliance School initiative has allowed EPISO to gain greater recognition both in communities and citywide, and it has been able to capitalize on this to advance its community-development agenda.
We also identified instances where parent participation appears to have led to schools being used for services that benefit communities in all four of the case studies. Parents trained under the COFI project in Chicago have initiated community centers in schools that are centers for ESL and GED classes and other programs for parents, recreational activities for children, and a number of social service programs. SSCs have played a critical role in this initiative both because many parents associated with COFI are SSC members and because parent representatives on SSCs provide a source of support for such initiatives. In El Paso, SSCs have initiated classes in ESL and preparation for citizenship, among others. Although no numbers are available on this, interviewees for this study indicated that parent members of SSCs in Kentucky have played a role in the establishment of many Family Resource and Youth Services Centers. Likewise, in Hawaii, Parent-Community Networking Centers have been established to organize volunteers at the community level to provide tutoring and other services (Ing, 1993).

Finally, it is perhaps not possible to determine from existing evidence what impact SSCs have had on broader parent perceptions of schools and on the consequent development of social capital. However, our many interviewees recounted trust building among interest groups as an important function of SSCs. This is perhaps best summed up in an EPISO organizer’s account of the interaction between parents and teachers at a house meeting at Ysleta Middle School:

We had about 200 parents and teachers sitting around talking about what their experience in education had been and why they wanted their students to go to college. And the parents were so shocked to learn that most of the teachers were the first in their family to go to college and that they had struggled to do it. And you just saw the ice breaking in the way people began interacting with each other. Because they had assumed that the teachers had been born with a silver spoon in their mouth, and that wasn’t the case. And that allowed them to see each other as human beings.

This quote is reminiscent of the earlier reference from Stone et al. (1999) that calls for “reversing the dissociation between schools and poor neighborhoods” (p. 340) as a critical step in both school improvement and community development. Countless such revelations have occurred in SSC meetings and through the day-to-day interactions of parents, teachers, principals, community representatives, and students.
Conclusion

Stone et al. (1999) identify the cultural, racial, and class barriers that often exist between schools and communities as a major impediment to social change in poor urban neighborhoods. They ask, “How, then, can this gap be bridged in such a way that schools become an important contributor to social change?” (p. 341). Based on exploratory case studies of four jurisdictions, this article has developed a framework for assessing the role of parent participation in SSCs as one means of bridging this gap. It has also provided suggestive evidence that this relatively recent innovation in school governance has in some cases led to new educational and extracurricular programs, enhanced social service delivery, leadership development, direct interventions in local community development, and, more generally, enhanced sense of mutual trust, understanding, and obligation between schools and communities. We have further argued that although the concept of civic capacity emphasized by Stone (2001) does explain much about the relative success of school reform, it is the ideological agenda around which such civic capacity coalesces that shapes the amount of space for civil society involvement and parent participation.

The framework and findings presented here suggest an agenda for further research geared both at understanding how widespread the outcomes identified here are and at gaining a more detailed understanding of the factors that bring them about. Specifically, we believe that two types of research would be particularly beneficial. The first is a sample survey of parents, teachers, principals, and other participants in SSCs probing several issues: Have similar initiatives emerged in their councils? To what degree are community context and school–community relations viewed as a matter of concern to the SSC members? Who has most actively participated in decision making, and what has the content of their contribution generally been? And what role have parents played in setting the SSC agenda, most specifically with reference to school–community relations and community development? The second type of required research is more intensive case studies of specific SSCs that have recognized the relationship between schools and communities. Such a project would involve more extensive interviews and nonparticipant observation during an extended period and would address questions about the dynamics of interactions between different stakeholders on councils and in the communities and the factors that lead to the kind of strong, effective, and mutually supportive parent and community linkages that are likely to foster community development.
If the relationship between parent participation and community development is supported by such research, this would have important implications for school governance and community development. It would demonstrate that although it is possible for political leaders to move forward with a reform agenda based on the support of elite actors and the exclusion of community-based actors and their advocates, such an agenda misses an opportunity to tap into a significant source of energy for school and social change. The school–community disconnect has reached a critical stage, and the experiences reviewed here indicate that parent participation in schools can play an effective role both in improving schools and in improving community perceptions of them. We have also tentatively identified some of the conditions that foster success in bringing parents to the table: the existence of independent nonprofit organizations that provide training for parents and play an advocacy role, principals with strong leadership skills, and, most importantly, a decision-making framework that provides parents with real influence and voice in decision making.

Notes

1. In part, this was because of our limited time (about one week) at each of the four case study sites. Given the limited time for field work, we needed to know a good deal (at least about the factual and institutional arrangements) about the cases before we arrived.

2. We were able to interview at least one principle, parent, government representative, and nonprofit representative for each case study. However, the small number of interviews per case study, dictated by time and resource constraints, is a limitation of this research project.

3. Another set of literature reviews the evidence on the process by which schools improve and yields conclusions that are consistent with the effective schools research. For example, in an evaluation of school improvement on three continents, Dalin et al. (1994) conclude that essential ingredients in successful reforms are a sustained commitment to quality improvement, local empowerment to adapt programs to local conditions, strong emphasis on school and classroom practice, and strong support linkage between education authorities and the schools.

4. In fact, this is the most common model. That is, many districts and states pay lip service to school-based management (SBM) and school site councils (SSCs) but empower them to do very little and give them few or no resources. One example would be New York State’s School Leadership Team reforms, but there are many others.

5. In Hawaii, changes that contravene Board of Education regulations must go through a waivers and exceptions process. Although this process has been the source of some frustration, some schools have been able to make significant changes, including major changes in curriculum and instruction, major changes in the school calendar (e.g., adopting a calendar year school schedule), and hiring for new instructional programs.

6. In addition, Hawaii is the only state in the country without local school districts. The fact there this is no level of policy making and bureaucracy between the state and the schools themselves could have several potential impacts unique to the state (e.g., increased centralization on
one hand but a greater propensity for decentralizing reforms to target schools rather than districts). On the other hand, the physical isolation of many schools because of the island geography of the state could increase school autonomy de facto.

7. Of Chicago students, 50% are African American and 37% are Latino, and 85% are from low-income families (Chicago Public Schools, 2004).

8. Under the reforms, principals were to be hired under 4-year performance contracts (Hess, 1992a). Greater budgetary discretion at the school level was combined with a requirement that schools undertake more intensive planning efforts, specifically to develop 3-year improvement plans to be updated yearly. Funding was to be directly allocated to schools based on a formula accounting for the number of disadvantaged students in a district, resulting in a significant budget increase for schools with large numbers of low-income students.

9. In the 1980s, Kentucky ranked 50th among states in adult literacy and adults with a high school diploma, 49th in the percentage of people who went on to college, and 48th in per pupil educational expenditure (Hunter, 1999). The system was also marked by disparity in access to educational resources, with the highest-spending districts spending 2.5 times more per pupil than the lowest-spending districts.

10. This has often meant increasing the number of instructional hours and in some cases cutting time devoted to music and physical education classes to ensure that students are prepared for exams. Although these changes have raised some concern, Kentucky’s success in raising scores on standardized tests has muted any criticism of the reform.

11. In Chicago, for example, surveys indicated that 75.6% of teachers on councils expressed positive feelings about councils (Ryan, 1997). In Kentucky, a 1999 survey found that 82% of principals, 76% of teachers, and 85% of parents said that SBM was functioning well (Kentucky Institute for Educational Research, 1995).

12. In Chicago, a survey of parent local school council (LSC) members found that 83% of parent representatives spent 5 hours or more per month and one third spent 10 hours or more per month on SSC-related duties (Ryan, 1997). In addition, about 48% of these same parents reported spending 10 or more hours per month in school outside of their LSC duties. Thus, many parents are willing and able to commit significant amount of time to school-related responsibilities. Survey research in Chicago and Kentucky indicates that parent members of councils are uniformly more educated than the population at large and are much more likely to be professionals (Ryan, 1997).

13. The debate over whether SSCs have fulfilled their mandate of improving educational outcomes is ongoing. Some improvement has been recorded, particularly in Kentucky and Ysleta, although it is not clear what role SSCs played relative to other reforms such as high-stakes testing and school choice. In Ysleta School District, the district went from having only 1 of its 49 schools rated recognized or exemplary (the two highest ratings accorded by the Texas Department of Education) in 1994 to 44 of 50 in 1998. Kentucky was 1 of only 3 of 38 states to show statistically significant improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests between 1993 and 1998. In Chicago, the results have been more mixed. A study by Bryk, Kerbow, and Rollow (1997) found that although math scores have trended up at the elementary school level since reform, reading scores have trended up only in the earlier grades while trending down afterward. A statistical analysis in Kentucky found no relationship between the implementation of SBM and test scores (Petrosko & Lindle, 2000).

14. Some education advocacy groups have complained of the lack of a mandate for parent participation in SBM, the cumbersome waivers and exceptions process mandated by SBM reforms, and the feeling among some that the Department of Education is using its resources to try to continue to direct school-level policy (Auditor, State of Hawaii, 1998).
15. We must note that the evaluation referenced does not allow reliable or defensible causal inferences to be drawn about the relationships between the programs and the outcomes mentioned.

16. Under the Kentucky Educational Reform Act, schools with at least 20% of children eligible for free lunch can apply to receive grants from the state. The services that are to be delivered by these centers are determined at the school level and can include reading programs to prepare young children for school, services to connect children to eye care or health care, after-school care, education for new or expectant parents, drug and alcohol counseling, job training and placement, and others. By 1999, 702 schools (93% of those eligible) had established such centers (Kentucky General Assembly, 2000). The most common services provided were health services and referrals and counseling for family crisis and mental health.

References


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