

LAUSD Parent Advisory Committee

Chairperson's Report

March 17, 2022

Hello, colleagues:

Every so often, I think about all the LAUSD schools my two kids have attended, and my efforts at these school sites to raise the bar for engaging parents and families. With a few notable exceptions, sadly I was not able to make much progress. The question I still ask myself is, why?

This is a big question, so let me focus on just one of the factors I've identified over the past 15 years. It is something many of you have come up against, and it's known in our District as *principal's discretion*. This vague, mostly unspoken concept holds that as the leader of a school, the principal must have wide latitude in making decisions on how to run it. This is all well and good, to a point. What I mean here is that if a principal is newly promoted to their position, having previously served as an assistant principal or only a coordinator (yes, it does happen), they are focused almost exclusively on doing a good job and, frankly, not messing up. There, I said it.

With binders full of District policy bulletins, memos, reference guides, and other documents to follow as the "instructional leader" of a school site, it's all they can do to keep things running smoothly, not make big changes — at least in their first year — and avoid getting on the bad side of teachers, particularly the UTLA chapter chair. This need to be liked is perfectly understandable, of course. We all want to fit in. The problem arises when a principal comes to believe that gaining the respect of faculty and staff is somehow more important than cultivating relationships with parents and families. The result is what many of us have experienced as a parent and family engagement practice which is inconsistent, ill-advised, arrogant, hostile, or even vindictive.

One of the most common phrases we hear from principals and senior leaders in LAUSD is that we as parents are "equal partners" with them in the education of our children. If only it were so. I've lost count of how many times I've heard the following from a frustrated parent or caregiver:

- The principal is cold, aloof, or insensitive when interacting with parents, or unavailable to talk.
- The principal says parents may not volunteer or even observe in their children's classrooms.
- The principal runs SSC and ELAC meetings, even though both groups have elected chairpersons.
- The principal announces that due to COVID, there are no parent volunteers on campus.
- The principal "plays favorites" and discriminates against parents of certain ethnicities.

What do these situations all have in common? If you answered, "The principal," you're correct.

The root of this problem is that until very recently, university training programs which prepare students to become educators had almost no coursework devoted to the importance of engaging parents and families. What little instruction an aspiring teacher did receive was often limited and less than rigorous in examining the critical role played by parents and families in collaborating with educators as truly equal partners in maximizing student academic achievement. As a result, for many years, new teachers entered their profession with no idea of how to build relationships with parents who entrust those most precious in their lives — their children — to public schools.

It's only in the past few years that teacher-preparation programs have begun to include a significant curriculum dedicated to best practices in parent and family engagement. This is why newer teachers typically are more familiar and comfortable working with us in a collaborative manner. As these aware, empathetic educators rise into the ranks of administration to become assistant principals, then principals and beyond, perhaps leading district-level departments or even entire school districts, we will surely see educational leaders who understand what real parent and family engagement is, why it must be front and center in any serious discussion about student achievement, and how to work side by side with us as equal partners. Imagine that!

Once this change eventually has come to pass, I can hardly envision how much different the experience of future parents will be when they enroll their precious children at an LAUSD school.

However, until then, it pains me to admit that we will continue to witness practices in parent and family engagement which are more akin to alienation than engagement. When we do, it is our responsibility to remind principals who are, shall we say, not yet enlightened, of our right to be involved in our children's education. I often help parents through the process of going from being timid and unsure of what to say in a meeting full of educators to blossoming into knowledgeable, confident, powerful parent leaders who understand that they have an obligation to "pay it forward" by mentoring those coming up behind them, just as they have been mentored.

By the way, if you have been fortunate never to meet a principal with the negative behaviors I've described above, then please count your blessings as you remember that parents at many other schools are not so lucky. Reach out to these justifiably frustrated parents. Listen to their stories. Then consider whether your own SSC and ELAC are operating properly. Has every single member received **training** on their roles? Insist that your principal not only inform members of the annual training events offered each autumn by all six of our Local Districts, but actively encourage attendance. Excellent principals lead by example, so they should be there as well. Do your part to inform, educate, and empower parents to demand best practices in all schools District-wide.

Every parent deserves a principal who is an outstanding practitioner of parent and family engagement. *Every parent* deserves "a seat at the table" when decisions affecting their children are being made, *not* later. ***Every parent deserves to be treated as the equal partners they are.***

At your service,

Paul Robak

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