

“Bottom-up accountability”

Parents can use the No Child Left Behind Act to get more of a voice in their kids' schools

BY DEBORAH KONG

Mary Johnson and other parents were tired of being treated as “rubber stampers.” Rather than working with parents as partners, teachers and administrators in Lynwood “would develop a plan and just bring it to the School Site Council meeting for parents to sign,” says Johnson, president of Parent-U-Turn, a parent advocacy group. “Parents were not being respected for the knowledge that we have about what is good for our kids.”

So she and other members of Parent-U-Turn decided “we’re going to change the structure,” recalls Johnson, the mother of three sons and a daughter who have now graduated from Lynwood Unified School District. “We’re going to make it friendly for the parent. We’re also going to make it so parents sit at the table.”

District officials did not return calls seeking comment.

Rights—and results

To back up their demands for change, Parent-U-Turn used the parental involvement requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind law. Even then, it was hard work, Johnson says. But last November, the district signed an agreement creating new systems of parent



Mary Johnson, president, Parent-U-Turn

involvement. For example, parents now sit on panels that interview applicants for teaching jobs. The district trains parents on understanding test scores and other school data. And schools must hold elections for parents who sit on decision-making panels.

Now, says Johnson, “parents are sitting on the textbook committee. They are sitting in on interviews. Parents are feeling welcome at the school.”

NCLB RESOURCES

- **Parent Information and Resource Centers**, funded by the federal Department of Education, provide information and training for parents. To find one near you, go to www.pirc-info.net and click on “Find your PIRC.”
- **The California Department of Education** provides information on NCLB at www.cde.ca.gov/nclb.
- **The Education Trust-West** features information about No Child Left Behind and California at www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/etw/ca+nclb, 510-465-6444.
- **The Public Education Network** provides a parents’ guide to NCLB and state-by-state reports at www.publiceducation.org/pubs_NCLB.asp, 202-628-7460.
- **The Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights** provides information on NCLB at www.cccr.org, 202-659-5565.

It’s the law

If a school receives Title One federal funds to boost achievement in low-income areas, the No Child Left Behind Act requires the school and the district to involve parents in developing both parent involvement policies and school improvement plans (see box, p. 11). Research provides overwhelming evidence that parent involvement promotes children’s academic achievement.

“Under No Child Left Behind, (parents) have the right to be equal partners,” Johnson says. “We needed bottom-up accountability to make the schools treat parents in a respectful way. Now we had something in writing that we could demand.”

Key to success: Unity

Getting the school district to meet those demands wasn't easy, Johnson says. Ten to 25 members of Parent-U-Turn participated in meetings with the district superintendent, a local newspaper reporter, and their state Assembly member. They also called and faxed the California Department of Education. In the end, says Johnson, the district agreed to a legally binding contract with 14 parental involvement requirements.

John Rogers, associate director of UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, & Access, says, "real change occurs when parents come together." Rogers, a faculty member at UCLA's School of Education, says the institute worked with Parent-U-Turn to produce data about school conditions, and Parent-U-Turn members participated in the institute's workshops.

"Groups like Parent-U-Turn have been so vigilant that the district hasn't been able to just drive the entire agenda," Rogers notes.

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Mary Johnson, president
Parent-U-Turn

Opened a door

Lynnwood parent Valerie Muñoz says she's happy with the changes she's seen. At the high school where she works as a community aide, meetings are now posted in advance, and the principal attends every parent meeting, she says.

No Child Left Behind "opened a new door where we can be part of the decision-making," Muñoz says. She urges parents to "exercise your rights. It's your school! If you don't fight for your child, nobody's going to do it for you."

- Parent-U-Turn, 323-564-6545
- Parent-U-Turn's *Parent Survival Guide* available from National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, 703-359-0972, www.ncpie.org

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TIPS FOR PARENTS

Experts and parents who have used No Child Left Behind offer this advice:

- **Educate yourself about your child's school.** Check out the report cards that compare schools. Make a list of items you need more information on.
- **Understand No Child Left Behind** and how it works in your state (see Resources, p.10).
- **Get to know the decision makers at your school:** the principal and members of your School Site Council (SSC) and English Language Advisory Committee (ELAC).
- **Make sure some parents in your group get to know district decision-makers:** school board members, superintendent, other administrators.
- **Attend SSC and ELAC meetings.** Make sure that someone from your group also attends district board meetings.
- **Visit schools in pairs,** for support and to help document conversations.
- **If you're dissatisfied** with the school's actions, ask parents on the School Site Council not to approve any funding requests and let other parents know why.
- **Elect strong parent representatives** "who are willing to stand up and say no," Johnson advises.
- **Join local parent groups,** contact national groups like the Citizens Commission for Civil Rights, or form your own group.

SOURCES: Mary Johnson, president, Parent-U-Turn; William Taylor, chair, Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights; Public Education Network; Judy Goddess, education consultant

PARENT RIGHTS

If schools receive money from Title One they must:

1. **Work with parents** to develop a parent involvement policy and publicize it to parents in a language and format they understand.
2. **Hold an annual meeting for parents** explaining the school's participation in Title One and letting parents know they have a right to be involved.
3. **Hold parent meetings at times convenient** for parents, providing transportation, child care, or home visits if necessary.
4. **Send parents' comments to the school district** if parents aren't satisfied with the school's educational plan.
5. **Explain the curriculum** and expectations to parents.
6. **Work with parents** to develop a school-parent "compact" spelling out parents' and school's responsibilities.
7. **Encourage parents to volunteer** in the school, observe, and participate in their child's classes.

Source: California Department of Education, www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/parentalbroch.asp