

Parents Organizing to Improve
Schools
The National Committee for
Citizens in Education.

CHAPTER 4

Dealing with School Officials

An important part of any action plan is negotiating with school officials. Some may be valuable allies. But others may be evasive or difficult to deal with. You must expect both kinds and be able to deal with them.

How Can You Identify and Work with Concerned School Staff?

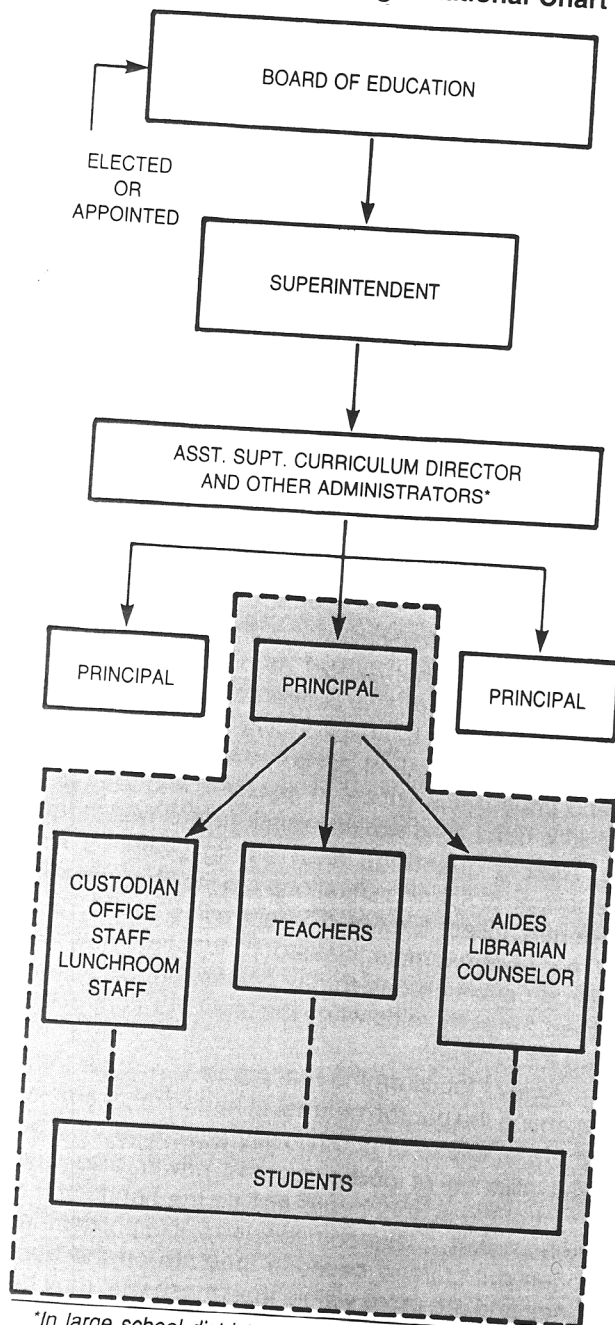
It is a mistake to assume that all teachers, principals, or other school officials are "the enemy." Many are deeply concerned about the children with whom they spend five or more hours a day. Such dedicated school staff need support and praise. It is critical to discover who they are and to build good working relationships with them.

Asking questions and testing people's responses to specific situations are the best ways to identify allies. Expect different allies at different times. For example, classroom teachers may be strong allies on day-to-day issues, but disagreements may develop when the teachers' contract is up for renewal.

Always focus on the real problem—rather than blaming the person nearest at hand. For example, the root cause of poor quality education may be the alliance of politicians and power elite who control the school board and tie the hands of the school staff. Classroom teachers, like policemen, often get blamed because they are on the front lines and are more visible than those who may be controlling the community behind closed doors.

Learn to separate issues from personalities. It may be appropriate to attack a harmful school practice or policy. But don't make personal attacks

School District Organizational Chart



*In large school districts "other administrators" may mean 25-500 people. Ask for an organization chart for your school district from the superintendent. Find out the structure in your school district. Fill in the names and phone numbers of key people.

on those responsible. Treat everyone courteously—even if someone becomes rude or difficult. School officials may not always agree with you, but they will learn to respect you.

How Do You Learn the Power Structure of the School and School System?

The diagram on the opposite page shows the formal organizational structure of most school districts.

The board of education is responsible for providing leadership to the school district, developing policy, and hiring and supervising the superintendent. The superintendent is responsible for implementing policies in the district, hiring administrators and principals, and managing the school system overall.

The formal power structure—who hires and fires, who is accountable to whom—is public information and should be available upon request. Make sure parents know the general structure and also the names of the persons with whom they must deal. A *Parent Handbook* listing the names and school telephone numbers of all staff in local schools, at the central administration office, and of school board members is useful.

In your efforts to bring about change, you may be most effective if you start with the person most responsible for the action you disagree with, and then move up the organization chart if you are dissatisfied with the results of your first encounter.

For instance, suppose a number of students have been suspended in your school for minor classroom misbehavior. Talk to their teachers first. Maybe you can persuade them to handle more behavior problems themselves, without sending unruly students to the principal's office.

If not, go to the principal and ask about the school's suspension policy. What are the conditions of suspension? Are students given a hearing? Urge the principal to reserve suspension as a punishment for only the most serious offenses.

If the principal is uncooperative, take your case to the superintendent and school board. The prin-

principal may not be following the district's policy on suspension, or the policy may need revising.

In the case of suspension, all students have due process rights, so it is conceivable that you could take your case even higher than the school board. Usually, however, you can resolve problems in your own school and district by following an orderly appeals process.

How Can Parent Groups Counter School Officials' Excuses for Inaction?

After your parent group has decided on the problem(s) that need to be solved and changes that need to be made, present your case to the school principal or perhaps the school board along with your demands, requests, suggestions or even offers of help.

At this point, it is wise to anticipate responses from school officials which may be excuses for inaction. Learn to recognize these excuses and counter them.

Some groups role-play the situation at a planning meeting in order to get practice in responding to school officials' reasons for inaction. Two parents could be assigned to play the role of principal and counselor and given a list of ways to avoid dealing with the parents' demands. This kind of role-play gives parents practice in recognizing ways that school officials consciously or unconsciously evade dealing with parental concerns. Practice is the best way to learn to negotiate effectively.

The following list of possible responses that evade the issue or divert parents from pressing their problems to a solution could be used as preparation for a meeting with school officials.

We're the experts—*We educators know best and must make these decisions. You do not understand all the complex issues involved.*

Parents must continually assert that they do know their children's needs and no one knows them better. School officials are paid by us to serve the needs of the children and the community.

As public servants, one responsibility of educators is to simplify complex issues so that the public can understand them. Insist that they do so.

Denying the problem—*That is not a real problem in our school. Do you have any proof?*

Perhaps the school official is not aware of the problems and the parent group is serving an important role by informing him or her.

Parents should come to the meeting with evidence (documented, if possible—firsthand reports of parents and students are best).

It's an exception—*It may be happening to just a few children; it certainly isn't widespread.*

Parents should point out that each child in the school is important and should ask the officials to prove the problem is not widespread. For example, if the problem is suspension of five children, documented by the parent group, ask for the record of suspensions at the school over the past year. Put the burden of proof on the school official. That is where it belongs, especially since parents may not have access to all records.

Blaming the victim—*With this type of student at this school, we really can't do that much.*

Blaming the child rather than the system, which itself may be structured to create problems (of discipline, dropouts, reading failure, trash on the playground) is a common way to avoid facing real problems. The school is set up to serve the children of the community, and school officials are paid to design a school environment that meets the needs of all children.

Blaming other parents—*We know it's a problem, but those parents don't seem to care about their own children.*

Do not accept this attempt to evade the issue by shifting blame to parents. Hold school officials accountable for what happens at the school. Parents as a group must stick together and not allow other parents to be labelled "bad parents" because of their overwhelming problems or inadequate avenues of communication between home and school. An example is labeling parents of Spanish-speaking children as uneducated and

uninterested in school when all school meetings are in English and such school officials as the principal and counselor can't speak Spanish.

Delaying—*Yes, I know the problem exists, but we need time to figure out the best thing to do.*

Ask specifically what is being done to solve the problems. Ask for their plans in writing with a timetable and the names of people responsible for implementing the plan.

Passing the buck—*Yes, that is a problem, but I can't do anything because my hands are tied (by district policy, the teachers' contract, higher officials in the school administration, the computer system).*

Ask to see copies in writing of the school board policy, teachers' contract, or superintendent's memo that excuses the principal from acting. If the principal, in fact, is not accountable, then appeal over his head to the official who is responsible.

The problem is unimportant—*Yes, it may be a problem but there are so many more pressing issues at this school.*

Do not be sidetracked. You believe the problem is important and should be dealt with because it affects children directly.

No one else is complaining—*You are in the minority. Most parents are happy with the way things are.*

If a policy or practice is harmful to students, it should be changed even if only one parent challenges it. A few union representatives look after the interests of many teachers. Your group looks after the interests of all students. Your delegation may be small, but the support for your mission is great.

We're not so bad—*Yes, it's a problem in all schools, but we're not doing any worse than others.*

Just because children in other schools or other school districts are not getting a quality education, officials in your school are not excused from doing their job properly. The standard for performance should be the needs of the children in your community, not the incompetence of school officials.

It needs further study—*We need to research the problem before we can act.*

Ask what can be done now to help the children who are suffering until the research is completed. (Also ask who is doing the study. Ask for the timetable for the research and plans for implementation.)

We have no money—*Yes, that's needed but we are so short of funds and are facing budget cuts already.*

Lack of funds is a convenient excuse. Dig deeper to the issue of priorities. It may mean, "We do not want to spend money on what you want." Press the importance of what you see as priorities, which may mean cutting out an outdated program or position. But also raise the issue of getting more money for schools and our children if the money pot is too small in the first place. If children are the most valuable resource for our country's future, local, state and federal governments need to fund public schools adequately.

What Can You Do if School Officials Refuse to Do Anything?

Parent groups try to accomplish change by working through channels—that is, they move up the line of authority, from the principal to the superintendent to the school board. But if this procedure gets no results, here are other options:

1. Higher appeal to political leaders or state officials who may have authority or influence over the school board.

2. Media blitz in local newspapers, on radio and TV stations to call attention to problems, raise public demand for change.

3. Direct action through public demonstrations or boycotts to attract public attention and pressure school officials to face up to problems.

4. Legal action in the courts—bringing suit on a violation of rights, or to challenge a policy or practice.