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Author

Rogers, John

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Quality Schooling for All**

John Rogers

University of California, Los Angeles

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Claims of *Williams v. State of California*

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This article explores the role of parents and ordinary citizens in preventing or detecting and thus helping to correct substandard conditions in California’s schools. The State of California has constructed an elaborate accountability system for insuring school quality and promoting school improvement that includes substantial references to parent participation.¹ This article seeks to make sense of the State’s commitment to and practice of engaging parents in its accountability system. It answers the following questions: Does the State of California offer a clear vision of how parents can help insure that their children’s schools offer the full range of learning opportunities promised by the State? What conditions are necessary for parents to play such a role? Does the State provide for these conditions?

The article is divided into four sections. Section one considers the meaning of parent involvement in educational accountability, focusing on the role of parents in accessing, contributing to, and acting upon information about student opportunity to learn and school quality. This section considers how parent participation in educational accountability differs from the broader construct of local control. It suggests that parent participation in accountability must be viewed as part of a state-wide system for insuring quality and equitable education. Section two lays out the State of California’s framework for involving parents in educational accountability. Drawing upon a wide array of State policies on parent involvement in public school accountability and school improvement, this section provides a comprehensive overview

¹ In the article, “parent participation” refers to the participation of parents, guardians, and other related and unrelated adults who play a central role in supervising and guiding a young person’s formal education.

of the State's commitment to parent participation in educational accountability. Section three then looks to empirical evidence from two case studies to assess whether California provides parents with the opportunities embedded in its own framework. The first case offers insight into the quality of information the State provides and makes accessible to parents. The second case explores whether knowledgeable and engaged parents have the opportunity to contribute information to educational officials in a way that leads to positive action. Finally, building upon the State of California's own vision of parent participation in accountability, section four points to the requirements of an educational accountability system that allows parents to play a meaningful role in insuring safe and quality learning conditions for all students.

Section One: Parent Participation, Accountability, and the State

There is a broad consensus amongst educational researchers, professional educators, policy makers, and the general public that parent participation is a critical factor in promoting school quality. For the most part, this consensus focuses attention on how parent participation adds value to the educational process. Parent participation contributes to the educational process in several ways. By volunteering in classrooms and the school as a whole, parents provide schools with valuable labor. By supporting their children with homework and other school-related activities, parents extend the educational process beyond the school's walls. By encouraging their children to view school success as important, parents promote student commitment to the school's work. Taken together, these forms of parent participation enable well-functioning schools to enhance student learning. An extensive body of research over the

last two decades establishes a strong relationship between parent involvement in education and children's learning and academic performance.²

Yet, parent participation can do more than add value to prevailing educational conditions; it can also contribute to a system that takes *account* of, and then is *accountable* for, these conditions. In the literal sense of these terms, this means a system which provides parents the opportunity to “reckon with” the available information and “count in” their own knowledge and experience so that they can call school officials to “answer for [their] responsibilities and conduct.”³ In more common language, parent participation in such a system entails: a) learning about the conditions students experience in school; b) contributing information about these conditions based on their own observations or the experience of their children; and c) encouraging the system to use this information to respond to presenting and potential problems. Significantly, these forms of parent participation need not undermine or conflict with parent participation that adds value to the educational process. To the contrary, parents who believe they are part of a system that can address problems are more likely to contribute to it in positive ways. Parent participation is thus most powerful when it includes opportunities for both adding value and overseeing the educational process.

This inclusive approach to parent involvement resonates with the National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement created by the National Parent and Teachers Association and an

² Baker, D.P., & Stevenson, D.L. (1986). Mother's strategies for Children's School Achievement: Managing the Transition to High School.” *Sociology of Education*, 59, 156-66. Epstein, J.L. (1983). Longitudinal Effects of Family-School-Person Interactions on Student Outcomes.” In A. Kerckhoff (Ed.), *Research in Sociology of Education and Socialization*, 4, 19-128. Greenwich, CT: JAI. Kieth, T.Z. Reimers, T.M., Fehrmann, P.G., Pottebaum, S.M., and Aubey, L.W. (1986). “Parental Involvement, Homework, and TV Time: Direct and Indirect Effects on High School Achievement.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 78, 272-80. Zill, N., & Nord, C.W. (1994). *Running in Place: How American Families are Faring in a Changing Economy and an Individualistic Society*. Washington, D.C. Child Trends. See also generally: Henderson, A. & Berla, N., (1994) *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical To Student Achievement* Washington, D.C., National Committee for Citizens in Education.

array of education and parent organizations in 1997.⁴ The National Standards call for school practices and structures that all parents can understand, participate in, and contribute to. These Standards build upon a typology of parent involvement developed by Dr. Joyce Epstein, Director of the John Hopkins University Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships.⁵ The typology includes six domains of parent involvement, ranging from parents assisting student learning at home to parents engaging in ‘two-way, and meaningful’ communication with the school about school conditions and programs. Significantly, Epstein and the PTA present this typology as a comprehensive model. Drawing on research, they argue that “gains for students are greatest when parents participate in activities in each of the six standard areas.”⁶

PARENT PARTICIPATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND LOCAL CONTROL

As we consider parent participation in educational accountability today, we need to address the gradual but substantial shift over the last one hundred fifty years from local control to a governance system driven largely by state policies. Parents have participated in educational accountability from the very beginning of mass public schooling in the United States. These early forms of parental participation in accountability were bound up tightly with a system of local control of schools. Local control in educational governance was most robust in the late 19th century when school trustees outnumbered teachers in some states. These trustees represented what historian David Tyack calls “the most numerous class of public officials in the world.”

³ From Oxford English Dictionary online

http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/findword?query_type=word&queryword=account.

⁴ National PTA’s National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs,” (1998)://www.pta.org/programs/invstand.htm.

⁵ Epstein, J.L., (1992) “School and Family Partnerships,” In M. Alkin (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* (Sixth Edition, pp. 1139-1152). New York: MacMillan.

⁶ “National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs,” <http://www.pta.org/programs/pfistand.htm#standard5>.

Tyack explains this highly localized model of governance as a product of the public's desire to "put the school and its trustees everywhere under the eye and thumb of citizens." In this structure, "communities were able to retain collective decisions about schooling—who would teach, how much schools would cost, and what kind of instruction to offer. If district voters disagreed with school trustees, they could elect others."⁷

The late 19th century model of educational governance shaped where parents participated, how their interests were counted, and who was accountable for addressing these interests. Parent participation occurred within local schools. This participation drew upon and contributed to intimate knowledge of school conditions. When a majority of local citizens was unhappy with these conditions, it could choose from a range of ways that local officials might act to rectify the problem. This practice of parent participation in accountability served several purposes. First, it strengthened civic life—at least for those parents who could exercise the franchise and other civil rights.⁸ Second, it infused the process of public decision-making with information drawn from the experiences of local participants. Third, it forged a shared understanding that the local public schools were legitimate—that they served the interests of the majority of the local parents.

Educational governance has grown vastly more centralized, bureaucratic, and expert-driven over the past century. A push for greater professionalization in educational administration in the early 20th century fueled and in turn was fueled by increasing state

⁷ David Tyack, "Democracy in Education—Who Needs It?" *Education Week* Nov 17, 1999, p. 43.

⁸ The ability of non-white parents and immigrant parents to participate in educational governance in the 19th century was highly circumscribed. For a discussion of how these limits played out for African American, Mexican American, Chinese American, and Japanese American parents in California, see Charles Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools 1855-1975*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976.

bureaucracies in education.⁹ Today, decisions in critical areas of finance, teacher quality, and curriculum and instruction are shaped largely by state policies on taxation, teacher credentialing, and curriculum standards. Significantly, this general movement towards greater state power in educational governance has not gone uncontested. Many educational reform efforts over the last century have called for decentralizing decision-making.¹⁰ Yet, the broader trends—for example, in size of districts, numbers of local school board members, number of employees in State Departments of Education—all point towards greater centralization.¹¹ Further, those policies that seek to reestablish local control, often fail to shift the true locus of decision making and power. Reviewing such policies, Malen and Muncey argue that “decentralization tends to be accompanied by renewed efforts by central state organizations to control schools through both managerialist policies and processes of accountability.”¹²

Regardless of where educational decisions are made, there is a strong need for parent participation in accountability to support the civic, informational, and legitimizing purposes it served in the late 19th century. Yet, an educational governance system which vests a great deal of power in a highly bureaucratic state calls for very different parent roles in accountability than a system in which all decisions are made by local parents. The historical shift in the locus and process of decision-making has consequences for what information parents need, how and where parents’ interests can be taken into account, and who will be accountable for addressing these interests. Parents today need access to information that allows them to compare their schools

⁹ Thomas Timar and David Tyack, “The Invisible Hand of Ideology: Perspectives from the History of School Governance,” *Education Commission of the States* 1999.

¹⁰ David Tyack speaks of “an uneasy and shifting balance between centralized and decentralized control” yet acknowledges that “long term trends” point towards centralization.” David Tyack, “Restructuring in Historical Perspective: Tinkering Toward Utopia,” *Teachers College Record* v 92 n2 1990, pp. 170-91.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 183.

with other schools in the state as well as to the state's own standards. Parents need to be able to share their knowledge about educational problems with educational officials across the different levels of the state system that have the power to address these problems. Finally, parents need to know who to hold responsible, again at all levels of the system, for insuring decent conditions for all students.

Section Two: Parent Participation and Educational Accountability in California

Over the last decade, the State of California has enacted a set of interrelated policies on educational accountability, school improvement, and parent involvement. Many of these policies share the premise that parent involvement plays a critical role in promoting quality schooling. Yet these policies have emerged out of separate initiatives—for example, the Public School Accountability Act of 1999, the California State Board's Parent Involvement Policy, the Family School Partnership Act of 1994—and hence rarely are considered as a comprehensive whole. This section offers such a comprehensive view. It examines an array of state policies that address parent involvement in accountability to answer the following questions: 1) What is the State of California's interest in engaging parents in accountability? 2) What role does the State imagine for parents in education generally? 3) What role does the State imagine for parents in educational accountability in particular? 4) What is State's theory of action for how parental involvement can contribute to a system that provides students with quality learning opportunities?

¹² Betty Malen and Donna Muncey, "Exploring the Tensions Between State Activism and School Autonomy," paper presented at the annual conference of the University Council for Educational Administration, in Minneapolis, MN, October, 1999, p. 12.

PURPOSES OF ENGAGING PARENTS IN ACCOUNTABILITY

The State of California acknowledges the general role of parent involvement in enhancing student learning as well as the particular role of parent involvement in educational accountability and school improvement. Several State documents, including the California State Board of Education Parent Involvement Policy of 1994 and the California Strategic Plan for Parental Involvement in Education of 1992, refer to the extensive body of research that notes the value added to schools by various forms of parent engagement.¹³ More importantly for our purposes, the State articulates how its interests are served by parental involvement in educational accountability. In doing so, the State echoes the three social purposes served by parent involvement in the late 19th century. First, the State sees parent participation in accountability as critical to sustaining civic life. In 1998, the legislature declared that: “It is essential to our democratic form of government that parents and guardians of schoolage children attending public schools and other citizens participate in improving public education institutions.”¹⁴ Second, the State reasons that broad-based parent participation enables parents with different experiences and information to contribute unique perspectives and knowledge to the system. This principle grounds the State’s commitment to engaging “broad and diverse groups” of parents in the Local Improvement Plan process mandated by the Federal Government’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act.¹⁵ Third, the State holds that including parents as “stakeholders in the accountability process” promotes a broad sense that the schools are legitimate and deserving of public commitment.¹⁶ In its Consolidated State Plan, California argues that “successful educational reform” requires that members of the community literally

¹³ See: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fc/family/board.html>; and <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fc/family/partners.html>.

¹⁴ California Education Code Section 51100.

¹⁵ See “Local Improvement Plan: Tool for Educational Reform,” p. 5. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/iasa/lip.html>

¹⁶ California Education Code Section 52050 (The Public School Accountability Act.)

have a “stake in and are accountable for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of [these] reforms.” Such forms of parent involvement, the State plan goes on to argue, provide a “means for families and communities to hold schools accountable for high academic performance and safe, orderly learning environments.”¹⁷

THE PARENTS’ ROLE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

How, and to what extent, do State policies construct ways for parents to help ‘ensure that each child in California receives a quality education?’¹⁸ Before addressing this question, a preliminary point is in order. The State of California does not mandate a particular role for parents; rather it creates a policy context that allows, invites, or encourages parents to play certain roles. In this way, the Family-School Partnership Act of 1994 permits parents and guardians to take time off work (without penalty) to participate in school activities, but it does not require parents to do so.¹⁹ As the Legislature declared in 1998, “In a democracy parents and guardians are *encouraged* and *welcomed* to become involved in the formal education of their children enrolled in public schools.”²⁰

The State of California encourages or welcomes parents to play a variety of different roles, emphasizing particularly forms of parent involvement which add value to local schools. The State has endorsed a model of parent involvement that follows the National Standards for Parent Involvement in encouraging parents to support student learning at home, volunteer, communicate with the school, and participate in school-based decision-making structures.²¹ Yet,

¹⁷ “California State Department of Education’s Consolidated State Plan,” pp. 3 and 26.

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/iasa/summary.html>

¹⁸ California Education Code Section 52050 (Public School Accountability Act)

¹⁹ This Act was expanded by Assembly Bill 47 in 1997. See: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fc/family/partners.html>.

²⁰ Emphasis added. California State Education Code Section 51100, (Parents Rights Act.)

²¹ The six dimensions of parent involvement that make up the National Framework have shaped California’s model since they were adopted in the California Strategic Plan for Parental Involvement in Education in 1992. In all, these

despite this endorsement, the State largely leaves the development, enactment, and support of parent involvement to local districts and schools. Hence, while California’s Legislature passed a law in 1990 that requires local school boards to adopt parent involvement policies, it does not provide significant financial resources to districts or schools interested in promoting parent involvement.²² Rather, the State offers districts and schools its conceptual model, a Parent Center in Sacramento that provides some technical assistance, and related web-based information.²³ Because local districts and schools bring different levels of interest and capacity to their work with parents, schools across the state benefit in highly variable ways from these forms of parent involvement. Further, budget-strapped schools eager for parents’ free labor are likely to emphasize parent volunteerism at the expense of forms of engagement that enable parents to press their schools to improve the conditions of learning.

The State of California also insures parents the right to monitor the conditions their children face in schools. The Legislature established a set of “Parent Rights” in 1998 (amended in 2001.) According to this legislation, parents have the “right and should have the opportunity” to: observe their child’s classroom; meet with their child’s teacher and principal; review curriculum materials, student records, academic standards, and school rules; and participate as a volunteer or a member of policy councils and decision-making committees. Parents also are

six dimensions include: developing parenting skills, promoting learning at home, encouraging volunteerism at school, coordinate collaboration with community organizations, insure two-way communication between school and home, and engage parents in decision-making at school. As noted earlier, these dimensions follow the research of Dr. Joyce Epstein.

²² Similarly, the State Board of Education adopted a policy on parent involvement in 1994 that “encourages school boards to establish comprehensive, long-term efforts to involve families in the education of their children.” See: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fc/family/partners.html>.

²³ Significantly, the State has demonstrated the capacity and willingness to take direct action on other issues in parent involvement. For example, The Family-School Partnership Act of 1994 enables parents, grandparents, and guardians to take up to 40 hours off work during the school year to participate in the school activities of k-12 students. See <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fc/family/partners.html>.

entitled to a “safe and supportive learning environment” for their child.²⁴ Three features of this “Parents Rights” legislation limit its potential application to school improvement and a State accountability system. First, the “Parents Rights” focus attention on the conditions of individual children rather than the school as a whole. Second, the legislation does not provide a support structure for parents that might make the monitoring process more systematic. Third, the legislation does not include any process or structure for enforcement. There is no sense in the legislation of how the information gathered by parents might be counted or used to hold officials accountable.

THE STATE’S ROLE IN ENGAGING PARENTS IN ACCOUNTABILITY

Beyond encouraging parent involvement and allowing limited parent monitoring, how does the State frame a role for parents in its system of education accountability? To answer this question, we need first to review California’s accountability system. The State of California has created an extensive accountability system through the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA) of 1999 and related legislation. It is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to fully describe, let alone assess, this plan. For our purposes here, it is important to note the following points.

- The legislative intent of PSAA was to “ensure that each child in California receives a high quality education consistent with all statewide content and performance standards.”

²⁴ California Education Code Section 51101.

- The legislature sought to advance this goal by: a) creating a common matrix to measure “the performance of schools” and “demonstrate comparable improvement” across schools and between significant sub-groups within schools; b) reporting on school performance using this matrix; c) providing rewards to schools that perform at an acceptable level on this matrix or who demonstrate sufficient improvement; d) imposing sanctions and offering opportunities for support to those schools that do not.
- The legislature expressed its intent for parents to be involved in “identifying the causes of pupil failure and designing programs for remediation.”²⁵

The system of testing, public reporting, and intervention that emerged from the PSAA shapes how the state engages parents around educational accountability. Students in every public school in California annually take the Stanford 9 examination. The results of these tests determine a school’s ranking on the Academic Performance Index (API) which in turn determines whether the State rewards the school, sanctions it, and/or makes it eligible for remedial intervention. The State reports these results to the public through the mass media as well as through the California Department of Education website. In addition to reporting the test results, the state website provides the public with school by school information on student demographics, teacher demographics and training, student attendance, student graduation rates, and more. The State calls upon individual schools to provide their local community with much of this same information in the form of a School Accountability Report Card (SARC.)

Alongside this general public reporting, the State also directs local officials to inform their school community when the school’s testing performance does not meet the standard for annual improvement mandated by the state.²⁶

In addition to testing students and reporting on the results to parents, the State also provides additional financial support for external evaluators to assist “underperforming” schools.

²⁵ California Education Code Section 52050 and 52052, (The Public School Accountability Act.)

²⁶ California Education Code Section 52055, (The Public School Accountability Act.)

Schools whose average scores fall below the 50th percentile on the achievement tests are eligible to apply for this support—what is known as the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). When the State selects schools to participate in the II/USP, it mandates that these schools inform parents that the school’s students have performed below average. Further, the external evaluator contracted by the State must invite all parents and guardians to a public meeting and solicit their opinions on what needs to be done to improve the school’s performance. Parents and guardians also must be afforded the opportunity to submit written recommendations to the external evaluator.²⁷

If the State’s accountability system can be summarized as test, report, and (selectively) support, what then is the parent’s role? According to the California’s Department of Education “Communication’s Assistance Packet” for reporting on the API, the primary role for parents is as recipients of State testing information. This packet argues that it is essential for parents to develop a “solid understanding of [their] school’s 2000-2001 API growth report.” Such an understanding, the Department of Education argues, will enable parents to recognize “their roles in helping all students reach their academic goals.”²⁸ The State offers schools three resources for educating parents about the meaning and significance of the API—a sample letter from principals to parents announcing the school’s API score, a brochure for parents on the API, and a set of worksheets that schools can use in parent meetings. What is striking about all of these resources is how little information they provide parents about either the quality of the school’s

²⁷ California State Education Code Sections 52053-52054, (Public School Accountability Act.)

²⁸ California Department of Education, Policy and Evaluation Division, “Reporting the Academic Performance Index Growth and Awards for 2000-2001 to Staff and Parents: Communications Assistance Packet,” p. 1.

instructional program or the academic achievement of its students. In one version of the sample letter, the principal commends staff, students, and parents for reaching or exceeding API targets. In the other version, the principal first acknowledges the school's low API results and then adds: "Although our school did not meet all of its targets, I'm proud of the efforts our parents, students, and staff have made to increase the academic achievement of all students."²⁹ It is not at all clear what distinction the State intends parents to draw from these letters or how this distinction might point to different roles for parents. The parent brochure and the worksheets for parent meetings explain only how the State calculates the API scores and makes decisions about which schools will receive performance awards.³⁰ The CDE documents do not offer parents a way to make sense of how these scores relate to student learning or possible gaps in curriculum and instruction, let alone provide parents with a meaningful sense of student opportunities to learn.

California's most notable effort to inform parents about school quality is its School Accountability Report Card (SARC) first created in 1988. The Legislature substantially revised the SARC in 2000 to make it a "more effective tool" for enabling the public to compare schools within and across districts.³¹ Today, the SARC includes school-level information about: a) educational outcomes such as student test results, graduation rates, and drop out rates; and b) conditions of student learning such as teacher qualification, availability of Advanced Placement Classes, and quality of textbooks and school facilities. The Legislature's intent was to "ensure that all parents receive a copy [of the SARC] and that it be "easy to read and understandable." Yet, in practice, the SARCs are neither universally accessible nor easily comprehensible by

²⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 34, 43-8.

³¹ California State Education Code Section 33126.

parents acting in isolation. Schools can choose to notify parents that the report is available online, rather than sending out a printed copy.³² Given the unequal access to the internet across California’s communities, web-based reporting translates to no access for many parents.³³

While schools report extensive data on student outcomes, they frequently provide only minimal information on the conditions of student learning. The State’s voluntary template for the SARC includes only broad prompts asking schools to provide information on “Quality and Currency of Textbooks and other Instructional Materials” and “School Facilities.” Schools frequently respond to these questions with general statements that do not enable parents to determine whether their children are receiving an adequate and safe education. For example, Luther Burbank Middle School in San Francisco reports: “Burbank has received new textbooks in math, science and social studies. Textbook inventory is presently being computerized to assist in determining textbook needs.”³⁴ The Report Card does not mention how many texts the school received or when these texts arrived. Nor does it provide any assurance that textbook needs will be met when they are identified.

More troubling still, the data posted on the SARC’s often is unreliable and difficult for parents to use. Schools themselves generate the information on the SARC with little oversight from the State. They have no incentive to publicize their problems and, as a consequence, frequently either refuse to respond or provide misleading responses to the State’s questions about school conditions. Many SARC’s contain an amalgam of testing data unique to the school and

³² See: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ope/sarc/sy0001/question.html>.

³³ A study by the U.S. Department of Commerce in 2000 found that 86.3% of households earning \$75,000 and above per year had Internet access compared to 12.7% of households earning less than \$15,000 per year. See: <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org/content/stories/index.cfm?key=168>. The Public Policy Institute of California’s (PPIC) recent study confirms that these trends hold true in California as well. In a survey conducted in 1999 and 2000, the PPIC found that whereas 85% of Californians with incomes over \$60,000 use the internet, only 33% of Californians with incomes less than \$20,000 did so. Further, only 20% of Latinos earning less than \$20,000 use the

‘boilerplate’ provided by the local district. For example, every high school in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) posts the same “Message from the Principal,” as well as identical information on finances, school facilities, and textbook quality.³⁵ Each LAUSD school reports that: “Our school makes every effort to provide a safe, clean environment for learning. Classroom space is used to support our instructional program.”³⁶ This practice leaves members of the public with the false impression that school facilities are the same across the district—from relatively new schools like Palisades High School in Los Angeles’ affluent Westside to schools scheduled to be torn down like Belmont High School in the predominantly immigrant community of Pico Union.

Further, even when schools provide information on school conditions, they frequently do so in a way that provides parents with no way to draw comparisons across different schools or to judge the school by a common standard. Hence, schools report the number of uncredentialed teachers on staff, but offer no figures on average numbers of uncredentialed teachers in neighboring schools or in the State as a whole. Nor do the SARC’s explain the State’s expectations for teacher qualifications—why parents should care about the percentage of uncredentialed teachers in their child’s school. It is interesting to contrast the lack of comparable data and information on qualified teachers with the abundant comparative data the State provides parents on the SAT-9. Whereas, the State reports on a school’s test performance relative to an average State Standard as well as a set of ‘similar schools,’ the State reports only absolute numbers or non-comparable qualitative responses in all areas of student opportunity to learn. Indeed, the State does not even require schools to use a common reporting format for opportunity

internet and only 14% of Californians whose primary language is Spanish use the internet. See: <http://www.ppic.org/facts/digital.nov00.pdf>.

³⁴ See: <http://orb.sfusd.edu/sarcs2/sarc-701.pdf>.

³⁵ See, for example, <http://search.lausd.k12.ca.us/cgi-bin/fccgi.exe?w3exec=jltest&which=8733>.

to learn conditions. Information presented in this way does not allow for parents to understand whether or not to be satisfied or concerned about the conditions in their children’s schools.

When parents do not understand California’s system of assessment and accountability, the State expects them to look to their local school for answers. The State’s parent brochure on the API recommends that parents “direct their questions about the API or the PSAA” to their principal or other school administrators.³⁷ In a similar fashion, California’s Department of Education encourages parents to ask school officials about the High School Exit Exam and about the conditions that enable students to succeed on the test. The CDE “Parent Notification Kit” includes handouts that inform parents that their children “will need to use their knowledge of the ... state content standards,” to pass the test and graduate from high school. The parent handout continues, (in bold letters):

How do parents/guardians find out if their student’s school uses the same or similar standards as state content standards?” Parents/guardians should ask their student’s teachers or principal if the school curriculum is aligned to state content standards in English-language arts and mathematics. Parents/guardians also should ask how teachers are helping students achieve these standards.³⁸

The CDE’s recommendation here is built upon a string of assumptions about parent access to school officials and school officials’ ability and willingness to respond forthrightly. Further, the State offers no guidance for parents on what to do if the school officials inform them that teachers are not teaching to the state curriculum standards.

³⁶See, for example, http://search.lausd.k12.ca.us/cgi-bin/fccgi.exe?w3exec=sarc3&which=8543#School_Safety.

³⁷ California Department of Education, Policy and Evaluation Division, “Reporting the Academic Performance Index Growth and Awards for 2000-2001 to Staff and Parents: Communications Assistance Packet.”

³⁸ California Department of Education, Standards and Assessment Division, “California High School Exit Examination: Parent Notification Assistance Packet for Districts and Schools 2001-2002, p. 2.

In addition to encouraging parents to direct questions to schools, the State provides limited opportunities for parents to share their interests and concerns within school improvement or school-based governance structures. As noted above, schools who volunteer for the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program must solicit parents input on “action that should be taken to improve school performance.”³⁹ (Of course, those schools who do not volunteer face no such requirement.) In addition, the State requires all schools to create schoolsite councils that are responsible for developing and then assessing the school’s improvement plan.⁴⁰ These councils must include parent representatives, selected by other parents at the school. Membership on the councils is supposed to reflect parity between professional educators on the one hand and parents and community members⁴¹ on the other.⁴² While these governance and policy sites potentially create the opportunity for parents to voice their concerns and contribute to school improvement, the degree and quality of parent participation varies greatly across school communities. In some schools, only a handful of parents may be aware of, let alone engaged in, the site council process. Betty Malen’s research suggests that those parents who do participate on councils often are not allowed to discuss “provocative issues” that they deem most important. She explains that:

on school councils that include parents as well as teachers and principals, conflicts regarding the proper role of parents in policymaking, fears associated with ‘intrusion’ by ‘outsiders’ and anxieties about the school’s ability to withstand scrutiny set the stage for a protective politics. These tensions tend to be managed by ceremonial exchanges that reflect and reinforce a traditional pattern of power wherein professionals, notably

³⁹ California Education Code Section 52054.

⁴⁰ The Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act includes similar provisions for schools receiving Title 1 funds. Schools with high percentages of English Learners must create an English Learners Advisory Council. (See California Education Code Sections 52160-52178.) It is common practice for schools to convene one council that serves multiple purposes.

⁴¹ At the secondary level, students are also included in the Councils.

⁴² California Education Code Section 52012.

principals, control school policy, teachers control instruction, and parents provide support.⁴³

Malen’s point is not to dismiss parent participation in site governance out of hand, but to suggest that states need to create conditions that insure what Gary Anderson terms “authentic participation”—participation that enables parents’ voices and concerns to be taken into account.⁴⁴

THE STATE’S THEORY OF CHANGE IN EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The State of California has created a system of accountability aimed at insuring every student in the State a quality education. The Public School Accountability Act seeks to advance this goal by testing students, reporting on the results of the tests, rewarding or sanctioning schools based on these results, and providing support to selected “underperforming” schools. This legislation suggests that quality education inevitably will result when a set of preconditions are met. What are these preconditions as they relate to parents, and how, according to the State, do they promote quality schooling for all?

The Public School Accountability Act begins with a set of legislative findings and declarations about the necessary elements of “any promising and effective accountability system.” Such a system “requires the active involvement of parents and guardians.” These parents and guardians need information about schools that is both “easily accessible and understandable.” They further need to be provided with opportunities to share their insights about the “causes of pupil failure” and their ideas for “designing programs for remediation.” Parents who are informed and able to communicate their concerns and ideas to school officials

⁴³ Betty Malen, “The Promise and Perils of Participation in Site-Based Councils,” *Theory Into Practice* v38 n4, 1999, pp. 210.

will contribute to school improvement in two ways. First, they will be more likely and more able to “support and sustain high quality educational programs” at their children’s school. Second, they will have the opportunity to shape the “development and implementation” of school improvement plans in lines with their interests and experience.⁴⁵

The ‘theory of change’ embedded in this legislation builds upon a set of three assumptions that are open to empirical test. First, it presumes that all parents have access to high quality, reliable, and comprehensible information. For this assumption to hold, information must be available to all parents, regardless of their home language, their capacity to connect to the internet, or their degree of experience with American school bureaucracy. This information also must attend to all areas of concern for parents, allow for meaningful comparisons across schools, and provide sufficient specificity to enable parents to identify possible remedies. Second, this theory of change assumes that parents have meaningful opportunities to share their knowledge, experience, and interests with educational officials charged with improving the schools. Opportunities for such participation are meaningful when the structures and processes provide for regular input from all parents regardless of their home language, access to the internet, or experience in U.S. schools. Third, this theory of change assumes that local educational officials will be accountable for responding to the ideas and concerns raised by parents. For this assumption to hold, local education officials must have the capacity and interest to remedy presenting problems. That is, when parents identify substandard conditions, local educators must have: a) knowledge about how to address these conditions; c) access to the resources and power

⁴⁴ Anderson contrasts ‘authentic participation’ with the “bogus, superficial, or ineffective” participation that often characterizes site councils. Gary Anderson, “Toward Authentic Participation: Deconstructing the Discourses of Participatory Reforms in Education,” *American Educational Research Journal* v35, 1998 p. 587, 571.

⁴⁵ California Education Code Section 52080.

necessary to take sufficient action; and c) commitment to resolving the problem in a reasonable time frame.

Section Three: Case Studies of Parent Participation in Accountability

This section looks to two case studies of parent participation in educational accountability at local school sites. The first case study draws upon research conducted by Social Policy Research Associates (SPRA).⁴⁶ This case examines parent participation in an “underperforming” elementary school that boasts high levels of parent involvement. Specifically, the case focuses attention on parents’ access to high quality, reliable, and comprehensible information on student achievement and learning opportunities. The second case builds upon an ongoing collaboration between this author and parents in Lynwood, California. It highlights the efforts of knowledgeable and engaged parents to hold their schools accountable for providing high quality and safe learning conditions.

These case studies are illustrative rather than comprehensive in scope. The intent is not to provide an exhaustive review of parent participation in educational accountability in schools across the State. Nor is it to suggest that these cases represent how parents participate in most “underperforming” California schools. (Indeed, the challenges SPRA experienced trying to gain access to II/USP schools to conduct their study point towards the likelihood that many administrators in “underperforming” schools are wary of any close examination of how they engage parents.⁴⁷) Rather, these cases focus on sites in which parents are particularly engaged.

⁴⁶ Diane Friedlaender, “Parent Study Documentation Final Report,” *Social Policy Research Associates*, March 2002. (I refer to the report in notes below as “SPRA.”)

⁴⁷ SPRA, p. 2. Significantly, many of the same schools that *declined* to participate in this SPRA study of parent participation *agreed* to participate in another SPRA study of teachers and teaching conditions. The fact that principals agreed to a far more extensive study with teachers but declined to participate in the parent study suggests a particular sense of vulnerability relative to their work with parents.

Since there is no question here of parent interest, the attention turns to the conditions created by the State for meaningful parent participation. These case studies thus illuminate whether, and to what extent, the State insures parents the opportunity to promote accountability in line with the State's own vision.

CASE ONE: INFORMATION FLOW AT FREMONT ELEMENTARY⁴⁸

Fremont Elementary is a K-8 school serving primarily low-income students of color. 68% of the student body is Latino, 21% African American, and 9% Pacific Islander. Roughly 2/3 of the students are designated English Language Learners (ELL) and 4/5 of the students are eligible for the Federal Government's Free and Reduced Lunch Program.⁴⁹ By most measures, there is a good deal of parent involvement at Fremont Elementary. A large number of parents turn out for cultural events at the school, such as the annual Cinco de Mayo celebration.⁵⁰ In addition, many parents provide volunteer service to the school on a regular basis. Much of this service comes in the form of unpaid parent labor in support of the school's program. Every classroom benefits from one or more "room parents" who tutor, chaperone field trips, assist teachers in supervising events at the school, and provide translation between mono-lingual English speaking teachers and students and parents with limited English skills. Parents also monitor student bathrooms and supervise the yard during recess and after school. Finally,

⁴⁸ "Fremont" elementary is a pseudonym—this author does not know the actual name of the school or the district in which it resides. SPRA's report identifies this school as "UE2" and provides some demographic information for descriptive purposes. The SPRA report includes documentation of two elementary schools, UE1 and UE2. I focus on UE2 here because it is the more extensive study of the two—with three parent interviews rather than one and supplementary data from a parent survey. Significantly, SPRA's report finds a great deal of similarity between parent participation in accountability across these two schools.

⁴⁹ SPRA p. 3.

⁵⁰ SPRA Report Appendix, p. 13.

parents participate in school governance committees—perhaps 50-60 attend the bi-monthly School Site Council meetings.⁵¹

SPRA’s study sheds light on how and to what extent the most involved parents at Fremont Elementary are able to access and make use of “information about the quality of the school’s program. To answer this question, SPRA researchers conducted a focus group in which three parent volunteers responded to open-ended questions on parent participation in the school, parent perception of school quality, patterns of school communication with parents, and patterns of school and district responsiveness to parents concerns. SPRA also interviewed Fremont’s principal about her work with parents. In addition, SPRA drew upon the results of a parent survey that the school conducted earlier in the year. The survey results are based upon a low response rate (7%) and thus likely reflect the beliefs of the most engaged parents at the school.⁵²

The ability of Fremont Elementary parents to access data about student learning and school quality varies by the type of information and the level of parent engagement in the school. Parents potentially can access four forms of information—regular communication from the school, unofficial parent observation of classrooms and school programs, information shared in school site council meetings, and official state, district, or school reporting on student learning and school quality. Fremont Elementary’s monthly newsletter provides the broadest diffusion of information to the school community. The principal distributes the newsletter to all parents and 4/5 of survey respondents report reading the newsletter.⁵³ While widely accessible, the newsletter is not aimed at providing parents with information on student learning or school quality, but rather seeks to keep parents informed about upcoming events and activities. In

⁵¹ SPRA, pp. 3-5.

⁵² SPRA, pp. 1-2.

⁵³ SPRA, p. 8.

contrast, a small number of parents acquire information about the school’s programs through their work as volunteers or their participation in school governance committees. Fremont’s “Room Parents” and yard or bathroom monitors acquire a good deal of observational knowledge about what occurs at the school. Just as this observational knowledge is confined to a small percentage of Fremont’s parent population, so too is the knowledge that parents might gain from participation in the school site council held by a small number of parent participants.

Significantly, Fremont parents are least able to access the information that the State deems most important to educational accountability—official reports on student performance on State standardized testing and school quality. The parent volunteers interviewed by SPRA are all familiar with the SAT-9. Their children’s teachers inform them when the test will be administered. Apparently, this is the only information the school communicates about the tests. The State sends parents test score reports in English and provides no explanation of their meaning. Since the majority of the school’s parents are limited English speakers, the lack of Spanish translation further limits parents’ ability to comprehend the significance of the State’s reports.⁵⁴ Neither the teachers nor the school as a whole offer any further explanation about the SAT-9 scores. Nor do they provide parents with any other official information about the school’s academic program or facilities. The State intends for parents to receive this information in the SARC. Yet, not one of the parent volunteers interviewed by SPRA has heard of the SARC.⁵⁵ Fremont’s principal explained that the SARC “data is on the web, but we haven’t given it to the parents directly.”⁵⁶ (While this practice is technically allowable within CDE’s regulations, it clearly violates the spirit of the legislative intent to “ensure that all parents receive

⁵⁴ The parent volunteers interviewed did indicate, however, that Spanish speaking parents could find teachers or parents to translate for them. SPRA, p. 9.

⁵⁵ It is worth reiterating that the parents interviewed represent the most engaged parents at the school.

⁵⁶ SPRA Report Appendix, p. 12.

a copy” of the SARC.)⁵⁷ Further, although the State has designated Fremont Elementary as an “underperforming school,” the parent volunteers only have limited information about what this designation signifies. In fact, only one parent interviewed is familiar with the term, “II/USP,” and her knowledge is based on the fact that the principal invited her to participate in the II/USP governance committee. When asked to describe the meaning of “II/USP,” this parent could only answer that she had heard that “the school’s test scores were very low” and as a consequence the school “might be taken over by the State.”⁵⁸

Even when parents at Fremont Elementary have access to some information about school quality and program, the nature of the available information and the structure of accountability mechanisms largely preclude them from taking positive action. For example, many Fremont parents draw upon an array of observational and experiential information in making sense of teacher commitment and quality. This information leads the vast majority of the parents who responded to the parent survey to indicate approval of their child’s teacher. Such positive assessments are not to be dismissed; they reflect important parental beliefs about what factors determine quality teaching. Yet, they also might reflect a lack of familiarity with State standards for teacher quality. It is telling that one Fremont parent comments favorably about her principal’s decision to replace a teacher who consistently missed one day a week with a long-term substitute. This parent does not know that long-term substitutes, like the 1/3 of Fremont’s faculty without teaching credentials, do not meet the State’s standards for teacher quality and likely would not be viewed as acceptable hires in an affluent school community. Nor do Fremont’s parents know whether a recent three month delay in the distribution of math and

⁵⁷ See note 32 above. While the school and the State provide further information about school program and STAR testing respectively, it is likely that few parents at Fremont are able to access this information given state-wide patterns for Spanish speaking and low-income populations.

⁵⁸ SPRA, p. 9.

reading textbooks represents a minor snafu common to all schools, or a major infringement on their children’s ability to learn the State curriculum standards that would not be tolerated in many other schools. As one of the parent volunteers reports, “I know about this school, but I don’t know anything about the other schools around here.”⁵⁹ My point is not to criticize engaged parents for not knowing about conditions in different schools. Rather it is to highlight the way that the quality of information provided by the State determines whether parents have a meaningful opportunity to understand whether their children are receiving the same opportunities as other children in the State.

Fremont’s parents, along with their children, may be best positioned to assess the quality of the school bathrooms and other facilities. While there certainly are standards that can be used to compare such conditions across schools, there also are absolute standards of decency that shape parent and student beliefs about whether a bathroom or piece of yard equipment is clean or safe. The majority of respondents to Fremont’s parent poll said that the school’s bathrooms are not sanitary. Two thirds of the parents indicated that the playground equipment is not safe. Parents in the focus group echo these assessments as do Fremont’s teachers and principal.⁶⁰ Yet, the conditions persist. The parent volunteers, who believe they have an open invitation to raise concerns with the principal, may have concluded that these facility problems can not be resolved. They have no way of knowing what would constitute reasonable expectations for addressing their concerns. They know only that the school’s bathrooms and play equipment continue to pose a threat to their children’s health.

⁵⁹ SPRA, p. 7.

⁶⁰ SPRA, p. 5.

CASE TWO: INFORMATION AND LIMITED ACTION IN LYNWOOD

Lynwood Unified, a district located south of South Central Los Angeles and east of Compton, serves one of the poorest communities in Los Angeles County. Over 80% of the district's students participate in the Federal Government's Free and Reduced Lunch Program. 84.3% of the students are Latino, 11.8% African American, and 3% Filipino. More than half of students across the district are designated as English Learners.⁶¹ Lynwood schools lack qualified teachers. At least one third of the teachers at every elementary and middle school in the district are not fully credentialed. This figure is far higher in many Lynwood schools; 2/3 of Abbott Elementary teachers do not have a clear teaching credential.⁶² Lynwood schools also have a poor record in insuring student safety. Two students were killed by automobiles in two separate incidents at Lindbergh Elementary during the 1999-2000 school year.⁶³ Unsafe and unsanitary facilities pose more regular, albeit less extreme, threats to student safety. These conditions contribute to patterns of low academic performance and depressed college-going rates across the district. All of the District's four secondary schools place in the lowest decile in the state on the SAT-9. Fewer than half of Lynwood High School graduates have taken the sequence of courses required to be eligible for admission to California's four year public universities; only 2% of these graduates enrolled in University of California campuses in Fall 2000.⁶⁴ In short, Lynwood's schools face many of the problems the State hopes to redress.

This case looks at the efforts of a group of Lynwood parents to play a vital role in creating decent conditions in their community's schools. It speaks to strategies for providing

⁶¹ See: <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/dev/District.asp>

⁶² California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS)

⁶³ Interview with Laila Hasan, December 20, 2001.

⁶⁴ California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS)

parents with the knowledge they need to participate meaningfully in school improvement as well as the obstacles knowledgeable parents face in making their voices heard. The analysis here emerges from an ongoing collaboration between this author and parents in Lynwood to examine the role of urban parents in equity-based reform that in turn builds upon more than three years of work by Lynwood’s parents and UCLA’s Parent Project. This case study draws upon an array of data collected by, or in collaboration with, parents in Lynwood. Specifically, the data includes: a) interviews with parent leaders and UCLA partners; b) parent writing on school quality; c) surveys conducted by the parents; d) notes from monthly meetings with Lynwood parents in 2001-2002 school year; and e) a Spring 2001 program evaluation of UCLA’s Parent Project in Lynwood.⁶⁵

The UCLA Parent Project began work in Lynwood in Fall of 1998 as part of a broader partnership between UCLA and Lynwood Unified aimed at promoting substantially higher rates of college eligibility in Lynwood. At the time of the Project’s inception, very few parents participated in any way in Lynwood schools. Moreover, while many parents felt a general sense of dissatisfaction with their children’s schooling, they did not have sufficient knowledge about curriculum and instruction to assess the quality of Lynwood education in relationship to the education provided in other schools in the area and around the state.⁶⁶ The Parent Project thus sought to “get parents to understand what these schools should be doing to educate their kids.” Parent Project Director Laila Hasan created a 13 week Parent Institute aimed at providing parents with a deep understanding of “what good teaching and learning looks like.”⁶⁷ Attending class

⁶⁵ Camille Wilson Cooper, “Perceptions of the Parent Curriculum Project’s program goals and effectiveness in the Lynwood Unified School District,” *UCLA Outreach Evaluation Occasional Report Series: Occasional Report #2*. UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. March 2001.

⁶⁶ Interview with UCLA Parent Project Director, Laila Hasan.

⁶⁷ Cooper, p. 7.

twice a week, parents studied the State curriculum framework and assessment tools.⁶⁸ The Institute curriculum modeled the curriculum and instructional practices recommended by the State. It thus provided parents with standards for assessing the quality of curriculum, instruction, and student work in their children’s classrooms.

Since this initial Institute, many of Lynwood’s parents have become increasingly knowledgeable about educational policy and practice. They continue to take seminars with UCLA instructors and regularly seek out information from elected officials, researchers, and policy makers on issues they deem important. Yet, despite their efforts, they face a number of constraints in accessing information about the learning opportunities in Lynwood schools. The two official sources of information available to parents offer them little assistance. They receive a monthly newsletter from the district that includes positive stories about what is happening in Lynwood schools and a listing of upcoming school activities.⁶⁹ The parents also receive the results of the SAT-9 test in the mail. While the graduates of the Parent Institute understand what these test results are supposed to mean, their familiarity with school practices leads them to discount the reliability of the scores. Two parent leaders, for example, argue that their schools tend to encourage parents of students who don’t test well to waive out of the test, so that these schools can better “compet[e] for API money.”⁷⁰ Further, the information parents want most is not easily attainable. When asked about what information parents receive from the school aside from the SAT-9, Parent Leader Mary Johnson replied:

⁶⁸ It is important to note the conditions that enabled parents to make this significant commitment in time. The Parent Project provided participating parents with breakfast, lunch, and childcare during class sessions. It also paid a modest stipend (\$150 or less than \$5 per meeting) to parents who successfully completed the program. Cooper, p.

⁶⁹ Hasan Interview.

⁷⁰ Interview with Johnson and Pague, December 20, 2001. Whether or not the parents are correct in their assessment of the schools’ actions, the fact is that these parents do not see the scores as a reliable source of information on the quality of learning at the school.

It's sort of funny because at this time, and I've been in this system for a long time—I have four kids—I really haven't gotten any information regarding that at all. ... In the years I've been raising my kids from Kindergarten to 12, I haven't had any other information but the SAT Nine as a way of saying where our kids [are] at.⁷¹

Johnson would like to have access to information on the availability, quality and age of student textbooks and the stability of the school's teaching force. Some of this information should be included in Lynwood's School Accountability Report Cards, but Lynwood's schools do not send out copies of the SARCs to parents, choosing instead to post the results on the internet.⁷²

Nonetheless, many Lynwood parents have developed a strong degree of sophistication about the educational process that they would like to use to improve their neighborhood schools. They have encountered many obstacles, however, in their attempts to share their knowledge and hold the system accountable. None of the parents surveyed indicated that their "school actively seeks ideas from parents on school related issues."⁷³ One explanation for this failure of schools to reach out to parents is that school leaders are not accustomed to working with parents in a collaborative way. Hence a Lynwood principal became "irate" when she learned that the Parent Institute had trained parents to observe classrooms and then write notes about what they observed. She viewed this process as training parents to be "oppositional," rather than part of an accountability process.⁷⁴

A second explanation for the schools' failure to work with parents is that school officials do not have sufficient capacity or autonomy to respond adequately to parental concerns. For example, school and district officials dismiss parent calls for high quality teaching and learning

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid. Johnson's

⁷³ Parent Survey Conducted by Lynwood Parents, November 2001.

⁷⁴ Interview with Johnson and Pague and Interview with Hasan.

that meets State standards, as unrealizable goals beyond district control.⁷⁵ Through their work with the Parent Project, many Lynwood parents have begun questioning their children’s teachers about whether they are teaching towards the standards. Instead of asking, “Is my child doing well” at back to school night, parents like Emma Street have used the standards as a way to question whether their child is receiving appropriate instruction. None of the teachers have provided a direct answer to this question. They offer only that they use the textbook and the textbook is representative of the standards. When Lynwood parents shared these responses at a district meeting, the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction explained that most of the teachers do not understand the standards since so many of them do not have credentials. District officials have expressed concerns that when parents ask teachers about standards, they intimidate teachers and create a hostile environment.⁷⁶ Lynwood’s parent leaders have assured the district that they are not trying to intimidate, but rather to insure their children receive a decent education.⁷⁷

Whatever the explanation, school officials in Lynwood regularly ignore or undermine parent voice. The costs of such inaction and action are great. For example, last year a group of parents at Mark Twain Elementary School became concerned about the quality of the cafeteria food when a number of children took ill after each lunch period. The parents requested that they be allowed to inspect the food preparation facilities. When they were denied this request, the parents asked their children to sneak food out of the cafeteria so that it could be tested. The parents found that the meat had not been completely cooked (some of the meat served was still

⁷⁵ Indeed, the high percentage of uncredentialed teachers in Lynwood Unified is in part the result of conditions—state policies and the metropolitan labor market for teachers—that likely are beyond the District’s control.

⁷⁶ It is worth reiterating that the State recommends that parents check with their children’s teachers about whether they are teaching to the standards. See footnote 38 above.

⁷⁷ Interview with Hasan.

partially frozen) and that the milk contained unsafe bacteria. The school principal agreed to make sure that the meat is cooked longer, but still will not let parents supervise the lunch preparation and service.⁷⁸

The result of such policies is a climate of conflict, distrust, and unaccountability. Frequently, schools label as trouble makers parents who raise concerns, further quelling democratic participation.⁷⁹ Parents, interested in improving health and learning conditions for their children, feel caught within a system that offers them no timely process for meaningful appeal. While Lynwood parents can work over the long term to change the governance of the local school board, they want a State accountability system that includes their voice and insures decent conditions in the here and now.

Section Four: Insuring Opportunities for Parents to Participate in Accountability

What actions must the State of California take to insure that parents have the opportunity to play a meaningful role in educational accountability? To answer this question, we need first to review: a) the State's commitment to involving parents in accountability; b) the conditions the State deems necessary to realize this involvement; and c) the degree to which the State has not fully provided for these conditions. The State has established a clear and compelling interest in engaging parents in the accountability process. In legislation and official policy statements, the State argues that parents must be encouraged to participate in educational accountability to enhance civic life, contribute valuable information to the school improvement process, and promote a public understanding that local schools are legitimate and hence worthy of sustained

⁷⁸ Interview with Hasan.

⁷⁹ Justina Pague reports that “there's still people in the community that are afraid” that schools will retaliate against their children if they take action. Interview with Johnson and Pague.

public commitment and support. Meaningful parent involvement in educational accountability requires that all parents can: a) access high quality, reliable, and understandable information on students learning and opportunities for learning; b) gather additional information and share it with school officials; and c) elicit actions from education officials that satisfactorily respond to parents' concerns.

The State of California fails to insure a number of the conditions necessary for meaningful parent involvement in accountability. Many parents do not have access to essential information on student learning and learning opportunities. The CDE's policy of allowing schools to post SARC's on the internet rather than sending them directly to parents, leaves many parents—particularly low income parents, parents of color, and immigrants—with no access to the State's primary tool for informing the public about school conditions. Similarly, the State's failure to insure that information on the SARC or the SAT-9 reports is provided in languages other than English, limits parent access to this data. Those parents who can access the SARC find its information wanting in a number of areas. It does not offer enough detail about the quality of school facilities for parents to know whether or not the school is safe. Nor does it offer parents sufficient information on student access to learning materials, rigorous curriculum, or quality teachers. Moreover, parents have no assurance that the information on the SARC is reliable. In a system with little or no State oversight, schools often provide minimal or misleading information to parents in areas such as school facilities. Even when schools make information available, this information frequently does not allow parents to draw meaningful comparisons across schools or between their own school and a common State standard. Finally, the SARCS provide parents with very little explanatory information about the meaning and significance of various indicators of educational outcomes or learning opportunities. The Report

Cards offer little information, let alone guidance, on why particular indicators matter, how schools determine their scores and responses, or what parents and schools might do to change the underlining conditions.

State policies also fail to insure that parents can gather and share information on the conditions in their children's schools. The Parent Rights legislation establishes the State's rhetorical commitment to providing parents with opportunities to observe classrooms and gather information from schools. However, as the experience of Lynwood's parents suggests, schools frequently create obstacles that prevent parents from learning more about conditions that impact student safety and learning. The Parents Rights legislation is limited both by its lack of an enforcement mechanism and its focus on information about individual students rather than the school as a whole. In addition, when parents have important information to share with school officials, they often find it difficult to make their concerns or ideas known to the proper authority. It is not common for schools or districts to identify employees responsible to parents for insuring that particular conditions are met. Some schools, such as those in Lynwood, discourage parent complaints by either ignoring parents' voices or responding to them in a hostile manner. With the exception of a few small scale programs,⁸⁰ the State neither regulates the way schools engage parents nor provides educators with training to encourage greater responsiveness to parental voice.

Further, the State has not created a broader accountability system that can insure that local schools will respond to the concerns of knowledgeable and engaged parents. The State's theory of action presumes that such parents will contribute to school improvement by pressing their schools for quality (while simultaneously offering free labor and support.) Yet, many local

⁸⁰ See the discussion of the Home Visitation program below.

school officials lack both the incentive and the capacity to redress problems. The Public School Accountability Act provides local educators with motivation to improve their test scores; it does not create direct incentives for officials to address unsafe or inadequate learning conditions. The point here is not to suggest that a large number of school officials are callous. Rather, given the complex and challenging task of managing personnel, the distribution of instructional material, and facilities, school officials may focus their attention on keeping the system running at the expense of immediately addressing substandard conditions. Such a strategy carries with it a certain logic in school contexts characterized by multiple problems and limited capacity. Significantly, many committed educators simply do not have the resources necessary to address presenting problems. If the principal of Fremont elementary does not have the funds to purchase safe play equipment or Lynwood principals cannot find sufficient numbers of certified teachers to hire, they cannot respond to parental concerns. The State thus provides no insurance that parent engagement—no matter how informed or how compelling the cause—will lead to action and the reasonable expectation of improved conditions.

STATE ACTION TO INSURE A MEANINGFUL PARENT ROLE

What conditions must the State now create to insure that all parents can play a role in preventing or detecting and then correcting substandard conditions in California's schools? It is important to reiterate that the State cannot mandate parent participation. Rather, its task is to establish a context in which parents have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the accountability process. Such a context requires a finance, governance, and accountability system at the State level that provides all students with an adequate and equal education. Parents in local schools, no matter how engaged, cannot transform the regional labor market for teachers.

Nor can they initiate major new capital investment in facilities or create new systems for insuring timely and equitable distribution of instructional materials. Yet, informed parents can keep track of new problems that arise in schools and contribute information from their experience to help in addressing these problems. Parent participation thus is most efficacious within an accountability system that has resolved major structural impediments to the provision of quality education to all children. In such a context, parents can play a powerful role in watching over the conditions at their children's schools and providing appropriate officials with information when the system temporarily fails to meet its own standards.

Parents need access to quality, reliable, and comprehensible information to play this role. Several changes are needed in California's policies regarding School Accountability Report Cards before the SARCs can serve this purpose. First, the State must insure that all parents receive a hard copy of their school's report card in both English and the dominant language of the home. Second, the State must create standards of student opportunity to learn and provide meaningful indicators of whether schools meet these standards. A recent report on school report cards by the Center for Community Change in Washington D.C. offers several examples of what such indicators might look like. To assess teacher quality, Kentucky's School Report Card provides information in areas such as the percentage of classes at a school taught by teachers with an undergraduate major or minor in the subject being taught. (See Appendix 2, figure 1.) Hawaii and Connecticut's School Report Cards score the quality of each school's different facilities on a likert scale and provide a quantified measure of the degree of overcrowding in each of these facilities. (See Appendix 2, figure 2.) Further, Delaware reports on the year each school was built, the year of the last remodeling, and the number of classrooms with air

conditioning.⁸¹ What is important in each of these cases is that the State first established clear criteria for what should be expected of every school, and then required that each school report on the extent to which they live up to this standard.

Beyond reporting information, the State needs to provide support to enable all parents to understand what the SARC says about the quality of education their child is receiving. New York State provides a useful service in this regard by publishing a “Parent Guide” to the school report cards that explains how to use the bar graphs to judge “if your child’s school is doing well or improving.” The Parent Guide also includes an extensive glossary of educational terms used in the report card.⁸² But many parents, particularly parents with limited experience in American schools, need more than written guides to make sense of the large body of complex information included in the SARC. They need training and personal guidance to understand the SARC. The State of California’s Community-Based Parent Involvement Grant Program provides a model of how a state can insure that parents receive such training. Through this program, the State funds nonprofit community organizations who agree to train parents in school governance.⁸³ By similarly contracting with community groups to provide training on the SARC, the State would enhance the capacity of parents to understand the conditions in their schools. (The UCLA Parent Project in Lynwood offers a powerful model of how independent organizations can work with working class and immigrant communities promote new parent understanding. Because nonprofit community groups are independent of the schools, they can more effectively guide parents

⁸¹ Center for Community Change, *Individual School Report Cards: Empowering Parents and Communities to Hold Schools Accountable* Washington D.C. April 2001, p. 23. For more information about this report, see also, David Hoff, “Advocate for Poor Communities Urges Detailed Data on Report Cards,” *Education Week*, April 18, 2001, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=31cards.h20>.

⁸² See: http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/guides/PGUIDE_HS_2000.pdf. New York and Wisconsin also provide parents with a clear statement of how each entering high school class progresses towards graduation. By tracking the students from 9th grade to graduation, these report cards offer parents a far more valuable indicator of a school’s ‘holding power’ than drop out rates. See Appendix 2, Figure 3.

in assessing both positive and negative indicators of school quality than school officials who might feel pressure to downplay school problems.⁸⁴

The State also needs to insure parents meaningful opportunities to gather and share information on school quality. Towards this end, existing California legislation on Parents Rights needs to be expanded and strengthened. Individual parents *and* groups of parents must have the right to observe students wherever students learn, eat, and play. They must have the opportunity to inspect play equipment, learning materials, bathrooms, and other school facilities. The State will want to establish general guidelines for these parent visitations so as to insure schools respond to parents requests in a timely fashion and parents do not disrupt student learning. It will also need to require districts to designate school officials that will be responsible for insuring parent access. In addition, the State may wish to follow the example of existing California legislation in creating independent citizen’s oversight committees that can periodically assess the quality of school facilities. California law now calls for local governing boards of school districts and community college districts to appoint such an oversight committee to review and report on the expenditure of taxpayers’ money for school construction.⁸⁵ This legislation could be expanded to create similar oversight committees that would periodically review the quality and condition of school facilities. Any new legislation must provide parents and other citizens with meaningful opportunities to report their findings to officials who are responsible for rectifying substandard conditions at the school, district, and state levels.

⁸³ California State Education Code, Section 51141.

⁸⁴ Texas similarly has recognized the important role that non-profit community groups can play in training parents. The Investment Capital Fund Grant Program calls upon schools to partner with “a nonprofit community-based organization that has a demonstrated capacity to train, develop, and organize parents and community leaders into a large, nonpartisan constituency that will hold the school and the school district accountable.” See: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/sii/icfg/>

⁸⁵ See California Education Code, Section 15278.

Finally, the State needs to provide training that enables educators and school officials to view parents as a resource in the educational accountability system. Existing California law provides grants to schools to support teachers that visit the homes of their students. The Parent/Teacher Involvement Program additionally provides training to teachers and paraprofessionals in “strategies for communicating effectively with parents.”⁸⁶ To date, this program has received only modest funding (\$15 million per year) and thus has touched a small percentage of California’s schools. An expanded version of the legislation could include all schools and provide training to a wide array of education officials so that they can be more receptive to parent information. Ultimately, it is in the State’s interest to insure that school officials treat parents with dignity when these parents seek to participate in the accountability system. Many parents, such as those in Lynwood, go to great lengths, at much personal sacrifice, to secure decent educational conditions for their children. Their participation is critical to the quality of California’s schools and its civic life.

⁸⁶ California Education Code, Section 51121.