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Finding and Sustaining Quality Parent Leadership

Every organization needs good leadership. Good leaders help the membership set the course for the organization and achieve its goals.

At this time of year, or in September, most PACs and DPACs are choosing their executives for the coming school year. BCCPAC, as well as some DPACs, are fielding the question: What happens to our PAC if we can't find a president?

Finding and sustaining good leadership is a problem for many organizations. The answer lies in providing potential leaders and members with a good—yes, irresistible—reason to become involved. With so many competing demands in our lives, parents must see special value in giving time and energy to their PAC or DPAC over and above the other ways they may already contribute to their school or district.

The responsibility for attracting quality leadership does not rest solely with the PAC or DPAC. It belongs to the entire school and district community. Parent-involvement researcher Anne Henderson, speaking at BCCPAC's Spring Conference in 2003, said that when schools reach out to families, parents respond and children do better. The message from schools and districts must be: "Parents belong in our schools. Parents share our power and responsibility to educate our children. By working together as full partners, we will benefit all students."

This message has huge significance for parent participation and leadership. It provides the irresistible reason many potential parent leaders are looking for to move into a leadership role. As parents, how do we encourage and assist our schools and districts to deliver this crucial message?

Anne Henderson says that families of all income and education levels, and from all ethnic and cultural groups, are supporting their children's learning at home. Parents have a natural interest in ensuring their children succeed. Schools, PACs, and DPACs that focus on building community—that say to parents, "You belong here"—draw parents into schools and boost their confidence to participate beyond the home to ensure their children's success and the success of all students. Among those parents are potential leaders willing to step into executive, committee, and project positions given the right opportunity.

Creating opportunities and a sense of belonging can begin with something as simple as personal reflection: What would bring me into the school or to a PAC or DPAC meeting? What would persuade me to take on a job beyond what I am already doing?

Most people like doing what they are good at or interested in, and they are often flattered to be asked. This is an important part of making people feel welcome. An invitation from the principal, a teacher, or PAC representative to do a job one would be naturally suited for is hard to resist.

When looking for volunteers for leadership positions, or when asking current volunteers to stay on, consider these tips:

- Strike a nominating committee to solicit volunteers before election night. A phone call ahead of time is friendlier and less intimidating than a plea at an open meeting.
- Offer to put new parents in touch with experienced parents to explain the job.
- Give a clear outline of the duties and time commitment of each position. Describe past activities and successes.
- Encourage retiring executive to stay on in an advisory capacity.
- Invite prospective volunteers to an executive or committee meeting to find out first-hand what goes on.
- Encourage new parents to put their names forward. New parents bring new involvement and new ideas.
- Above all, acknowledge the work of past and current volunteers.

There are many potential parent leaders in our school communities. Once they believe they belong, they will come and they will contribute.