

Key Leverage Points for Parents and Community Leaders

The No Child Left Behind amendments to the federal Title I program contain extensive provisions for parent involvement at the state, district and local school levels. Parent and community leaders can and should have a major influence on how fully and effectively these provisions are carried out.

No Child Left Behind: What's in It for Parents, a new report from Parent Leadership Associates, identifies six key leverage points for parents. At each point, schools and districts must respond to parents' priorities and concerns. Knowing where these are and how to use them will be critical to building strong parent involvement and a more effective Title I program. The points below are condensed from that report.

Leverage Point #1: School Parent Involvement Policy. Every Title I school must have a written parent involvement policy, developed with and approved by parents. This policy should spell out how parents will be involved in meaningful ways in making decisions about the program and how parents will be involved in the school. The policy must be updated periodically to reflect the changing concerns of parents.

Steps to take:

1. Get a copy of your school's policy and check whether it covers all points required in the law. These are: parent involvement in developing the Title I program and the parent involvement policy, the school-parent compact, and capacity-building for family and staff to work together effectively.
2. Find out what other parents think about the policy and whether it covers their concerns. Ask them how it could be stronger. What kind of supports do they want from the school to help them be more involved, both in improving the program and in helping their children?
3. Update the policy and make it as specific as possible. What kind of parent training will be offered and when? What is the process for obtaining parent input and approval of the policy? What should the school do to make meetings and other events convenient and accessible to families – are times flexible, is there transportation and childcare, do the topics reflect the interests of families?

Leverage Point #2: School-Parent Compact. Every Title I school must have a school-parent compact, developed with and approved by parents, that describes how educators and parents will build a partnership to improve student achievement. This compact should explain how the school will meet the needs of its students, so that they will achieve high standards.

Steps to take: Examine your school's compact to see if it covers what is needed to help all children achieve state standards:

1. Make sure the compact outlines how the school will provide a supportive and effective learning environment for all students. For example, will children get extra

- help as soon as they need it? What kind of help? Will the school offer staff development for teachers?
2. Specify how teachers will keep parents informed about how their children are doing. Will students get effective help if they need it, as soon as they need it? Is the goal of this help to make sure they catch up fully with their classmates? What support will teachers give families to help their children at home?
 3. Define the terms of parent-teacher collaboration. What is “reasonable access” to staff and classrooms to observe and volunteer? What hours will the principal be available to meet with parents? What are the security procedures for visits to the school?
 4. Identify the actions and supports parents and teachers think are needed to improve achievement. Families may need information, materials and encouragement to help their students with complex subjects, such as math or science. If so, the compact should describe what support the school will offer and how families will use that support.
 5. Use student test data to decide what areas to focus on each year.

Leverage Point #3: School district policy. Every school *district* must develop a written Title I parent involvement policy that is developed with and approved by parents, and evaluated every year. This policy must spell out how the district will engage parents in developing its Title I plan and will build parent capacity to be involved in decisions about the program and in the schools.

Steps to take:

1. Obtain a copy of your district’s Title I parent involvement policy. Make sure that it meets all the requirements in the law.
2. Look for specific, concrete language that spells out how the district will carry out the goals of the policy:
 - * How were parents involved in developing and approving the policy?
 - * Is the policy available in a language and format that all parents can understand? How was the policy distributed to parents and families?
 - * How will parents be involved in school review and improvement? Is there a process of school review, and how do parents take part in that process? How will families with limited English be involved?
 - * What supports will the district provide to help Title I schools engage parents in activities to improve student achievement?
3. Check to see what the policy requires *schools* to do. Does the policy apply only to Title I schools, or to all schools in the district? How will the district make sure that the schools are fully involving parents and families?
4. Find out what the district is doing to build partnerships with community-based organizations and businesses in activities that involve parents. These groups include local education funds, Boys and Girls Clubs, and local chapters of national organizations such as the Urban League and National Council of La Raza.
5. Ask when the policy was last evaluated and who was involved. Who represented parents and families? What changes were made?

6. Insist that the district create a district parent advisory council. This council can assist in evaluating the current policy, oversee the development of a new policy, and identify needs at Title I schools that the district should address.
7. Submit written comments if the district refuses to revise the policy, or makes changes that parents believe are not adequate. The district must include these comments with its application for Title I funds to the state. The state education agency can require changes in the district plan, which includes the parent involvement policy.

Leverage Point #4: Report Cards. The school district must distribute a report card on how every school and the district as a whole are performing. This report must include data on how different groups of students are doing.

Steps to take:

1. Examine how (or if) your school's Title I plan addresses the data in the school report card. For example, if reading scores are low, what is the school doing to improve reading instruction? If students with limited English are not making progress, how will the school modify its program for English language learners? If the percent of teachers who are not qualified is high, what is the plan to upgrade their skills or bring in certified teachers?
2. Examine how (or if) the district's Title I plan addresses the information in the district report card. Use this data in the annual evaluation of the Title I plan and parent involvement policy.
3. Make sure there is a meeting for parents at each school to explain the district and school report cards, and how to interpret their children's individual reports on test results.

Leverage Point #5: Public School Choice. If their child's Title I school has not made adequate progress over the past two or more years, parents have two options. They can ask to transfer their children to a school that is making adequate progress. Or they can request supplemental services and become involved in improving the school.

Steps to take:

1. Find out how your school is doing. You don't have to wait for the state to issue a school report card. There are web sites where you can find out about your school. Visit your state's web site, by going to www.ccsso.org or go to www.greatschools.net.
2. Insist that the principal or district inform you whether the school has made adequate yearly progress for the past two years. The district must give notice to all parents in failing schools, in a language and format they can understand.
3. Ask for a meeting with the principal to find out what the school is doing to improve achievement. Ask questions like these:
 - * What will the school do to close achievement gaps between different groups of students? Your school will be judged on how well students in all groups perform, not just on the school's average results.

- * What is the school doing to recruit and keep well-qualified teachers? What kind of professional development will be offered to improve instruction?
 - * Will the school eliminate low-level programs and give all children challenging work? What is the school's plan to make sure all children meet the state standards?
4. Check out the schools to which the district says your child may transfer. The district must give you information about how students are performing in the transfer schools. Ask parents at those schools if they feel the school offers a high-quality education and if their children like going to school there. Press for reasons. If you transfer, you will not be able to get supplemental services for your child.
 5. If you decide to stay in the original school, insist on supplemental services for your child, and get involved in making the school better. Schools in need of improvement must involve parents in developing their school improvement plan.

Leverage Point #6: State Review. The state education agency must monitor the school districts' Title I programs to make sure they carry out the law. This includes involving parents. If the district is not doing its job, parents and community members can appeal to the state.

Steps to Take:

1. If you disagree with the district policy, make written comments. The district must submit them with its application to the state education agency. Make sure that the state Title I office knows about your concerns. Ask for a copy of its review.
2. Request that the state Title I office meet with district administrators to discuss your concerns. Ask that you be present at the meeting.
3. Ask the state for a copy of the research and practices they are recommending to local districts. These practices should be based on current research and aimed at lowering barriers to involving parents in school planning, review and improvement.
4. If you believe that the state is not doing its job, appeal to the Title I office in the federal Department of Education.

Anne T. Henderson, *No Child Left Behind: What's in It for Parents?*, Parent Leadership Associates, Arlington, VA 2002. <http://www.plassociates.org/>