

REPORT TO THE NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE ON PARENT COUNCILS

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I. Introduction

This report looks at the establishment of five new Urban League Parent Councils, in Brooklyn, NY, Chattanooga, TN, Morris County, NJ, Philadelphia, PA and Springfield, IL. Evaluation data was collected in the last several months of the 1993-1996 grant period and necessarily reflects a retrospective perspective on the evolution of these sites. Nevertheless, in gathering information Research for Action sought to understand how this cohort of Parent Councils built on the knowledge culled through implementation of an earlier wave of Urban League Parent Councils and adapted those learnings to their own situations. Given the short data gathering period, we consider the information presented in this report preliminary and tentative; it represents early impressions of how these programs are situated locally and how they work.

Research for Action (RFA) entered this work not only toward the end of the grant period, but also at a moment in the history of the Urban League which national and local staff characterize as “the transition.” The transition has been a period of reorganization at the national level of the organization which has led to a change in personnel providing oversight to the Parent Council initiative and thus an interruption of relationships previously established between locals and national. Nonetheless, evidence indicates that for the most part the five new local Parent Councils have been able to carry their work forward during this changeover, despite feeling the absence of their previous interaction

with national. In large part, the ability of local Parent Councils to sustain their efforts appears to be linked to two factors: Parent Councils at the new sites are embedded within ongoing local work and therefore have avoided the vulnerability of “stand alone” programs; and the strong initial support they received from national when they were starting-up gave them extra “gas” to run on.

METHODOLOGY

The National Urban League requested that RFA investigate both key characteristics of the five new Parent Councils and the ways in which these Parent Councils influence parents’ involvement in their children’s education. We posed the following two broad research questions:

- What are the contextual factors, locally and nationally, which support/do not support the formation and development of Parent Councils?
- How do Parent Councils build the capacity of parents for greater involvement in the education of their children?

Congruent with the research questions posed, RFA utilized a qualitative approach to the study. We sought to illuminate the evolution of the Parent Councils and their work through the perspectives of those most closely involved with the Parent Council initiative: national and local program planners, staff and participants. While we learned that Parent Councils evolved differently, reflecting the contingencies of the local contexts in which they were situated, the research also began to reveal cross-cutting findings that seem to be fundamental to the work of Parent Councils. This report will highlight both the contextual factors influencing the formation and sustenance of the Parent Councils and cross-cutting findings generated by the work of these groups.

Using a team of two female researchers, one white and one African American, RFA gathered data through the qualitative methods of interviewing, participant observation and document analysis. At the national level, we interviewed past and present staff connected with this initiative, conducted a focus group interview of the National Parent Council and observed workshops at a National Parent Council Meeting.

At each of the five local sites we interviewed in person or by phone the Urban League staff person connected to the Parent Council initiative as well as two to five parent participants, in groups or individually. At four out of the five sites we also interviewed the local CEO. We were able to conduct participant observations in two parent workshops at two different sites. (See Appendix A for interview and observation guidelines and focus group protocols.) We reviewed documents produced by program staff over the life spans of these programs.

PROGRAM IMAGES

Given the short time frame we have not yet been able to involve local program staff and participants in the interpretive process, enriching the analysis with the perspectives of both “outsiders” and “insiders.” Nonetheless, our observations, participation and conversations, in conjunction with the documented program histories, have begun to make visible many aspects of this initiative. We open with a few stories which help to create images of the qualities of the Parent Councils.

The first two stories were collected through interviews with parents. Both highlight the way in which the Parent Council has provided these parents with the knowledge, tools and confidence needed to advocate for their children.

P1: The way our school system is set up ... by the time a child gets to the seventh grade they are already tracked. We have a high track and low track classes and we have to prepare them [our children] for that by seventh grade. The League made me aware of this.... Through the Urban League I knew that my children should be taking biology, chemistry, physics, advanced biology ... algebra, geometry, four years of a foreign language. Both of my children went through high level tracking.

In school district after school district African American youngsters, like the children of this parent, are disproportionately represented in “low” dead-end tracks. Here we see a parent who has gained knowledge about and insight into how school systems label and “track” children in ways that can provide access to future opportunities or block possibilities. With this understanding of how the system works, this parent was able to

help her children “be prepared,” which meant being rostered for the high track, which included courses that would leave open the possibility of college.

P2: The Parent Council has given me a way to know the proper channels to go through to help my daughter [when she started having trouble reading in second grade]. I have learned *my* rights as well as her rights. I’ve told them [school personnel] what I wanted instead of them telling me what they’re going to do. [The Parent Council staff person] has sometimes come with me to meetings at school. Because she was there with me I had more leverage. The whole process was a lot easier because I had someone behind me. ... Now my child has been diagnosed and I feel better.

Here we see a parent who has learned about school processes and procedures and parental rights to demand an appropriate educational program for their children. Having the Parent Council staff accompany her to key school meetings has bolstered this parent’s confidence enabling her to put her assessment of her child’s needs up against that of school professionals.

Not only has participation in the Parent Council assisted individual parents in advocating for their children, but Parent Council meetings and workshops are settings in which parents as a group share and learn from one another. They are also often a support to parents who feel alone and isolated in dealing with youngsters as they rapidly grow and change. The following vignettes, taken from our fieldnotes, illustrate how parents support one another when they come together and talk.

V1: One young mother, who was not a member of the Parent Council but who was attending the parent workshop, lamented that she feels like a failure when her son does not do well in school. The other parents questioned her: “What methods does she use at home? Does she study with her son? Does she help him with his homework? Does she speak with the teacher?” They shared with her things they have tried but they also told her that it was not her fault if she was doing all she could to help her son. He would have to take responsibility and want to do better in school. She said that she would try to think along those lines.

V2: When the workshop was close to ending, [the speaker] asked whether the parents had any questions, comments or stories. One parent asked, “What if you have a child who chooses a book you know he can’t read?”

[The speaker] and parents offer this parent different strategies: look together at the illustrations, have the child read one page and you read the next, etc. A parent wonders aloud, “Is the child feeling pressured to read at the higher level?” Another parent in the group presents another issue: “What about when a child comes home and rushes through homework because she wants to go outside?” [The speaker] suggests that compromising might be necessary. Parents tell what they have done under similar circumstances, e.g. let the child go out for a half hour and then come in to do homework, let the child do half the homework and then go out, etc. A parent reflects, “I find they have too much homework now.”

In both vignettes we hear parents raising immediate and pressing concerns about their children and parenting. These concerns resonate with other parents, and in settings such as the Parent Council, which offer adults opportunities to be together with a focus on their children, the parents are able to offer each other strategies that broaden their menu of ways for dealing with their children about troubling issues.

Opportunities to share and learn can also help to relieve anxiety caused by the stress of parenting. For example, in the first vignette parents advise the young mother to lift the blame from herself; her son must be a partner in finding a solution to his school difficulties. In the second vignette, twice parents raise questions which shift the focus of the conversation away from simply sharing parenting techniques into new directions. The first instance is when a parent asks “Is the child feeling pressured to read at the higher level?” This query suggests that the adults should probe the underlying causes for why children might exhibit this kind of behavior and that parents might deal with causes as well as symptoms. The second instance is when a parent muses about there being “too much homework now.” This comment has the potential to shift the conversation toward a conflict which has its base not in parent/child relations but in school/family expectations. It raises the possibility for parents to explore broader issues such as, What are their expectations for homework? What is the “right” amount? How can parents raise this issue with teachers and other school staff? It is through opportunities to share, question and explore that parents build trust and support one another.

A final story, told by a parent during an interview, illustrates how participation in a Parent Council led to a deeper level of involvement in her child’s education by deepening her participation in her child’s school.

I'm on the [school's] planning team. You know, we've had session, workshops where we've gone in [to school], and we can sit down and write curriculum for the coming year, and have input in what the school board would have as far as the curriculum... And, I don't think...I would not have gotten involved had I not gone to the [Parent] Council sessions... to the various meetings to find out what I could be involved in. You know, as a parent I take my child to school. He does okay, and that's it. If they have a report card night, I go in; teacher's conference, I go in. But that was about it. I didn't really become involved, you know, but I wanted to change some of the things that I saw that was not, you know, I didn't like and that was not right. And I thought, okay, now I can become involved and have my little opinion be counted.

Her account aptly illustrates how participation in Parent Council workshops can lead to a reconceptualization of what "being involved in your child's education" means. She moved from pro-forma types of interactions around her individual child to bringing a parental perspective to planning for school structures and curricula.

Using these opening images to give a backdrop for some of the qualities of the work of the Parent Councils, the remainder of the report will look at:

- The National Urban League context for Parent Councils
- Preliminary sketches of Parent Councils in each of five new sites
- Tentative cross-cutting themes and issues
- Questions for future research.

III. The National Urban League Context for Parent Councils

The most recent cohort of Parent Councils have developed in the context of the National Urban League's established commitment to a focus on the education of young people and particularly to increasing parent involvement in their children's education. The work that the Urban League had already nurtured in this area provided rich soil in which the new Parent Councils could grow.

In 1986, a decision was reached at the national level that it was imperative for the Urban League to respond to reports of increasing drop-out, teenage pregnancy and declining college attendance among African American youth. The Urban League instituted a five-year initiative intended to improve outcomes for African American

children, after which all but a handful of its 116 affiliates had established education-focused programs. Parental involvement and science and math enrichment were the focus of many of these programs. Parent involvement, many affiliates discovered, dovetailed nicely with existing Urban League programs since parents could be recruited from among adults already participating in other areas of its work. A few key learnings about working with parents began to emerge from these earliest efforts: parent groups need to develop the capacity for leadership, and Urban League staff should neither provide this leadership to the group nor select leadership from among the parents; to be viable, parent groups need training; and parent groups thrive where there is respect for a parental perspective within the leadership of the organization.

In 1991, the National Urban League spawned the National Parent Council, which was to model at a national level its commitment to organizing parents. Urban League affiliates were asked to make nominations to the National Parent Council and 13 members were selected; the group included African American men and women from a broad range of professional and non-professional backgrounds who ranged in age from a teen parent to a grandparent. All were active in their local communities in the areas of education and parent involvement.

Since 1992, a major activity of the National Parent Council has been co-sponsoring with the National Urban League annual National Parent Conferences. These events have brought together parent activists -- from local Parent Councils and other parent groups -- for training and opportunities to share and learn from one another. Each event also provided participants with a “hands on” experience, such as visiting a museum, school or other site where they witnessed first-hand an innovative educational endeavor. As one National Parent Council member explained:

This [the National Parent Conference] is almost like the concept of training the trainer, that we’re providing training for parents that are head of parent groups, PTAs and so forth. And what they do is go and train other parents....what you can do is take it [the training], and reshape it, do whatever, and curtail it and fit it to your community.

The return of a number of parent participants to this annual event has provided National Parent Council members with important feedback that The Parent Council is fulfilling an important function.

... we have people coming back year after year saying, 'Yeah, I took the information back and used it.' And we always encourage people, you know. It's nice to get together, to network and to talk about what we're doing. But if you don't take it back and put it into action, what good is it?

In addition to contributing to building a nationwide network of parents committed to greater involvement in their children's education, one National Parent Council member reflected on what he believed was the strength of being part of an organization with many levels of commitment to parent involvement:

We want to have like a national movement with the Parent Councils ... to let the parents know that they have a national organization behind them. That's strength. You know, you go to confront a situation on a local school level. And you say, 'I'm a member of the local Parent Council.' That's power. 'I'm with a national organization.' That's more power. 'And all of it is supported by the Urban League.' That's real power.

At this juncture, some members of the National Parent Council are considering ways in which The National Parent Council might support local parent activism beyond acting as a "clearinghouse to direct Parent Councils to resources." For a number of its members it is time for the National Parent Council to play a more activist role nationally, representing the voice of parents both inside and outside the Urban League.

The focus of the conference has been as a vehicle for education. The action piece is a piece that we have not moved forward on. We've talked a lot about things that we would like to do, but haven't really formalized a plan.

As this group continues to mature, it is likely that it will add to its repertoire of strategies for supporting parent involvement ways that make the insights and demands of parents more prominent in the national arena.

III. Preliminary Sketches of Parent Councils in Each of Five New Sites

BROOKLYN, NY

The Brooklyn Parent Council is folded into the work of the Parent Ambassadors, a program in place before the Parent Council and not originally an Urban League endeavor. The Parent Ambassador program, initiated in 1991-92, was conceptualized as a programmatic response to parents' sense that although they knew schools weren't working for their youngsters, they did not know enough about programs which might work. The Parent Ambassadors involved parents in taking "field trips" to see innovative programs in schools, museums and other educational settings which they might want to adapt to their local communities. Within a short time, the Parent Ambassador program was adopted by the Brooklyn Urban League. The Parent Council, started in 1994, has deepened the work of the Parent Ambassadors by involving its members in thinking through the barriers to parents' involvement in their children's education.

I think they [the Parent Council] have legitimized our work by making us more determined to make sure our programs reflect parent needs. [The Parent Council] has provided us with an array of effective strategies for involving parents that we didn't know about. The Council has given us an opportunity to create a model of what parent groups can do in local communities, providing training and resources to parents. Our interaction has identified some concrete issue areas of importance and made us aware of the priorities of parents. ... it helps us understand what some of the current barriers are to parent involvement. (Parent Ambassador)

The Parent Council has a cadre of 40 parents. These parents are of varied socio-economic backgrounds and represent all five New York boroughs. As a whole they meet about five times a year: two of the five meetings are opportunities to "exchange" what they been doing and the other three are usually devoted to planning field trips or training for parent leaders.

The mission of the Parent Council is twofold. The first reflects the Parent Council's connection with the Parent Ambassador program -- "Arming parents with knowledge and providing them with first-hand experiences about innovative educational programs inside and outside schools." The second signifies the Parent Council's overall commitment to making a difference in the public school system -- "The purpose is to

discuss information and provide workshops to train parents how to deal with the public school system.” The activities of the Parent Council reflect these two program thrusts: field trips to schools, museums and other educational programs to learn about innovative educational programs; workshops and training in how parents can most effectively interact with their local schools and larger policy making contexts. The two major thrusts of the Parent Council -- knowledge about programs that work and about how schools and schools systems work -- has increased participants’ sense of preparedness for being part of policy making bodies.

[The Parent Council activities] were very effective for dealing with schools. I was part of a state advisory group. I didn’t have to go in cold. Through the Parent Council training I knew what was going on as far as the state was concerned. [Being part of the] Parent Ambassadors gave us team building experience. It’s one thing to be on a team and another being just a part of a part. (Parent Ambassador)

You become more vocal. I go to meetings where there are prominent professionals. I go to the meetings or conferences like I was getting paid to go there. I am a parent representative and I take the role seriously. (Parent Ambassador)

The Parent Council has also been responsive to a perceived need of parents for more information about science and math and has provided a series of 20 math/science workshops.

The umbrella of the Brooklyn Urban League has been important to the effectiveness of the Parent Council. One parent commented, for example, on the advantages that an autonomous community organization can bring to “parent involvement.”

The Urban League can say things others can’t. Everybody doesn’t want parents in the schools. We have to knock on doors. Some superintendents are open to parents, but some districts don’t want parents involved. Some districts don’t want parents to come in or if they do, they want them to do what they say and do busy work. The real work is to come in and help with the curriculum -- help improve the curriculum to help our children. The Urban League does not do its training in schools, but outside ... They [the Urban League] don’t have politics to deal with, schools do.

For her part, the Parent Council staff* sees the relationship between parent participants and the Urban League as reciprocal. She commented that, "... [the] parents are incredible and part of the Urban League family. You can call them to do a paint job or clear out a yard."

CHATTANOOGA, TN

The Chattanooga Parent Council has evolved alongside and with other community programs, particularly in the area of health education. The Parent Council staff creates these links because of his own heavy involvement in both the education and health arenas -- two areas which he believes impact heavily on the African American community. One member of the Parent Council describes his seamless approach to community education as "holistic" in which "parental involvement, education and good health are key to the success of our children." The Council, which got its start in 1994, also works with a previously established group in the area -- PACE (Partners for Academic Excellence) -- a non-profit organization dedicated to getting parents involved in schools and creating paid parent positions in schools to recruit parents.

The Parent Council has eight active members who in its first year met once every two weeks. This past year, however, they met on an average of once a month during the school year, relying more on phone calls for keeping in contact. The group rotates responsibility for setting up activities so "no one is in charge and everyone has the opportunity in that leadership role and feels comfortable in that role." The Parent Council staff describes the Parent Council's strategies for involving parents in its activities as "grass roots" or "church organization": Word of events is spread through the community by mouth and as a result of his and other Council members' contacts with members of other community organizations.

The Parent Council motto is "If you win a parent you save a child." They describe their work as "giv[ing] information to parents and training. We get parents

involved in what goes on nationally, and give them information about our city so they have a base of understanding and know that what's happening here is happening elsewhere and they are not alone." The Council is focused on middle school parents and seven middle schools from the area participate in its activities, which include Project PRISM, Family Math Night, workshops on education and health, and a Parent Appreciation banquet. The education workshops help parents understand and be able to exercise their rights in the school system. The following, from a researcher's fieldnotes, illustrates how this emphasis worked for one middle school parent.

One parent, whose child had been in court with her for eight days running, was notified by the school that the child would automatically fail because of the amount of school he had missed. Because of her participation in the Parent Council she said she felt "empowered" to ask questions and when she did she discovered that when the absences are excused the teachers must give the student make-up work. She was able to get the court to provide documentation that her child's absences should be excused and after he turned in the make-up work he was promoted. This parent and her child benefited from the Parent Council's support through this process and its insistence that "it's your responsibility and right to know as a parent."

Yet another parent attributes her daughters' success in math to information she received through the Parent Council about what she could do to help them.

I received information through the Parent Council about working with my own children, influencing them to achieve things in school they probably would not strive for. I was able to help our daughters do well in math. There was some information I received that helped me to encourage my daughters in math. ... The training enabled me to do things without going off into tangents. It helped me focus on what I needed to take care, addressing what I needed to do.

The Chattanooga Urban League provides not only space and resources for the Parent Council but also strong backing. One parent describes the Urban League as a group that "is at the forefront of actively participating in the community." Another explains how "[the Urban League] has gone out and got information for us or even made

* Parent Council staff, an expression used throughout this report, usually refers to one person, an Urban League staff person who works with the Parent Council. In one case, Chattanooga, the Parent Council staff is a volunteer.

what we needed themselves. They wrote a guide, PRISM, which is basic enough for everyone to understand.” From the perspective of Parent Council staff, the Parent Council has made its contribution to the Urban League as well. “We have had a heavy impact. We have made the Urban League the forerunner in the city as far as parent involvement activities. Overall we help the program because we are interested in involving parents in the education of [their] children.”

MORRIS COUNTY, NJ

Previous to its Parent Council program, the Morris County Urban League was active in programs with high-level parent involvement. For example, they are a major player in the Morris County Minority Task Force, which has significant parent involvement. The opportunity to have a Parent Council augmented this work and extended other programs that were already in place. The Parent Council is one of a sequential series of programs that provides support to youth and adults with limited resources. A number of the Parent Council participants were active in the Urban League Youth program while others had been a part of the Young Mothers group. As they “aged out” of Young Mothers, the Parent Council filled a gap, providing a place where these single mothers can find support as their children enter school and go through their elementary years. A number of these mothers spoke of continuing with the Urban League later on when their children reach adolescence through participation in a program for the parents of teenagers.

The Parent Council has an active core of ten single mothers, with another five or six attending intermittently. The core group meets once a month and in addition plans special events and trips for which there is often a greater turnout -- up to 20 to 40 more. The Parent Council staff says that now that she has “firmed up” her core, the group is trying to recruit and expand. She would like to have a solid 20 as her base. The group of “core” participants say that although they didn’t start out as friends, they are friends now and there is a lot of “informal” contact in the form of visits and phone calling. They also call the Parent Council staff between meetings when they feel they need help or counsel.

According to the Parent Council staff the Parent Council is about “parents being advocates for their children’s education and about other issues related to the family.” A press release announcing the formation of the group stated that the purposes of the group were to “provide an organization with a parental perspective on education; assist in the development and coordination of parent activities; and provide the leadership for parent advocacy on behalf of African American and other minority children.”

Activities of the Parent Council correspond to its multi-purposes. The group has devoted time to what the Parent Council staff calls “personal development” or “self-esteem building” and parenting education. The Council staff has referred parents and their children for outside professional help when appropriate. With the help of “parent coordinators” -- seasoned parent participants -- the group has organized workshops and taken trips to “expose our children because minority children are doing less well in science and math.” They have included other youngsters from the local schools along on these trips, thus multiplying the efforts they have made on behalf of their own children to a larger group of youngsters. After one trip the Parent Counsel staff received a letter from school staff which thanked the Urban League for their efforts.

On behalf of the Morris School district, I would like to thank you for the Urban League’s sponsorship of a trip to Liberty Science Center for students in our homework clubs. Many of the youngsters do not have access to this wonderful opportunity without the support of community organizations.

A second such letter added: “... the chaperons (sic) were great too!”

Some parents report that they have been encouraged to participate in other groups, such as the Minority Task Force. “... just by being involved in this group I was helped in getting involved in other efforts” where they believe they can have a greater impact on district policies affecting their children and other minority children. Currently, the group is working with the local community center to get computers so they can have an opportunity to learn about computers and “can do more with computers and math with our children.”

The Parent Council staff believes that the local community has come to view the Urban League as being “very proficient in dealing with parenting/education issues.” The outreach done by the Parent Council for events such as workshops and trips to the local African American and Hispanic community has contributed to this image.

PHILADELPHIA, PA

The Philadelphia Parent Council began its work in summer 1994. The Parent Council has been interwoven with the Merrill-Lynch Scholarship Builders program, maximizing support for the families and children in this program by helping the parents help their children meet school success. The Merrill-Lynch “scholars” were selected when they were in first grade. They are all African American and attended a racially isolated elementary school. When the Parent Council started, the youngsters were already in middle school. Although many attended their neighborhood middle school, a few had left their “feeder” pattern to attend schools in other parts of the city. As high school approaches, the children are likely to be even more dispersed, as they and their families choose from among the district’s array of neighborhood, magnet and vocational programs both in and out of their neighborhood.

On the advice of national staff, the Parent Council began small, with a group of about ten parent participants already active in the Scholarship Builders program. Now that the Parent Council staff sees the skills of this group “strengthened,” she is opening up workshops sponsored by the Parent Council to other parents in the Scholarship Builder program. While the Council met monthly in the beginning, since winter 1996 they have gotten together somewhat less frequently. The Parent Council staff is also in touch with participants by phone, and parent participants call each other or “catch” each other at meetings or at school and “go off and talk.”

In its earliest meetings, the parent participants articulated the mission of the group: to “be ‘educated’ on the educational process.” Minutes of the first meeting of the Parent Council indicate that

(m)any of the parents voiced concerns over not knowing how to make the school system work for them.... The general consensus was that as parents we need to be able to use the public school system to get the best possible education for our children..... One parent summarized the discussion by stating that we were looking for ‘accountability and accessibility’ from the school system and that we had to obtain skills to make that happen for us. (Minutes, July 23, 1994, submitted by a parent recorder)

The Parent Council staff similarly observed: “We have parents who want to act [on behalf of their children] but without tools, resources and by the time they figure it [how the system works] out, the school year is up.”

Often, Parent Council meetings are workshops done in conjunction with other Philadelphia groups such as the Parents Union, in which topics such as how the school bureaucracy works or the different roles parents can play in schools are discussed. But the Parent Council’s support for children’s school achievement goes beyond school walls and the Council has introduced parents to summer opportunities for their children, Upward Bound programs, and a College Access support program. Parenting workshops, conflict resolution and other relational issues have also provided a focus for workshops, as parents have deemed necessary. Currently, parents have identified the need for parenting education which addresses issues of adolescence. Council staff, on her own initiative, is looking into computer education for parents at a community site: “[I am looking into] if through our finances we can hire someone at a reasonable price to go in there and train Scholarship Builder parents. Because computer and technology is it. I mean ..they need to feel comfortable with it, so that they can help their child feel comfortable with it.”

While the support of the local Urban League in terms of staff, a place to meet, and other resources has been critical to the Parent Council, the Parent Council staff also believes that the Parent Council is helping to give “a positive image to the Philadelphia Urban League.” She notes how one parent tells another about her activities and the word about the Urban League gets around. Recently, one Parent Council member was asked to represent the Urban League before a funding agency where she stressed how participation in the Parent Council has strengthened her. The Parent Council staff feels the funding agency will remember her story when it comes time to allocate moneys. For

its part, the Urban League has presented an award to a Parent Council member for community activism and is beginning to include parents more frequently as spokespeople at its local events.

SPRINGFIELD, IL

The Springfield Urban League has blended its now three-year-old Parent Council with its other educational activities. Both the staff and a number of the parent participants had a strong grounding in Urban League educational activities which predated the Council. From their perspective, the Parent Council offered an opportunity to “enhance” the efforts they were already making by placing greater emphasis on ways in which parents can be involved with their children’s education. There are 16 active men and women participants in the Council ranging in age and including several retired persons.

The mission statement of the Council announces its purpose to be “...an enabling force in the community, empowering parents, guardians, community representatives and others in becoming effective advocates for the nurturance of children including their educational, physical and social development... .” Specifically, it says that the Council will “Empower parents with the knowledge so they can be effective parents and participants in the educational system in the public schools... .” The activities of the Council combine a service oriented approach for students with support for parents. For example, the Parent Council has “adopted” a local middle school where Parent Council members tutor 7th and 8th graders and serve as adult mentors to them. As part of their mentoring responsibilities, Council members make and maintain contact with the youngster’s parents and assist the parent if they have to go to a parent conference and feel they need someone present who can play an advocacy role. Another example of this dual service/support approach is one in which Parent Council members coach students in the ACT (college entrance) exams and invite parents to come to the tutorial sessions so they can become part of the teaching team. The local CEO says that it is “extremely satisfying and gratifying to see the results of your labor. ... Since the ACT program they are scoring higher and can compete with others despite [their] adverse surroundings.” The

Parent Council members also offer an array of seminars and workshops to parents including a six to seven week “Megaskills” series which helps parents of Headstart and elementary age children learn how to communicate better with their children. Other workshops focus on communication between parents and professional educators in which the Council encourages “impromptu talking with teachers. We encourage parents to meet with teachers. [We tell parents] you are partners with your child’s teacher. Exchange phone numbers and let them know you are supportive of your child.”

The Parent Council is integrated into the overall educational program of the Springfield Urban League. A member of the Parent Council reports monthly to the local Board of Directors keeping them up-to-date on “our functions and dreams.” The Parent Council chair is also a member of the Board of Directors. Because of this tight-knit relationship the local Urban League is perceived as “100% behind” the effort.

IV. Preliminary Cross-Cutting Findings (arranged from national level findings to local findings)

1. The five new Parent Councils evolved within a context where the National Urban League had made the educational achievement of African American and other minority youths a priority. Many local affiliates, as well as national, had already begun to focus on parent involvement as a strategy for increasing educational achievement. The new sites benefited from the climate established by these previous commitments and from what local programs had begun to learn about involving parents in their children’s education. **National Parent Council members believe the time is now right to escalate their commitment to supporting parent involvement in children’s education by finding ways in which they can make the perspective of parents visible at national events and forums inside and outside the National Urban League.**

2. The day- to-day support provided to the new Parent Councils from both the national and local levels was critical to their start-up and maintenance. The technical assistance offered by national staff supported local staff in knowing how to begin their local efforts,

and particularly how to work with parents to identify their needs and interests. In addition, national staff was accessible to local staff for problem solving. The National Parent Conference is also cited as an important opportunity to learn about educational initiatives and resources which support local work. Despite the interruption of national level support during the organization's leadership transition, local Councils have continued to develop. **A number of local staff, however, urge that the previous support offered by the national -- particularly technical assistance and problem solving support -- pick up again. Several local staff suggest that in addition to support from national, it also would be helpful to have opportunities for local Parent Councils -- staff and selected parent participants -- to meet with other local Councils in order to share and learn. One parent interviewed for this study suggested that local Councils have access to this report as a way of learning more about one another's activities.**

3. While responsibility for organizing workshops and events is frequently rotated among local Council members, local staff have played an essential role in identifying opportunities for Parent Councils -- speakers, trips, etc. -- which match with parent interests and needs. In addition, a number of parents commented on the individual support local Parent Council staff have offered them as they have negotiated with schools and school systems on behalf of their children and as they have struggled to balance their own needs with those of their families. **The continued deep involvement of local Parent Council staff appears critical to sustaining this initiative. Other forms of local support -- facilities, resources and organizational acknowledgment of the importance of the parents' perspectives on their children's education -- also helps to sustain the work of local Councils.**

4. In all but one site, the Parent Councils are small groups of 10-15. They have passed through an initial period in which they have focused on building strong, trusting groups. Local staff in many of these sites now feel they are ready to recruit further in order to expand their "core." **Despite the relatively low numbers involved in local Councils, members often do outreach for special activities and events multiplying the effect of**

the Council. This “reaching out” both increases the effect of the Council and contributes to the image of local Urban Leagues as being in the forefront of parent involvement in education in their communities.

5. The previous educational involvements of the Urban League, both nationally and locally, are reflected in the work of these local Councils. One of the best examples of the ways in which previous educational priorities have been incorporated into the work of these new sites is their mirroring of the organization’s commitment to math and science enrichment -- with the added dimension of bringing parents into the process of understanding changes taking place in math and science education. **A couple of the locals have added to the previous Urban League science and math agenda making parents familiar with technology, especially computers, so they can be of greater assistance to their children in this area. Other areas in which the Parent Councils have expanded include information about testing and how to interpret standardized tests, about special education, and about how schools and school systems work.**

6. The Parent Councils have become a resource to parents in several important ways:

- **Parent Council meetings provide a “space” for parent participants to share and learn from each other. They have also provided a context for mutual support, which often carries over into their personal lives outside of Council activities.**

- **Workshops of the Parent Council as well as Parent Council staff have supported parents as they negotiate with teachers, schools and school districts on behalf of their children. This support has given them a number of parents the confidence to raise questions about their child’s educational program that they might have felt unprepared to tackle in the past.**

- **With the knowledge gained through Parent Council activities focusing on how schools work, a number of parents report that they are now**

competent and able to participate alongside professional educators in district and state level educational forums.

- **Council activities focusing on parenting skills have made parents feel better able to support their children’s education outside of school. Parents’ repertoire of strategies for making sure homework gets done, increasing home-based literacy activities such as reading and writing, and developing alternative discipline techniques such as conflict resolution have increased.**

7. Parent Councils are an important strategy for increasing parents’ involvement in their children’s education:

- **A number of local Council participants report that they have increased their involvement in the local schools.** These “involvements” represent a range of activities including Home and School, mentoring, school councils, curriculum committees, and participation in district and state level forums. Many of these activities go well beyond the usual kinds of work assigned to parents in schools, such as marking papers, being a library or trip aide, etc.
- **While many Council participants are focused on their own children’s educational opportunities, they also see their efforts as on the behalf of many children and their parents.** A number speak about their efforts to include other parents and children in opportunities they have learned about through the Parent Council, e.g. summer enrichment programs, Upward Bound programs and computer education programs. Many Council events -- e.g. workshops and trips -- reach out to parents and youngsters beyond those in the Council. In one site, the activity of the Council overlaps with previous commitments to involve parents in local school reform. In this instance, the work of the Council has been to help stimulate local ideas about how teaching and learning might look and to

involve parents in the process of thinking through the issues of reform. In another, Council participants have been mentors to youngsters and supports to their parents when their parents need the help of an outside advocate.

- **As Council activities and workshops have made parents familiar and comfortable with curricula, many believe they are better able to involve themselves in supporting their children through at-home and out-of-school activities.** When parents are familiar with the content and pedagogy of classrooms, they can not only help their children with their homework, but also participate more easily in activities which reinforce school learning.

V. Future research questions

1. As Parent Councils continue to age, how do contextual and developmental factors converge at the local site to foster/inhibit continued growth and deepening of commitments to supporting parent involvement in children's education?
2. In the second phase of development, what are the most critical kinds of supports provided by the national and local Urban Leagues to the Parent Councils?
3. How do the activities of the National Parent Council influence the continued development of local Parent Councils?
4. At both local and national levels, how does the Urban League develop additional ways to acknowledge parental perspectives?

5. In order to recruit beyond the initial "core" who came to the Parent Councils with a sense of urgency about the need to act on behalf of their youngsters, what strategies do local Parent Council's use to bring in new members whose priorities might not first be their children's education? As Parent Councils expand their numbers, how do they continue to sustain the tight and trusting relationships that have been created when they were intimate groups?

6. How do other local community groups, teachers, schools and others connected to education perceive the work of the Urban League, locally and nationally, as important to education, particularly parent involvement?

7. How do youngsters of Parent Council members -- or those mentored or tutored by Parent Council members -- perceive the effect on them of greater parent/guardian/adult involvement in their education?