

## **Developing a Public Education Coalition in St. Louis**

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### ***A. What Are Public Education Coalitions?***

**A public education coalition is an entity established for the express purpose of involving a wide range of community members – both individuals and organizations – in joint efforts to support and improve public education. Such coalitions provide a forum and process for collaborative community action to promote quality education, increase student achievement, and improve the overall quality of community life.**

Specific functions of public education coalitions include:

- Engaging all key stakeholders and community groups in school improvement efforts;
- Providing opportunities for community groups to participate equitably and effectively in addressing critical public education issues in roles in which they are comfortable;
- Making the community aware of the link between quality public education and the overall quality of community life -- improving the community by improving the schools;
- Promoting community investment in and “ownership” of the public education system;
- Making school district operations transparent and ensuring that the community possesses the data and information needed to understand what is going on in the schools and the results that are being produced – especially how well students are achieving;
- Holding accountable all community stakeholders who have a role in providing for quality public education to ensure they are playing their roles, fully, appropriately and effectively;
- Ensuring that the schools – collectively and individually -- have the resources and community supports required to be successful; and
- Promoting and supporting quality public education.

More than 90 American cities have established public education coalitions in some form. The purpose of those coalitions is to provide a forum and process to support and facilitate community involvement in efforts to improve the quality of schools and increase student achievement. These coalitions provide vehicles through which everyone can work together for better schools. **Seventeen of the central cities in the 20 largest U.S. metropolitan areas have public education coalitions of some type. St. Louis is one of the three cities that do not.**

### ***B. Need for a Public Education Coalition in St. Louis***

Educational research demonstrates clearly that successful public school systems are those that have high levels of civic engagement and broad-based community support. Civic engagement and community support are particularly critical in large urban school systems that face multiple, substantial challenges and where many helping hands and resources are required to make the public schools successful. Research also demonstrates that there is a direct link between the overall health, well-being, and prosperity of local communities and the quality of education that is offered.

More than 600 people participated in the community forum series *A Public Dialogue on Public Education* presented by Vision for Children at Risk and the St. Louis Children's Agenda. A major theme that emerged from the forums is the need for an ongoing structure and process in St. Louis through which all key stakeholders and sectors of the community can work together to address critical issues facing the St. Louis Public Schools and develop effective strategies for school improvement. Based on the desire expressed in the local community, Vision for Children at Risk conducted research

on models for public education coalitions employed in other places. That research has provided the foundation for an initiative involving a group of key community stakeholders to expand community engagement in public education in St. Louis and move forward with a strategy to establish a local public education coalition.

There is a need for a structured, broad-based approach to engaging the community in efforts to support the schools and ensure critical educational outcomes are achieved, regardless of the specific governance structure under which the schools are operating. A public education coalition will provide a much-needed vehicle for broad civic engagement and be a catalyst for school improvement.

### **C. Mission and Purpose of a St. Louis Public Education Coalition**

**The mission of the St. Louis Public Education Coalition will be to ensure the public schools are effective and successful, advancing the well-being of children, their families, and the city as a whole by extending access to quality education to all.** The coalition will work to develop a broad-based community constituency that will: (1) promote public awareness of the critical importance of quality public schools to the overall well-being of children and youth and the broader community; (2) engage all sectors of the community and civic stakeholders in ongoing strategic efforts to establish an equitable system of quality public education that effectively addresses the needs of *all* students; (3) develop and implement specific strategies for school reform in which all community stakeholders play appropriate roles; (4) evaluate the performance of the schools and report outcomes; and (5) work to ensure that all public schools have the resources required to provide a quality education to their students.

**A system of quality public schools is defined as one that produces students who possess necessary life and academic skills. Such a system must be adequately financed, well managed, equitable, responsive to the needs of the community, accountable, and focused on promotion of student learning and development as its primary goal.**

### **D. Challenges in Establishing a Local Public Education Coalition**

Ensuring a quality education to all students is dependent on involving all segments of the community and key civic stakeholders in strategic, collaborative action to strengthen the St. Louis Public Schools. Because of the complexity and magnitude of the problems facing the SLPS, it is important that these organized community efforts be effectively and equitably structured and maintained on a long-term basis. St. Louis does not have a strong track record in conducting truly inclusive community efforts to address its major problems. **Efforts to establish a broad-based, collaborative process to engage all members of the community in a coalition working to improve the quality of education in the St. Louis Public Schools must be vigorously pursued.**

### **E. Next Steps: Tasks to Establish a St. Louis Public Education Coalition**

- Demonstrating the need for and benefits of a public education coalition for the schools, students and city as a whole;
- Reaching out to engage all community stakeholders in development of a public education coalition, with particular emphasis on providing opportunities for participation to grassroots community groups often excluded from public policy discussions and planning.
- Developing a coalition model tailored to the needs and realities of the St. Louis setting;
- Establishing specific goals, strategies, and time lines;
- Achieving broad-based community support and buy-in for the coalition; and
- Securing the organizational and financial resources required to support a coalition.