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# Public Participation, Mayoral Control, and the New York City Public School System

## **Abstract**

In this article, I utilize the case of New York City to assess the role and influence of public-participation mechanisms operating in large urban public school systems under mayoral control. I find that the public-participation mechanisms operating under New York City's mayor-controlled school system can produce some policy and administrative changes despite their lack of formal statutory powers. Their ability to produce such changes depends on several factors, including a citizen and administrative ability and willingness to identify and utilize opportunities for collaboration, the presence of a culture of civic engagement within local communities, and the political values reflected in formal policy advisories.

## **Keywords**

public participation, citizen participation, school governance

## **Acknowledgements**

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Achieving a balance between administrative performance and democratic participation is a recurring challenge for large public organizations. American public organizations function within a unique context, in that our historical preference for decentralized governance and democratic participation makes the administration of public organizations difficult. Public organizations must fulfill the public's demand for efficiency, effectiveness, and administrative performance, factors which may require autonomous governmental action (Kettl, 2002). At the same time, these organizations are necessarily accountable to the public and therefore called on to include the public in the development and administration of their policies, either indirectly through representation and oversight by elected officials or more directly through consultation and collaboration with the public (Fung & Wright, 2003).

Public school systems, particularly in large urban centers, are increasingly facing this dilemma of reconciling the competing demands of organizational performance and democratic participation in their operations (Chapman & Dunstan, 1990). Public school systems are facing increasing pressures from their clients, constituents, and other levels of government to improve school and student achievement (Elmore, 2004; Ravitch, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1997). Many cities are experimenting with the centralization of school governance and administration as a path towards improving school and student performance (Henig & Rich, 2004; Kirst & Bulkley, 2000; Wong, Shen, Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, & Rutledge, 2007). However, given the modern expectations for public participation in governance, they must simultaneously find ways to meaningfully include the public in the administration of these centralized school systems (Roberts, 2008).

In this article, I study how one large urban public school system, the New York City Public School System, has sought to ensure that local communities continue to have a voice in the administration of a reorganized school system now governed through mayoral control. Through the use of the case study methodology, I analyze the functioning of three community education councils (CECs) operating in New York City, focusing on their success in achieving policy and administrative changes. I seek to discover whether these public-participation mechanisms can have an impact on school policy and administration despite their primarily advisory role and lack of formal statutory powers. In the process, I seek to add to our understanding regarding the ability of public-participation

mechanisms to contribute to the democratic functioning of large public organizations.

### **Citizen Participation in American Governance**

Citizen participation has served as an intrinsic value and fundamental practice in American governance. Broadly understood, citizen participation is an essential component in the American system of government, underlying its ethical and legitimacy claims as well as its more pragmatic claims to being the governmental system best capable of responding to citizen needs. Robert Dahl notes that citizen participation is the fundamental component of democracy and that nations can be considered democratic to the extent that they protect and promote the citizenry's right to participate in government (Dahl, 1989).

America has long struggled to balance the need to provide for citizen participation in government with the equally important need to provide for a strong and stable government capable of protecting and promoting the national interest. This struggle was evident at the nation's outset, as the framers created the federal system to balance the need for national centralized power with local participation and control through state and local governments. The American citizenry's demand for participation in government has manifested itself throughout history, finding peaks of activity during historical periods such as the era of Jacksonian Democracy and the later Progressive Era (Lux, 2009; Mattson, 1997; McGerr, 2005). In the mid-twentieth century, the public's demand for participation in government took a decided turn, moving beyond the realm of participation in government through traditional republican channels and towards more direct forms of citizen participation in the administration of government. Much of this norm was instituted as a result of the growing number of federal social programs emerging in the post-World War II era that required citizen participation in government. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 is perhaps the most noted of these programs, requiring "maximal feasible participation" of the public in the administration of an assortment of federally based health, educational, and social welfare programs (Kweit & Kweit, 1982).

Since the middle of the twentieth century, various mechanisms and practices of citizen participation have been developed, requiring us to define citizen participation more specifically for the modern context. Roberts defines citizen participation as "the process by which members of a society (those not holding office or administrative positions in government) share power with public

officials in making substantive decisions and in taking actions related to the community” (Roberts, 2008, p. 7). Webler and Renn refer to citizen participation as relating to “forums of exchange that are organized for the purpose of facilitating communication between government, citizens, stakeholders and interest groups, and business regarding a specific decision or problem” (Renn & Webler, 1995, p. 2). Beierle and Crayford define citizen participation as being “any of several mechanisms intentionally instituted to involve the lay public or their representatives in administrative decision-making” (Beierle, 1998, p. 6).

While the extent of citizen participation in government has fluctuated, it is clear that these practices are now considered important components of modern governance (Fung, 2006a). Leighninger notes that a shift has occurred in American governance, with decision-making power being dislodged from the control of technocrats and elected officials and reconfigured into new shared modes of governance where citizens play a larger role (Leighninger & Bradley, 2006). Sherry Arnstein commented on the broad public support for citizen participation in government, noting that "the idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach; no one is against it in principle because it is good for you." (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). Given this broad support, the debate among academics, practitioners, and policymakers has increasingly focused not on whether to utilize citizen participation, but rather on how we may utilize the process most effectively.

### **Effective Citizen Participation**

Despite the seeming clarity of this question, Rosener warns that “the seemingly simple phrase ‘citizen participation’ can be discovered to be, in reality, a very complex concept, and...the lack of knowledge about participation effectiveness is probably related to the fact that so few acknowledge its complexity” (Rosener, 1978, p. 458). Indeed, the scholarship on citizen participation produces a complex and untidy literature and the research on its effectiveness yields diverse perspectives (Berner, Amos, & Morse, 2011; Kweit & Kweit, 1982). Nevertheless, one basic dimension along which the literature’s perspective on citizen participation effectiveness tends to vary is with respect to the unit of analysis used to conceptualize the effectiveness of these processes. Perspectives on the effectiveness of citizen participation vary depending on whether we conceptualize effectiveness in terms of the impact of citizen participation on individual citizens, on the broader democratic system of government, or on the policy and administrative outputs of these systems.

**Citizen Participation and Individual Transformations.** One of the reasons why citizen participation in government garners such wide public support is the positive and transformative effects it has been credited with having on the character of individual citizens. For many researchers and practitioners, citizen participation is effective when it succeeds in producing positive changes in the consciousness and character of individuals.

The idea that citizen participation in government could contribute to the development of the individual's character was first put forward in the period of Greek antiquity. Aristotle opined that active citizen participation in the state was an essential part of being human and necessary for the attainment of eudaimonia, the highest state of moral, intellectual, and emotional development (Aristotle, 1981). This view would be further articulated in later years by philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, who highlighted citizen participation's role in developing the human civic and moral character (Mill, 2010; Rousseau & Cole, 2008). Political philosophers Arnold Kaufman and Carole Pateman would build on this view, noting that citizen participation in government had the potential to foster the psychological and intellectual well-being of individuals and improve their sense of personal and political efficacy (Kaufman, 1973; Pateman, 1976).

The more recent literature on citizen participation identifies a host of positive changes that can occur within the individual as a result of involvement in citizen participation processes. Fung and Wright note that participatory bodies facilitating citizen participation can act as schools of democracy where participating citizens can develop a host of positive attributes beneficial for both the individual and society (Fung & Wright, 2003). Citizens can develop a sense of civic virtue, integrity, and respect for fellow citizens as a result of participation in deliberative processes (Benhabib, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Deliberation among citizens regarding pressing public issues can result in improvements in one's reasoning abilities as well as the development a publicly-spirited character that is more concerned with pursuing the public good (Cohen, 2009; Elkin & Soltan, 1999; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

**Citizen Participation and the Democratic System.** The benefits of citizen participation can also be seen from a more holistic perspective, in terms of

the positive effects it can have on the development of societal characteristics essential for the proper functioning of a democracy. For example, citizen participation can help foster public trust in government, a requisite for the legitimacy and stability of a democracy (Wang & Wan Wart, 2007). Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol among other scholars have highlighted the marked decline of public trust in government arising as a result of a decline in civic and political engagement. By providing venues for citizens to engage their government, citizen participation can reduce public animosity towards government, improve public trust in government, and increase public support for its actions (Beierle, 1998; Gastil & Levine, 2005; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Thomas, 1995). The legitimacy of democratic systems is also aided when citizen participation contributes to the empowerment of citizens to substantially influence public policy and administrative practice (Fung, Wright, & Abers, 2003; Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Finally, by bringing citizens more directly into the process of governing, citizen participation has also been credited with improving transparency in government, another characteristic that contributes to the legitimacy and stability of democratic systems (Vigoda, 2002).

**Policy and Administrative Outcomes.** Finally, the literature reveals that citizen participation can also be considered effective when it results in policy and/or administrative change that improves the quality of public services and/or makes public services more responsive to citizen wants and needs (Gulati, 1982). A major reason for the wide public support for citizen participation processes is the salutary effect these processes are perceived to have on the quality of public policy and administration (Rosenberg, 2007). In addition to the basic problem of the disempowerment of marginalized communities, elected officials and public administrators often simply lack the breadth and depth of information necessary to properly address public problems; citizen participation processes can help foster the collaboration between citizens and administrators that is necessary for high-quality public policy-making and administration (Vigoda, 2002). In a variety of policy contexts, “public participants may be able to frame problems and priorities in ways that break from professional conceptions yet more closely match their values, needs, and preferences” (Fung, 2006b, p. 73). Citizen participation practices, if utilized properly, can help facilitate the more collaborative forms of public management necessary in the modern context to help ensure that public policy is formed and administered in a more technically optimal fashion while responding better to community needs (Agranoff &

McGuire, 2004; Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005; O'Leary & Bingham, 2009).

### **The Case of New York City**

Today's public agencies are increasingly being called on to include the public in their administrative operations while simultaneously improving organizational performance. The New York City Public School System is an example of such an organization, seeking to address the demands of modern democracy while improving school and student performance. The scope of the New York City Public School System (NYCPSS) is large and its organizational structure and environmental context are highly complex, making it a fruitful subject for various types of administrative research. The NYCPSS educates approximately 1.1 million students, employs 80,000 teachers, and administers 1,200 schools (New York City Department of Education, 2009a). Throughout its history, the system has been faced with the difficult task of educating a highly diverse student population, in terms of both socioeconomic background and academic ability (Ravitch, 1974). Various administrative approaches have been utilized throughout its history in its efforts to improve organizational performance. The New York City Public School System has experimented with various models of governance and administration, at times emphasizing a centralized administrative strategy while at other times emphasizing the values of decentralization and greater local control. In 2002, the NYCPSS ended its experiment with the decentralization of school system governance (a system that had existed in some form since 1969) as New York State Governor George Pataki signed legislation granting control of the school system to the city's mayor.

Federal law required the creation of some structure for public participation to replace the outgoing community school boards which formerly provided communities with a voice in the administration of community schools (Gootman, 2004). The legislation centralizing New York City's public school system required the approval of the United States Justice Department, as it virtually eliminated the formal powers of the former community school boards, whose members were directly elected by voters. Under the Federal Voting Rights Act, any changes affecting voting in a jurisdiction with a history of voting discrimination – which in this case includes the boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx – require Justice Department approval. Thus, the forming of the



community education councils was the result of a legal compromise between New York State and the Justice Department aimed at ensuring local communities continued to be represented in the governance of their schools.

The advisory role of the CECs stands in contrast to their more powerful predecessors, the community school boards. From 1969 to 2002, the community school boards shared power over a large portion of the public school system with the central Board of Education and the schools chancellor. At the outset of their formation in 1969, community school boards had the power to hire community superintendents, principals, and assistant principals, as well as to approve school budgets (Task Force on Community School District Governance Reform, 2003). But the formal powers of community school boards steadily eroded. Actions taken by schools chancellors and the central Board of Education, coupled with the growing powers of teachers unions, principals, and others stakeholders, greatly qualified the power community school boards had over school policy and administration (Wolff, 2002). In response to charges of excessive infighting, corruption, and general ineffectiveness in managing public elementary and middle schools, state legislation was passed in 1996 that removed their power to hire and fire principals, limited their role in hiring school district superintendents, and expanded the powers of the chancellor to intervene in the affairs of school boards in cases of malfeasance (Task Force on Community School District Governance Reform, 2003).

The Community Education Councils are the structures replacing the former community school boards. There are 32 Community Education Councils for each of New York City's 32 community school districts, with each council having twelve members. In contrast to the former community school boards, which did not require members to have children enrolled in the city's public schools, at least nine of the twelve available seats on each CEC must be held by public school parents. Two members of each CEC are appointed by the borough presidents and these members are not required to have children in the public schools. One member of the CEC must be a non-voting high school senior who lives in the community school district and is on the elected student leadership of his/her school. This member is appointed by the community superintendent (New York City Department of Education, 2009b).

Parents interested in serving on the community education councils can nominate themselves for the position. With regard to elections, members are selected by the President, Secretary, and Treasurer of every Parent and Parent-

Teacher Association (PA/PTA) in the district. These three PA/PTA officers are known as Parent Selectors. To facilitate public participation in the electoral process, public meetings are held in each community school district. At these public meetings, candidates are able to make presentations to the parent selectors, other parents, and members of the community. Anyone attending these public meetings can submit written comments regarding CEC candidates that are shared with the parent selectors. Following these public meetings, each PA/PTA is encouraged to hold membership meetings to obtain additional feedback on the candidates (New York City Department of Education, 2009c).

While Community Education Council members are predominantly parents with children in the school system, they are intended to serve as representatives of both parents with children in the school system and members of the greater district community. According to Section 2590-e of New York State's Education Law, the CECs are responsible for "promoting the achievement of educational standards and objectives relating to the instruction of students." State law encourages a collaborative rather than adversarial relationship with school system administrators, calling on CEC members to "establish a positive working relationship with the community superintendent and local instructional superintendents." The CECs are intended to gather community input on educational policy issues in the district and work with Department of Education officials to help ensure that such concerns are reflected in school policy and administration. The CECs have the power to approve school zoning changes within the district and also play a role in evaluating the community superintendents and the local instructional superintendents (Salimi, Atwell, Culp, Poreda-Ryan, & Hoglebe, 2006).

### **Research Questions and Methodology**

This paper seeks to answer two main research questions. First, can New York City's Community Education Councils (CECs) be effective in producing policy and administrative change, despite their lack of formal statutory powers? The ability to produce policy and administrative change is one of the key standards by which the scholarly literature assesses the effectiveness of public-participation mechanisms, making this insight valuable for our understanding of the operations of these participatory bodies. Second, what factors seem to affect the ability of these participatory bodies to produce such policy and administrative changes? More specifically, what are the characteristics of the participants involved in the functioning of these bodies, or of the dynamics among these

participants, that appear to contribute to the ability of these participatory mechanisms to produce policy and/or administrative change?

This article reports on findings from three case studies of community education councils. The decision to include a particular community education council (CEC) as a case in this study required me to balance both theoretical and practical factors, particularly because this study was conducted at an early stage in the implementation of mayoral control and of the CECs. In terms of practical factors, the studied councils needed to have full memberships, be meeting on a regular basis, have documents available for review, and be functioning in accordance with their roles and duties. These practical considerations were balanced with an interest in studying councils exhibiting a level of socioeconomic diversity to aid with establishing greater generalizability in my findings. Information garnered from prior knowledge about community school districts, corroborated by Department of Education Annual District Reports, allowed me to draw a sample exhibiting socioeconomic diversity. The final choices for my research sample that I include in this article are the community education councils for school districts 2, 3, and 30 in New York City.<sup>1</sup>

I conducted 37 formal telephone interviews for this study. My sample included a diverse range of parties involved either directly or indirectly in the functioning of the CECs. They included activists advocating for particular interests and issues through the CEC structures, elected officials and/or their staff interacting with CECs, CEC members themselves, Department of Education officials involved in the administration of the CECs, and experts in not-for-profit organizations interacting with these mechanisms. Interview information was supplemented with documents released by these individuals or their associated organizations. Reviews of media accounts also served as an important source of data, as did email communications with some of the aforementioned parties.

I utilized an explanation-building analytic strategy to evaluate the collected data and gather insights as to why the observed community education councils could be effective in producing policy and/or administrative change despite their lack of formal statutory powers (Yin, 2009). In order to complete this analysis, case study documents, notes from telephone interviews, and notes from personal observations of Community Education Council meetings were stored in one place, serving as a central case study database (Yin, 2009). Information in this database was examined, first focusing on identifying instances where CECs were able to produce policy and/or administrative change; this

information is presented in the following findings section. After identifying these instances, the compiled data were reexamined, with a focus on identifying participant characteristics and/or dynamics that appeared to contribute to the ability of these participatory mechanisms to produce policy and/or administrative change. These themes and factors are addressed in the discussion and lessons-learned section of this paper.

## **Findings**

### **CEC 30**

Community School District 30 is located in the northwestern section of the borough of Queens. It is one of the most ethnically diverse school districts in the city, with its population representing over 120 countries. As of 2005, District 30 served 39,802 students in its 40 schools. The poverty level, as indicated by the percentage of students eligible for free lunch in the district, is high in District 30, with over three-fourths (76.1%) of its students being eligible to receive free lunch. Despite this high poverty level, student achievement remains comparatively high in District 30, as it consistently ranks in the top third of NYC school districts on standardized English Language Arts and Mathematics tests (New York City Department of Education, 2005a).

Community Education Council 30 (CEC 30) took a largely collaborative approach in its relationship with the Department of Education, working in conjunction with administrative actors to educate and inform the public about issues impacting the school district. Much of the early educative agenda at CEC proceedings consisted of efforts towards explaining to the public the host of new programs and policies of the school system under the new organizational framework. Department of Education officials utilized the councils as forums to make presentations about a variety of school level reforms and practices, such as the growing use of technology in the classroom, new experimental administrative models being used in some district schools, and the expansion of programs for gifted and talented students across the district. CEC proceedings were also instrumental in keeping the community abreast of the state of capital projects in the district. Finally, public information efforts were also used to raise parent awareness about the variety of programs and services available to help parents aid their children with learning at home. Information on supplementary education services was disseminated and presentations on elementary school admission policies and special programs were made to the public.

While some CEC members used early CEC proceedings as opportunities to challenge some aspects of new Department of Education policies affecting their district, these challenges occurred only sporadically as a result of individual members' actions and did not reflect a cohesive council-wide effort to challenge Department of Education policies. For instance, some council members and the public questioned Department of Education officials with respect to the mayor's policy ending social promotions for fifth-graders, prior to a child's entry into middle school (Community Education Council – District 30, 2004). Administrators addressed this controversial issue, replying to public concerns that the policy was “too drastic” with specific answers explaining the resulting developmental and academic problems that occurred as a result of the former policy. Explanatory efforts were followed with information regarding new funding and a range of new programs aimed at supporting struggling fifth-grade students in achieving state standards. Both the availability and the content of summer school programs, and their pedagogical approaches, were presented and explained to the public in response to public concerns.

In addition to its efforts towards educating and informing the public, CEC 30 showed that its policy advisories could result in formal policy changes. One area in which CEC 30 sought to garner influence was in the area of school and student safety. For instance, CEC 30 used its proceedings to raise the public's awareness about problems with district school safety by bringing public attention to a rash of incidents regarding sex offenders in the school district (Community Education Council – District 30, 2005b). By highlighting the topic at public forums and informing the public on incidents that had occurred in the district, the council membership created a public dialogue on the problem of sex offenders. This dialogue, while aimed at improving the public's capacity to protect their own families from such victimization, also led to a revision in the school system's citywide sex offender notification policy. CEC 30 investigated the issue and found that as a result of the former decentralized process of governance, community schools had a wide array of policies regarding how schools would notify parents about sex offenders living in the school district. Some schools were proactive in their notification policies while others took a passive approach, placing the onus on parents to visit schools and review often outdated dossiers with information about sex offenders living in the district. The situation was particularly alarming in light of the existence of electronic state databases with updated information on sex offenders that could be disseminated to parents. After extensive communications with Department of Education officials, the Chancellor

decided to make formal revisions to section A – 418 of the Chancellor's regulations governing the Department of Education's sex offender notification policy (Klein, 2006). As a result of these collaborations, all New York City public schools were mandated to notify parents about sex offenders living in the district and those who had recently moved into the same zip code of their children's school at the beginning of the school year, through a uniform set of outreach practices.

Another prominent health and safety issue where CEC 30 sought to achieve changes was with regard to the placement of cellular phone communication towers in close proximity to District 30 schools. In response to parent concerns regarding the placement of a cellular communications tower in close proximity to an elementary school, CEC 30 helped organize a community movement in opposition to the placement of these towers, culminating in the passage of a CEC resolution condemning the installation of these towers (Community Education Council – District 30, 2005a). Collaborations with local community groups, elected officials, and the media resulted in sufficient public pressure to prompt the removal of these towers. One CEC member noted, "That's the first time in the history of Nextel where they have had to address community resistance and take towers down. That's not happened across the country" (Guyton, 2006, p. 16). Moreover, partnering with local elected officials with respect to this issue prompted the introduction of local and state legislation regulating or discouraging the placement of communications towers within 500 feet of public schools (Gentile, 2005; Millman, 2006; Vallone, 2006).

CEC 30 also used its proceedings to address student health issues. In response to community concerns about school air quality, the community education council gathered and disseminated information on a spike in reported asthma cases between the 2005 and 2006 school years. In addition to raising public awareness on this issue, the CEC was also able to take action that resulted in administrative change. CEC 30 was able to expand an EPA assessment of air quality in District 30 schools from four to over 15 schools. CEC 30 members also collaborated with local officials and prompted the city to enforce its existing regulation banning the idling of school buses when stationed outside public schools, removing a "blue haze of diesel exhaust" that permeated the area surrounding district schools, significantly improving the air quality around schools (Guyton, 2006, p. 23).

CEC 30 members reported numerous other actions that resulted in smaller scale changes. CEC 30 worked with principals to add capital improvement items to the school system's five-year capital plan amendment. They worked with local and state legislators to help secure discretionary funds to supplement school budgets. CEC 30 members also worked to acquire additional school safety officers, crossing guards, and other valued resources. CEC 30 recognized that collaborating with Department of Education officials would be critical to its success. One CEC 30 member commented, "You can accept it and work with it [mayoral control], or you can just fight about it and not do anything" (Bassini, 2006, p. 11).

## **CEC 2**

Community School District 2's geographical boundaries cover much of the lower part of Manhattan, spreading to midtown and then covering the southern portion of the Upper East Side. It serves many of the wealthiest communities in New York City but also serves a substantial number of poorer students who transfer into the district or who live in the lower-income areas of District 2. As of 2005, Community School District 2 had 58,927 students enrolled in its 88 schools. Forty-four percent of its students are eligible for free lunch, compared to the citywide average of 65%. District 2 is an ethnically diverse district. Nineteen percent of its student population is categorized as White, 21% Black, 37% is Hispanic, and 23% is Asian or other. District 2 is one of the most highly performing school districts in New York City, second only to District 26 of Eastern Queens, a district that performs at a slightly higher level, but has a wealthier and more homogenous student population (New York City Department of Education, 2005b).

From the outset of the council's formation, the CEC 2 membership quickly sought to identify issues important to the district and shaped its specific agenda around expressed district needs. CEC 2 addressed a variety of issues, ranging from client service-related concerns to more substantial instruction-related issues of longer term concern to the district constituency. CEC 2 was unique in that it was the only council whose membership initiated long-term educative efforts towards informing the public about substantial issues related to instruction in district schools. By hosting educative forums with regard to mathematics instruction, the CEC aided in building the public's knowledge with regard to the topic, enabling them to advocate more effectively for substantive policy improvements. Moreover, the council's efforts resulted in actual street-



level changes in teaching practices and other changes in the implementation of the district's math curriculum, illustrating the CEC's ability to act effectively at the implementation stage of the policy process.

As a high-performing school district, community stakeholders were concerned that centralized governance would entail the dismantling of district programs and policies that had proven successful prior to centralization. At several meetings, the district superintendent emphasized district-wide improvements in math and ELA (English Language Arts) scores, illustrating the continued high performance of district schools. Department administrators also sought to alleviate some concerns of parents with more highly performing children in the district by discrediting rumors of the possible dismantling of Gifted and Talented programs at district schools (Community Education Council – District 2, 2004).

The leadership of CEC 2 particularly emphasized that it was the goal of the council to represent the desires and needs of district parents and families rather than simply advance the Department of Education's, or their own, agenda. One CEC 2 leader noted:

**The agenda is determined by the parental input...what their needs are within District 2. We advocate them, we represent them. We don't determine our own agenda...The CEC's agenda is a result of parental influence and input. You tell us what the concerns are and that's what creates the agenda for the CEC. (Propper, 2006, p. 14)**

One topic of early discussion and concern was the district-wide implications of the city's change in its middle school promotion policy. As a high-performing school district, the issue of detaining children due to the ending of social promotions was not as prominent as in other districts. However, along with this policy change came a tightening in standards for admissions into coveted Special Progress classes and screened programs for high-achieving students in the district. CEC 2 proceedings served as important venues for clarifying the specifics of this new policy and how it would affect higher achieving students. CEC 2 later sponsored a middle school admissions forum, noting that the rules and processes of applying to middle schools were historically burdensome, and more so in a time of organizational change. Middle school admissions were noted as particularly complex in 2005, as criteria for admissions into district Special Progress classes and screened programs were changed and made more stringent.



The CEC's role in providing the necessary new information and clarifying admissions policies and procedures illustrated an important role the CEC has played as a mechanism aiding in client service. Parents can become overwhelmed by the confusing red tape inherent in the large school bureaucracy, and the CEC has served as "another information source" and partner with Department of Education officials in the provision of client service (Koss, 2006, p. 4).

Moreover, through consultation with Department of Education administrators, CEC 2 was also able to make substantial changes that streamlined and simplified the middle school admissions process. In response to community demands, changes were made to the middle school admissions criteria in the district. School administrators agreed to add criteria such as student attendance, student grades, and punctuality to standardized test scores as admissions criteria to make the process fairer and more holistic. CEC 2 was also able to make other changes that made the district middle school admissions a more user friendly process, including improvements in the content and clarity of informational materials, the availability and distribution of these materials, as well as extending the time period families have to complete the process.

Perhaps CEC 2's most ambitious effort was its initiative in holding a series of math forums aimed at educating and informing the public with regard to mathematics education in the district. These forums were held independently from any Department of Education initiative, and to some degree, inherently challenged the district's position and practices in math instruction. The forums were a longer-term effort aimed at improving the public's capacity to understand math curricula issues from a variety of perspectives, thus capacitating them to participate meaningfully on this matter, whether through the CEC mechanism, through other political channels, or in their everyday interactions with the school system.

After the passage of mayoral control, one of the first priorities of New York City's Mayor Michael Bloomberg was the standardization of the citywide curriculum in English language arts and mathematics. The mayor argued that due to the prior decentralization of the system, school districts were working with highly varying English language arts and mathematics curricula. In addition to the fact that these curricula had not been proven effective by empirical research, the variety of curricula across school districts made learning difficult for children who moved to a new residence during the school year, as they would often enter schools covering very different subject matter (Goodnough & Medina, 2003).

However, because Community School District 2 was already achieving highly in English language arts and mathematics, Mayor Bloomberg granted the district an exemption from this requirement and allowed them greater autonomy in determining their own English language arts and mathematics curricula (Herszenhorn, 2003). CEC 2 utilized this exemption as an opportunity to revisit the constructivist mathematics curriculum they were using, through hosting public forums aimed at gathering community input on this subject matter.<sup>2</sup> One community activist lauded CEC 2's efforts:

**The CEC, understanding that this problem certainly didn't ever go away, and they wanted to do the right thing...the CEC, first time out of the box, only a year term...but you know what, they wanted to do what was important to do, so, to their credit, they sponsored four [forums] of their own. (Carson, 2006, p. 16)**

While various topics and perspectives were addressed, with some parents voicing support for the district's math curriculum while others sought more information on the topic, most parents in attendance directly criticized the constructivist math curriculum, seeing it as insufficient for the rigors students would encounter in mathematics throughout their future years of education.

While CEC 2 was not able to make formal changes in the District 2 mathematics curriculum, it was able to affect the actual practice of teaching mathematics in two ways. First, CEC 2 was able to come to a compromise with school administrators whereby changes would be made in the way tutoring and other forms of supplemental instruction were delivered. School district authorities agreed to weave more traditional forms of mathematics instruction into tutoring and other forms of supplementary instruction services, as well as into the resource materials available to help parents aid their own children learning mathematics at home (Carillo, 2006). Secondly, several stakeholders noted that CEC 2's efforts at calling attention to the problem helped change the way mathematics was actually being taught in the district schools. One community activist involved in this issue noted "They're...getting more math. [The teachers] have...figured out a way, without going and changing the superintendent, you see...they're just buckling down, and in their own schools, closing the door...and teaching" (Carson, 2006, p. 20). Moreover, in an official letter sent to district and regional superintendents, CEC 2 noted that "the Council recognizes an unofficial trend, classroom by classroom, towards a more 'balanced' mathematics approach" (Community Education Council – District 2, 2005).

CEC 2 also held the power to act effectively in other areas. Like other councils, CEC 2 was able to work with city officials in areas supporting school functioning, in gathering some financial resources for district schools, and in spurring agency action on facilities improvement projects. CEC 2 also worked to protect student health and safety; the council collaborated with the New York City Police Department and the Department of Consumer Affairs to address the problem of truant students loitering in Internet cafés (Koss, 2006). Issues of food quality were also addressed in CEC proceedings, leading to an informative session on food quality standards in the district and the dissemination of information on recent changes in the system's contracts with food vendors. Parent concerns regarding safety and security in the schools led to informative presentations by Department of Education administrators on systems for dealing with safety and terrorism-related events.

### **CEC 3**

Community School District 3 operates on the West Side of Manhattan, with its boundaries ranging from West 59th Street as far north as West 122nd Street. The district includes the communities of Central Harlem, Manhattan Valley, the Upper West Side, and Lincoln Center. District 3 had 23,526 students enrolled in its 42 public schools. The attendance rate is slightly above the city average, standing at 90%. Fifty-four percent of its students are eligible for free lunch. Twenty percent of District 3's students are classified as white, while 38% of students identify as black. 37% of the student population identifies as Hispanic, and 6% of the population is Asian or of another ethnicity. As of 2005, 5% of the District 3 student population was classified as recent-immigrant (New York City Department of Education, 2005c).

Much of CEC 3's effectiveness as an advisory council stemmed from its ability to serve as a central hub where community stakeholders working toward policy change could collaborate and establish a sense of legitimacy for their causes. CEC 3 built a base of power by forming a network with local parent groups and community-based organizations, building the CEC's capacity to change substantive areas of school policy in addition to its ability to spur basic administrative changes that improved the delivery of educational services. CEC 3's ability to capitalize on its efforts in networking with other community actors and exercise policy-changing power was substantial but bounded by external social factors and conditions. Nevertheless, the case of CEC 2 provides evidence that by forming relationships with administrative and community stakeholders

and by capitalizing on propitious social conditions, these participatory mechanisms could produce substantive policy change.

Establishing working relationships and networking with the variety of active community groups in School District 3 was critical to CEC 3's success in producing policy and administrative change. CEC 3 members reported that basic council practices such as assigning particular CEC members as liaisons to individual community schools facilitated the formation of relationships with school administrators and stakeholders. One district administrator emphasized the effectiveness of this simple collaboration strategy, noting that, "it works better than you'd think" (Sheppard, 2006). Through routine communications between CEC members and school-based stakeholders, parents and principals were made aware of the presence of the new CECs and their role in advocating for school improvements. CEC members were able to inform new principals about the availability of discretionary funds for their district schools from local elected officials and from other alternative funding sources within school budgets. Overlooked facilities improvement issues were addressed or placed in the annual capital budget request as a result of CEC oversight. In various ways, simple contacts and communications between CEC members and district school administrators proved beneficial, resulting in school improvements that helped students and their families. CEC 3 also made conscious efforts towards encouraging public participation in the CEC's proceedings through outreach to local families and community-based organizations. While they highlighted the importance of these efforts, they found their ability to garner participation was bounded by the circumstances surrounding issues the CEC was addressing:

**[Public participation] happens around specific topics. So, as we gravitate towards a topic, or put a panel together on a certain area, we will see a large turnout. When we have a general public meeting, on a variety of topics, we get a small turnout. When we focus on just one topic, and it happens to be a hot topic, then we'll get a good turnout. (Stollar, 2006, p. 28)**

On the macrolevel, CEC 3 served as a nexus of activity for district level policy concerns, acting as a forum where ideas and positions regarding critical local school policy issues were vigorously debated, leading to a community consensus that later became a blueprint for policy action. The highly diverse nature of the client base of Community School District 3 made this function critical, as the diversity of the district sometimes resulted in a fractious

competition for limited resources. CEC 3 served as a locus for deliberation where differences could be resolved and compromises could be reached. The primary District 3 issue requiring such deliberation regarded access to vacant seats in higher performing community public schools and to Gifted and Talented programs – highly sought-after special programs with the reputation of having some of the most highly qualified teachers.

While there are high-quality public schools within the New York City limits, demand for seats in the best public schools outstrips supply. One journalist writing on this matter noted, “Getting your child into a strong public school in New York City is the kind of thing that can bring otherwise calm parents to blows” (Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, 2005). Given this reality, Community School District 3 found itself in a unique situation, with a considerable number of vacant seats in its high-quality public elementary schools. The bifurcated nature of District 3’s population in terms of socioeconomic status made for this the rare situation. District 3’s diverse population includes a large population of wealthy households on the Upper West Side, as well as large portions of the city’s poorest households in areas such as Central Harlem, upper Manhattan, and Manhattan Valley (New York City Department of Education, 2005c). Many of the district’s wealthier households enrolled their children in private or religious schools, leaving these seats vacant in the district’s public schools. This situation led to fierce competition for access to these vacant seats. Administrators in charge of parceling out this resource often did so in a way that benefited a narrow set of favored parties. The *New York Times* reported that, “For years, the empty seats in those schools went to pupils ‘hand-picked’ by the individual schools administration from outside their geographic zone, resulting in a system that favors educated, savvy, connected parents” (Saulny, 2005).

The initial push for reform of this system of distribution stemmed largely from the efforts of the Center for Immigrant Families, a community-based organization representing the interests of the Spanish-speaking immigrant population of the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The center for immigrant families had long argued that the system of distribution of these coveted vacant seats in District 3 elementary schools systematically discriminated against racial and ethnic minorities. Through the implementation of a variety of administrative practices – such as the discriminatory use of catchment areas/zoning lines, the brusque treatment and referral of minority families to other schools, the presence of language barriers in the school application process, the proliferation of Gifted

and Talented programs that largely excluded minority children, and the favoring of parents who contributed money to schools – the children of low-income families of color were systematically obstructed from accessing higher quality district public elementary schools (Center for Immigrant Families, 2004). One parent recounted her experiences with this system:

**I represent all those parents who have these unpleasant experiences daily, when we go to register our children in the public schools. We haven't even finished talking and already they're telling us that we don't belong, even if we live in the area, letting us know that we are not welcome in that school – immigrants, low income families, people of color and those of us who don't speak English. They “suggest” that we go to schools Uptown, and the excuse they offer is that we may feel more comfortable in those schools because there are more people there who are like us... But we know that they are discriminating against us. This is even more obvious when we notice how differently they treat white people or people who have money to contribute to the school. And sometimes these people don't even live in the area and are accepted anyway! This is unfair for our children, all of our children, regardless of their social status or race! (Center for Immigrant Families, 2004, p. 7)**

CEC 3 worked with the Center for Immigrant Families and formed a task force in the summer of 2005 aimed at resolving this contentious issue. The task force included a wide array of actors involved in this issue, including parents, teachers, school system administrators, district parent-teacher associations, and other community advocacy groups and organizations. After much contentious deliberation over the summer of 2005, the task force came to a compromise that was acceptable to all of the group's members. They decided that vacant seats would be distributed according to a lottery process that gave preference to students living within district boundaries. The application process for vacant seats would be simple and intuitive, consisting of printed applications forms in English and Spanish. If any vacant seats remained after district parents applied for the slots, preference would then be granted to students in adjacent districts, and finally to students throughout the rest of the city.

CEC 3 was also capable of achieving other changes in district school policy and administration. Ongoing communications between CEC members and community school administrators aided in the procurement of resources for district schools. Alternative sources of funding for school improvement projects were found as a result of CEC investigative efforts, and CEC member communications with principals resulted in capital improvement items being included in the yearly Capital Budget amendment. CEC efforts toward raising awareness regarding inconsistent admissions requirements for district Gifted and Talented programs resulted in the formation of a more uniform citywide admissions process (Saulny, 2006).

## **Discussion and Lessons-Learned**

### **Public and Administrative Relations**

Mayoral control concentrated most formal policy-making power at the executive level, placing constraints on the range of issues the CECs could seek to affect through policy advisement. There were several controversial policy changes, such as the ending of social promotions or the ban on student possession of cell phones in schools, that had been issued as citywide directives by the mayor over the time period of this study, and it seemed possible that CEC proceedings might be utilized in an adversarial fashion to oppose these policy mandates (Hernandez, 2009; Steinhauer, 2004). However, the evidence in these case studies illustrates a generally collaborative relationship between CEC members and Department of Education administrators, where these parties opted to focus on collaborating on policy issues such as student health, safety, and the manner of implementing new standardized curricula, rather than on opposing more controversial citywide mandates that could spur internal conflicts. One CEC commented on this collaborative approach, noting that “instead of complaining about lack of power, we take the power and influence that we do have and we try to help the children” (Bassini, 2006, p. 11). It seems that CEC members determined it was in their best interest to work with the Department of Education to create beneficial change in the policy areas where there was space for compromise and change.

Critics of direct public participation argue that the use of direct public participation disproportionately benefits the powerful, allowing them to minimize public resistance to their desired policy outcomes rather than empowering the public to produce policy change that is in their own best interest. This study



shows that there can remain space in the political and policy arena where administrators and the public can collaborate to produce policy change that is beneficial to local constituencies, even within the context of mayoral control. While much educational policy was controlled by the mayor or predetermined by state and federal requirements, CECs appeared to have an ability to make an impact in some policy areas by directing public and administrative focus towards topics more subject to collaboration and/or by targeting their efforts at the implementation, rather than formation, stage of the policy process.

These findings reinforce the scholarship emphasizing the need for public and administrative skills in collaboration within these participatory settings. Even within school systems under mayoral control, it seems evident that both administrators and the public will need to manage complex relationships between themselves and among a broad array of external public and private entities (Agranoff & McGuire, 2004). Such action requires not only the use of new mechanisms for collaboration, but also the development and utilization of a new set of skills and competencies in collaborating in complex environments (Bingham et al., 2005). If done properly, it appears possible that these mechanisms can place citizen needs, rather than solely administrative prerogatives, at the center of their deliberations (Cooper, Bryer, & Meek, 2006).

### **Community Characteristics**

The fact that some policy and administrative changes could be accomplished through collaboration between these public-participation mechanisms and administrative authorities is encouraging. It suggests that public-participation mechanisms operating in mayor-controlled school systems can still exert some level of influence over school system operations, giving them some political and policy-making value. Through technical improvements in the training of CEC members and administrators, we can reasonably expect improvements in the effectiveness of these participatory mechanisms. Certainly, the success of the CECs in producing policy and administrative change is limited and needs to be seen in light of the larger context of mayoral control. While these participatory mechanisms can have an effect in some areas of school policy and administration, the significance of these changes varies and is to some degree a matter of perspective. Changes to middle school admissions procedures may be seen as relatively minor changes by systemic education policy analysts but as more significant by families undergoing the admissions process. Likewise, some observers may critically note that many of the aforementioned policy and



administrative changes occurred in the areas of student health and safety rather than in areas directly related to education, while others may laud the role of these participatory bodies in ensuring that health and safety issues that might otherwise be overlooked are addressed. We should also recognize that the influence of these participatory bodies is necessarily bounded by the broader legal reality of mayoral control. The executive branch of the municipality ultimately controls school policy and the success of the CECs in achieving policy and administrative change ultimately requires the collaboration and consent of the governing administration.

Yet while we emphasize the importance of the collaborative working styles and relationships observed in this study, there are other factors, endogenous to communities and outside of direct citizen or administrative control, that seem to affect the ability of these mechanisms to influence school policy and administration. It appears that preexistent characteristics of school district communities themselves impacted their ability to produce policy and/or administrative change through the CECs. This was particularly evident in the case of CEC 3. As noted in the case study report, the Upper West Side of Manhattan has a large population of Hispanic residents living within or close to the formal boundaries of community School District 3; many of these residents originate from the Dominican Republic. Legal scholar Julissa Reynoso notes that, “Dominicans...tend to be...concentrated, residing exclusively in barrios or ghettos like Washington Heights–Inwood, home to 59% of Dominicans registered by the INS. Other areas of Dominican concentration include sections of the Upper West Side...The largest concentration occurs in Manhattan, where 41.1 percent of the Dominican population resides” (Reynoso, 2003). This sizeable and concentrated ethnic population exhibits characteristics associated with community efficacy in producing social and political change. In a 2003 study of social capital in New York City’s Dominican community, Reynoso found that this community tested positively for civic engagement, a correlate of the construct of social capital (Putnam, 2001). Reynoso notes that 85% of respondents in her study belonged to some form of formal organization or group, with 31% belonging to educational organizations, 27% to socio-cultural groups, 21% to religious organizations, and 20% belonging to sport and/or professional organizations.

In the case of CEC 3, this ethos of civic engagement present in the surrounding community appeared to be an energizing force helping move the CEC towards producing policy changes. Of the three councils highlighted in this study, CEC 3 seemed to achieve the most significant policy changes. Much of

this success may have been driven by a combination of the advocacy efforts of a well-organized community-based organization (the Center for Immigrant Families) and the more dispersed activism of a civically engaged immigrant community.

## **Policy, Power, and Organizational Form**

Finally, we should note how the centralized organizational structure of the New York City Public School System itself may serve as a factor mediating the effectiveness of CECs in achieving policy changes. As a result of mayoral control, the New York City Public School System's organizational structure changed into a more traditionally hierarchical and bureaucratic form. As a result of this change, the New York City Public School System has refocused its reform efforts on initiatives emphasizing systemic, rather than local, improvements in service quality and delivery (O'Day, Bitter, & Gomez, 2011). This shift in focus may have implications for the kinds of program and policy advocacies that are likely to be actualized within the context of mayoral control.

Policy advocacy efforts emphasizing the need for *systemic*, rather than local, improvements may be more likely to be actualized under the current administrative configuration. The Community School Boards, the precursors to the CECs under the former decentralized governance system, were developed to serve as pathways by which local communities could advocate for changes in policy and administration that benefited particular local communities (Ravitch, 1974). However, in the centralized context of mayoral control, such advocacy efforts may be less likely to result in policy and administrative change, as they conflict with the school system's overriding ethos of systemic service improvements. Therefore, CECs focusing on policy advocacies that could result in broad-based systemic improvements and/or a more standardized distribution of resources may be more successful in producing such changes than CECs seeking benefits for specific local constituencies. This advantage was particularly evident in the case of CEC 3, where the district's Hispanic community was able to gain access to prized vacant seats in high-quality public schools after years of being denied access under the former decentralized system (Center for Immigrant Families, 2004).

This phenomenon may also point towards the potential for the Community Education Councils and similar public-participation bodies in other mayor-controlled school systems to serve as venues for fair public deliberation among diverse stakeholders with varying levels of socioeconomic status and power. While the former community school boards were originally intended to serve as mechanisms of professionalization by which schools would be freed from the corrupting influence of "ordinary politicians," they often in fact have fallen short of this ideal, especially in urban centers (Danzberger, 1994, p. 67). They have

been criticized for becoming mired down in special interest activity by board members and with becoming corrupting influences themselves (Danzberger, 1994). Segal notes that New York City's former community school boards carved their districts into "fiefdoms" where cronyism determined the distribution of resources and policy choices (Segal, 1997, p. 141). In this context, community stakeholders falling outside of the school board's local political power structure found it difficult to advocate for policy change.

It is possible that mayoral control itself could result in a more equitable distribution of power among stakeholders operating in these participatory settings. Archon Fung notes that systems intended to facilitate collaborative governance such as the CECs are often "inattentive to problems of powerlessness and domination" which limits the ability of less powerful parties to utilize these systems to improve the content and quality of public services (Fung & Wright, 2003, p. 259). Mayoral control may serve as a source of "countervailing power" for formerly marginalized stakeholders, as a mechanism that can "reduce, and perhaps even neutralize, the power-advantages of ordinarily powerful actors," allowing formerly marginalized parties to participate in these settings on a more equal basis (Fung & Wright, 2003, p. 260).

### **Conclusion**

Certainly, we must remain aware of the challenges and limits inherent in research on public participation in education or in other types of public organizations. Both scholars and practitioners can respectfully differ in their beliefs regarding the proper forms, roles, and goals of public participation as an administrative practice. As with other lines of public administration research, we face the dilemma of having to reconcile the "mutually incompatible values" of bureaucracy and democracy in the administration of public participation (Rosenbloom, 1983, p. 219). As a result, such research will inevitably lead to differences in interpretation and perspective.

Nevertheless, the findings in this study illustrate that public participation can serve as a useful tool for improving governance processes, even with the centralized administrative context of mayoral control. While there remains the perception that public participation is unrealistic and inefficient in today's complex society, this research shows that public participation can work and provide value for both citizens and administrators. But in order to extract this value, both citizens and administrators must be willing to recognize the social and

institutional constraints they face while simultaneously working together in good faith to produce policy and administrative change that is beneficial to the community whenever and wherever such opportunities exist.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Community Education Council 26, the council representing a northeastern Queens, NY school district, was included in the original sample for this research but is not included in this article due to space constraints. Moreover, the findings yielded from this case did not differ significantly from the case studies included in this article.

<sup>2</sup> *Constructivist mathematics* refers to a reform movement in mathematics education developed in the 1990s; it emphasized the importance of children constructing their own understanding of the principles of mathematics through experimentation and hands-on learning activities, rather than through learning preset problem-solving methods.