

Harvard Family Research Project



The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

Building Capacity for Public Engagement in Education Reform

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The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence: Building Capacity for Public Engagement in Education Reform

What Is Public Engagement for Public Education?

Within the wide spectrum of activities and initiatives that characterize family, school and community partnerships, public engagement efforts are among the most comprehensive and broad-based in focus and results. The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence - an independent, non-partisan group of citizens, parents and business people which has been generating widespread public support for education reform in Kentucky since 1980 - is one of the best known and most successful public engagement initiatives in the country. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform in its 1997 report *Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change* defines public engagement for public education as “a purposeful effort, starting in either the school system or the community, to build a collaborative constituency for change and improvement in schools” (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997, p. 16). Public engagement also involves “a process of educating, organizing, and energizing a community to play the role that only they can play to create really effective schools” (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997, p. 16).

Public engagement initiatives such as that of the Prichard Committee that have been sustained over time are achieving a variety of positive outcomes. These include improvements in teaching and learning; deeper parent and community involvement and trust in schools; increased financial, physical and human resources available to schools; and the development and support of important legislative and policy reform. None of these achievements, however, is made quickly. Successful engagement initiatives take time, much like all efforts to change complex organizations or institutions such as schools or school systems.

The Prichard Committee’s engagement initiatives take time because they do not focus simply on the content of school improvement. Instead, such initiatives build relationships with all stakeholders responsible for educational progress and create a process that will move people toward change. In this way, they seek to create dynamic partnerships based on common ground, candor, and mutual trust. This attention to ownership and process is one reason why so many people are optimistic about the potential of public engagement to catalyze enduring school improvements (Greider, 1993; Shirley, 1998). We know that perceived public crises such as news reports of mass numbers of failing students or hazardous school building conditions often are enough to galvanize interest and mobilize the voices diverse constituencies. But such problems usually do not sustain public involvement in the broader reform arena beyond the immediate issues. Rather, organizations must take intensive and sustained action to produce long-term public engagement.

The 1997 Annenberg report identifies three recognizable phases in the “life cycle” of engagement activities in their review of 26 engagement efforts:

1. **Coming together:** Starting conversation and dialogue; building trust and safe spaces.

2. **Moving forward:** Converting dialogue into concern-driven activity; reaching out beyond the core group.
3. **Sustaining momentum:** Building structures; developing and sustaining leadership; assessing and improving programs. (pp. 54-55)

This cycle of engagement provides a useful lens through which to consider the phases of the work of the Prichard Committee.

Education Reform in Kentucky: Nowhere to Go But Up

The state of Kentucky is in the midst of implementing one of the most sweeping and demanding educational reform efforts ever attempted in the United States, making school reform the most dominant Kentucky event of the last decade. Kentucky's history has been marked by consistently poor performance in education. The eastern Kentucky Appalachian region has been characterized as the most undereducated population in the U.S. In the 1980s, Kentucky ranked 50th in the nation in adult literacy and the percentage of adults with a high school diploma; 49th in percentage of college graduates; 42nd in per pupil expenditure; and 41st in pupil-teacher ratio. In 1983, the state was described by MIT economist David Birch as a Third World country with the nation's most uneducated work force (Parrish, 1990).

After decades of failed initiatives resulting from piecemeal proposals and limited political will, substantive change began in 1985 when 66 poor school districts sued the state, arguing that Kentucky's financing of schools was inadequate and inequitable. The lower court found glaring disparities in funding, salaries, materials, curricula, and class size. In a 1989 landmark decision, the state's Supreme Court declared Kentucky's entire system of common schools to be unconstitutional (*Rose v. Council for Better Education, Inc.*). As a result, the General Assembly was ordered to recreate, not just equalize, funding of the state's school system to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children.

In 1990, the General Assembly enacted a reform law that touched virtually every aspect of elementary and secondary education in the state. Two points distinguished Kentucky's reform plan from efforts in other states: First, while the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) set very high expectations and a vision that all children could be taught, it also provided the means – the policies, money, and other resources – needed to achieve them. Second, KERA was a comprehensive program of interconnected steps that required an extended period of time and deep commitment to become reality. No single part of Kentucky's school reforms were seen as stand-alone elements; each piece, it was believed, was needed to ensure success (Miller, 1990). KERA's mandates are as follows:

- decentralizing districts
- making schools accountable for student performance
- ensuring equitable funding
- developing assessments to measure school and student progress
- creating merged grades
- eliminating school-board nepotism
- providing extended school services
- starting school-based decision making councils
- putting technology in the classroom
- offering public preschool (Miller, 1990).

Michael Timpane, vice-president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching calls KERA "the most thorough and most coherently designed reform in the country" (Galuszka, 1997, p. 90).

Signs of Progress and Continuing Challenges

After several years of reform in Kentucky, compelling results are coming forth. Test scores of elementary school students have improved sharply, though older students are gaining at a much slower rate. More students are taking challenging courses, and many, although not all, schools that serve students at very high levels of poverty have shown they can educate those students as well as schools with the most affluent students.

Of particular significance is the fact that elementary students are improving in comparison with their counterparts in other states in reading, math, and writing test scores. The academic performance of Kentucky's students has moved the state up from the bottom tier to the middle range of state results. Kentucky's scores are now in the range of states such as Michigan, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. National test results in 1998, for example, showed only seven states with average scores significantly higher than Kentucky's in eighth-grade reading. The rate of improvement in fourth graders' math scores between 1992 and 1996 was exceeded by only eight states; and Kentucky was one of five states that improved significantly between 1992 and 1998 in fourth grade reading (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1997).

Although the progress of the reforms has been considerable, challenges remain. More schools in the poorest regions and schools serving minority students need to show academic gain. Other challenges remain in the area of reading instruction in the early grades so that all students enter middle school reading on grade level. Also, in the area of teacher preparation and professional development, there is a continuing need for teachers to master the academic content that students are expected to master if they are going to be effective in teaching that content.

The emerging picture of Kentucky's schools is attracting the attention of scholars, education policy experts, and other observers throughout the country. Kentucky's school reform is arguably one of the most intriguing and important initiatives in the nation's recent history. An indication of how others see the state's progress was provided in 1997 when Kentucky's school reform was named the winner of the Innovations in American Government Award by Harvard University and the Ford Foundation. The award Committee pointed out that the Kentucky reform effort has done an amazing job of getting the infrastructure of reform in place, as well as putting heavy responsibilities on citizens, parents, and business leaders to expand their commitment to schools, form alliances, demand improved academic achievement, and recognize that educators are not solely responsible for quality education.

The role of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence has been crucial in spearheading and providing leadership in both of these areas. It is the story of the Prichard Committee's history and evolution, which parallels the evolution of KERA, that will be the remaining focus here. Appendix B summarizes key transitional events in the life of the organization.

The First Decade

Coming Together and Moving Forward: The Prichard Committee as Reform Driver

In 1980, the Prichard Committee began a decade of work characterized by starting and sustaining conversation and dialogue within the Committee and throughout the state

related to education, building trust and alliances among diverse stakeholders, and converting dialogue into concern driven activity, which reached out beyond the core group. The Prichard Committee actually grew out of the Committee on Higher Education and Kentucky's Future that was convened by the Kentucky Council on Higher Education in 1980.

This Committee was initially conceived as an advisory group that would give the Council objective guidance by identifying critical issues likely to affect higher education during the 1980s. Robert F. Sexton, a council deputy executive director who later became the Prichard Committee's director, recruited 30 members from differing backgrounds, points of view and walks of life. A brilliant and charismatic lawyer named Ed Prichard was tapped to chair the Committee. Prichard's expression of the right and power of citizens and parents to make informed choices, his deep faith in human potential, and his infectious optimism became lasting and powerful values in the daily life of the Committee. Bob Sexton and Ed Prichard have both played central roles in the productivity and effectiveness of the Committee through their visionary and capable leadership, which for Sexton continues to this day and for Prichard ended with his death in 1984.

Due in part to Prichard's formidable strength of intellect and personality and in part to "the incredible mix of people, not just those normally on public Committees but also plain folks who cared about education, the Committee jelled quickly," according to an early member of the Prichard Committee. Chairman Prichard introduced a unifying vision early on. As member Pat Kafaglis describes, "Prich inspired us to believe in the old dream that education was the answer to the problem of poverty and, of course, of ignorance, and Prich kept the dream alive for all of us. His view of the power of education for all people as a kind of intellectual independence, the ability to think and speak for themselves and make choices in their family lives, in the community, and in the society at large provided a driving vision for the Committee's work. The members," she reported, "became more involved than in any other Committee I've worked with, and there's been many of those – everybody played an active role and all felt they were engaged in something of high importance" (Parrish, 1990, p. 7).

The Committee studied reports and publications, talked over their own ideas and spoke with teachers, administrators, and students in Kentucky and other states. The Committee's work captured the attention of the media and politicians, with proceedings reported on the nightly news. "All in all," said Vice Chair Dot Ridings, "these meetings were the start of people talking about education in Kentucky in recent history" (Parrish, 1990, p. 8).

In October 1981, the Committee's report entitled *In Pursuit of Excellence*, appeared in book form. The report recognized that excellence in higher education would require more state funds, but also that higher-education institutions should know that improved performance must result from increased financial resources. Much of the report was devoted to describing what improved performance might be like in the undergraduate, graduate, and professional realms.

The Committee did not shy away from controversy and recommended limiting admissions to some universities, de-emphasizing intercollegiate athletics, and eliminating some professional schools. Overall, the report called for reform, urged sacrifice, and gave the state a roadmap to a destination. Unlike other reports from other committees, *In Pursuit of Excellence* shook the political and educational establishment. The press greeted the report with great applause and a national education official called it "unquestionably the best report written by a lay group in three decades" (Parrish, 1990, p. 11).

The lack of legislative fiscal support for implementing the report's recommendations in 1982 was a pivotal event that caused the Committee to recreate its mandate and redirect its focus toward K-12 education reform. Members decided that they might have failed to cultivate the legislature enough, even though the Committee had not been created as an advocacy group. After the legislature rejected the Committee's recommendations, Committee members decided to become exactly that.

Following Prichard's vision of a role for citizens acting independently from the educational system, the members worked to keep the Committee going as a permanent voice of citizen volunteers with no connection to government. In 1983, members of the original committee created the current Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence as an independent, non-partisan group, expanding membership to 60 business leaders, concerned parents, and community activists from across the state and raising funds from private contributions to support the work.

No longer having a mandate from a higher authority, the Prichard Committee's leader, Bob Sexton, drafted a working paper entitled "What Must Be Done," which laid out three guiding premises for the Committee's work in K-12 reform advocacy:

1. ***Education is a seamless web:*** From their deliberations and research throughout the state, members had concluded that "effective educational improvement cannot take place in higher education alone or in elementary education alone. All levels of education must be improved" (Parrish, 1990, p. 18).
2. ***Focus on citizen involvement in education:*** The Committee decided that fueling citizen interest in education would become its chief activity. "We are firmly committed to the necessity of increased and deepened public involvement in and concern for quality education. It is often said that Kentuckians do not value education and that low expectations are rooted deeply in our history, our economic condition and our social structure. As citizens, we have concluded that thousands of people all across Kentucky share our belief that our children and our neighbor's children deserve a better future through better schools. We believe that the key is finding those people who value education highly and then arming them with knowledge and enthusiasm so that they can be effective" (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 1990, p. xix).
3. ***Focus on Legislative Action:*** In 1984, a series of education reform proposals again failed to pass the legislature. State senators and representatives said they did not enact the governor's tax-and-education package because they sensed no groundswell of support for it. In light of this legislative inertia, the Committee pledged to "find some way of showing the lawmakers that Kentuckians at the grassroots really wanted a better educational system" (Parrish, 1990, p. 19).

Turning Up the Fire – Seven Years of Public Alarm

As the reconstituted Committee began its work as an independent non-profit organization, it focused on three main areas of activity to drive educational reform in the state between 1983 and 1990. The group focused on identifying problems and recommendations for educational reform, writing a comprehensive report and publicizing its positions through the sponsorship of a statewide public forum and an extensive lobbying campaign. Beginning from the principle that Sexton expresses as "you have to decide what you're for" the Committee prepared a report summarizing its recommendations for K-12 reform. The 1985 report entitled *Path to a Larger Life* became widely influential, with many of its recommendations adopted within the 1990 KERA. Upon issuing the report, the Committee stated, "we believe that, with a little refinement and a few changes, the report's basic

recommendations and the hope it holds out for Kentucky schools will serve as a guide for the deliberations and the decisions ahead” (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 1990, p. xiv).

Much of the data for *Path to a Larger Life* was generated during a statewide “Town Forum,” which the Prichard Committee sponsored in 1984. In order to send a loud and clear message to the legislature, the Committee organized one evening of televised, simultaneous sessions on education through which 20,000 people participated in local discussions about the conditions of their schools. Every one of the 178 school districts across the state participated. What might have been an organizational and logistical nightmare was accomplished with relative ease because, as Sexton noted, “people jumped at the chance to be involved.”

As the basic theme of the forum was addressed – “What do you think schools should do?” – 6,000 individual comments were recorded, 15,000 individual written statements were collected, and more than 200 letters came directly to the Prichard Committee. In general, participants declared that they wanted high-quality academic programs that produced mastery of fundamental skills. They also wanted students to receive more individual attention, teachers to receive higher pay, less favoritism and politicking in the schools, more money for the schools, and closer relationships between parents and schools.

Committee member Pam Papka recalled that the Town Forums had been successful on two levels – they were big and they were vocal. “We never dreamed they would do what they did,” said member Pat Kafoglis. Member Pam Miller saw the forums as “the beginning of a tremendous groundswell which made it plain that the education-reform movement had more momentum than we thought” (Parrish, 1990, p. 21). By initiating action in communities across the state, the forums also brought about the founding of new kinds of local citizens’ organizations to work on improving schools.

The “Town Forum” was followed by a six-year public lobbying campaign, as Sexton describes, “to stir the pot, to turn the fire up under the burner so that education would be the hot topic.” This lobbying campaign included holding public forums and debates for gubernatorial candidates; organizing workshops for citizen activists; speaking to hundreds of local civic organizations; and sharing the Committee’s views and the views of the public with legislators and governors. As *Path to a Larger Life* (2nd edition) notes, partially as a result of the Committee’s work education became the central political issue from 1983 to 1988, capped by the Supreme Court decision of 1989 (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 1990).

Primarily in response to the citizen movement set in motion by the Town Forums, a special legislative session on education was convened during the summer of 1985. During the session Bob Sexton’s testimony presented specific recommendations of the Prichard Committee from its earlier report and the Town Forums to the legislature. This was the beginning of many years of Committee participation in the basic political ritual known as the legislative hearing at which its officers and staff were to become experienced practitioners. Each hearing provided media attention, and opportunities to circulate the legislative testimony.

Citizen Action Workshops: Bringing Reform to the People

In addition to its legislative work and public forums, in the late 1980s the Committee sponsored a series of initiatives focused on the development of still greater involvement of citizens in schools. The Committee believed that only an intensive investment of time and energy directly in schools, and the wave of opinion this could generate, could bring about the fundamental overall change still needed to give Kentucky a satisfactory educational

system. Hence, the Prichard Committee dedicated itself to what Wade Mountz, its new chair, called “a way of working together to cultivate the talents of active leadership” (Parrish, 1990, p. 34).

Early in 1987, the Committee launched a series of Citizen Action Workshops to offer instruction in practical techniques for organizing and leading citizens’ groups that would work for improved schools. Along with learning how to set goals and conduct meetings, panel discussions, and brainstorming sessions, participants were shown how to establish public relations, recruit allies, and build relationships. Other initiatives during this period included a “Better Schools Now” public relations campaign in which 100,000 citizens were asked to mail postcards to officials in the state capital. Two coalitions also formed. An Education Coalition of 10 educational organizations created by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and with strong Prichard Committee support, drafted a consensus program of reform. The Prichard Committee provided a structural home and organizational status for the core of involved people in every school district who had been asking the Committee to give them continuing support in their districts.

As KERA was enacted by the 1990 legislature, specific provisions of the reform act dealt with many of the Prichard Committee’s major concerns, in some cases going beyond Committee recommendations, in others not quite meeting the Committee’s hopes. Far from a quick fix, the new law included radical provisions allowing state government to yield control over budgets and courses of study to the local school systems. When asked about the role played by the Prichard Committee in creating the reform program, Kentucky’s Governor Wallace Wilkinson responded, “If it hadn’t been for them, this would never have happened” (Parrish, 1990, p. 44).

Commenting on its own work during the first decade, the Committee highlighted the following:

In all these recent years the greatest progress and change has been not in legislation enacted or in education budgets passed but in the attitudes and values of Kentucky’s people. Thousands of citizens all over Kentucky have stepped forward. A quiet revolution has moved through communities. When educational decisions are made, the public is asserting its right to be heard. Kentuckians have made the connection between improved schools and improved jobs – between improved schools and improved lives. In hundreds of communities our citizens have decided to do something about their own schools; they have joined on the “path to a larger life.” (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 1990, p. xiv)

Lessons from the First Decade

Three main themes emerge from the development of the Prichard Committee as a public engagement organization during the first decade of its work dedicated to driving the Kentucky education reform movement. First, the Committee has been adaptable and flexible in adjusting its specific activities and agenda to meet the needs of the reform effort. The Committee has tried to do whatever was necessary at every point, taking on a variety of tasks, while keeping the vision of increasing citizen and parent involvement and input as the cornerstone to guide all efforts.

Second, the Committee has constantly moved in the direction of widening participation both in terms of sheer numbers of people involved and in terms of building coalitions and alliances among stakeholders. Third, the Committee has worked at fostering public engagement at several levels simultaneously – at the statewide level, the local community level, and at the level of businesses, education professionals, and individual parents. The continuum of the Committee’s activities illustrates how the Committee simultaneously

increased the scope of activities, the participation of citizens and the levels of engagement.

Another strength contributing to the Committee's success is that it has been able to strategically position itself and be proactive in crafting its own message and niche. The Committee started with very high credibility, for example, in part because of Ed Prichard's role as the state's leading public intellectual and in part because Committee members were perceived as just being in it for the common good – a group made up entirely of citizens and taxpayers with no educators or representatives of educational organizations. As Sexton describes, "We were viewed very favorably by the media and described as a real force and a positive force by the opinion leaders."

The Transition Period: From Raising Cain to Being a Voice of Reason

Since the passage of KERA, the Prichard Committee's role has changed from reform driver to reform partner. As Sexton recalls, "there was a real challenge, moving from being against [bad schools] to being for reform. And it's easy to get derailed in the details. Since 1990, the challenge has been 'how do you help the implementation of the reform and be supportive, but maintain your independence? How do you avoid being seen just as the tool of the state bureaucracy?'" In response to these organizational challenges, the Committee developed two strategies to maintain autonomy and avoid getting derailed by the massive details of the reform program. These strategies include setting the agenda and focusing on the results of the mandates.

Strategies for Setting the Agenda and Keeping the Public Engaged

According to Bob Sexton, one way the Prichard Committee avoids being seen as a cheerleader for the reform is to balance the demands of being "called upon from the public side to explain things, to defend things, to speak on behalf of the reform while shaping what gets talked about, modulating the flow and the timing." The Committee has developed three specific strategies for setting the agenda and maintaining public engagement.

The first strategy is to buy time for the system to ingest the reforms by attempting to create a climate of patience. Sexton explains, "we've tried to influence the opinion leaders by reminding them of the long-term vision, to establish in every way we could the message that this is a 20- to 40-year process, and we do that by everything we say in the press and in our three to four hundred public appearances each year." This strategy includes working to ensure that the 'core' of public opinion and the core of the Committee's positions as a 'centrist organization' holds. When business people, for example, "become impatient we've been able to stay focused and help the core of influentials in the state prevail," stated one Prichard Committee member.

Sexton describes a second strategy in setting the agenda and maintaining public interest is "to rely a whole lot on our ability to get press stories on topics. We identify subjects that need pushing and either do reports on them or speak out in a way that gets public attention." Striking a balance between praise and criticism of educators and policy makers is another strategy used by the Committee in shaping the post-KERA agenda. This has created "mixed relationships" between the Committee and the legislature, governor, and educators which the Committee finds healthy.

Some educators, for example, have leveled charges of elitism while others appreciated the public support and advocacy for more education spending that the Committee offered.

With politicians, as Sexton describes, “we make a huge effort to give politicians credit. We operate on the principle that you get a lot done by giving people credit. But we are quite willing to criticize them and push them, and the way the press treats us – with editorials saying the Prichard Committee suggests this or that – helps do this. We’ve had some negative reactions from legislators, and that’s acceptable.”

Focusing on Results of the Mandates: Sticking to Principles and Values

To avoid getting involved with the nuts-and-bolts of implementing each of the 30 areas of the reform program, which the Committee sees as beyond its expertise and mandate, an explicit decision has been made to speak about and focus on the results of the innovations. Likewise, the Committee decided to operate at the level of principle and not detail except when necessary. Sexton illustrates how the Committee works using its position on preschool as an example:

We’ve talked about providing appropriate services to all children. We think that means everybody should be in preschool; every family should have adequate healthcare; we have to build the economy so people have jobs. But we’re not going to design a preschool. People say ‘does that mean expand Head Start, or fund private preschools, or state preschools?’ And we have said to the educators, the governor and the legislators they can work that out, put something on the table and we might comment on it. So when they came up with a system of state-funded preschools that supplemented Head Start and we said it’s fine if it works. We were able to focus on the results. This is our level: ‘Here’s the goal – every child should be in preschool; and here’s why it matters.’

As the Committee began the second phase of its work supporting and monitoring KERA implementation, it recommitted itself to operating and talking at the level of the original vision and principles of the Committee while remaining flexible regarding strategies and tactics. The Committee focused on and continually championed four values: 1) Every child in the state deserves adequate and equal opportunity including resources; 2) The state must invest in families as well as schools because schools cannot do it alone -- the social, community, and family condition is part of the solution; 3) The focus has to be on excellence and high expectations for every child -- everyone can do better; and 4) Education is important for a healthy body politic, for our culture, and for the economy. As Sexton notes, “these values translate into inclusion, excellence, results, and adequate spending and, once you have those, it’s not hard to stick with them.”

The Second Decade

Moving Forward and Sustaining Momentum: The Prichard Committee as Reform Partner

During the first decade, the identification of problems and solutions, advocacy, and mobilization were the Prichard Committee’s priorities that would be supplemented during the second decade of work by a specific focus on ensuring that academic standards drive improved teaching in the classroom. In order to move in the direction of directly affecting student achievement and student outcomes via public engagement, the Committee would eventually make a transition to an emphasis on parent education and empowerment.

The second phase of the Prichard Committee’s work, starting in 1990, involved further converting the dialogue on school reform into concern-driven activity reaching out beyond the core group, building structures, developing and sustaining leadership, and assessing

and improving programs. With the passage of KERA, the Committee faced a crossroads in deciding whether to continue or disband. As member Thomas Clark said, "It's one thing to get the law passed and another to get it implemented." The Committee rededicated itself to a new era of work by putting together a six-year plan to assist the implementation of the reform package.

The plan set out three broad areas of activity: 1) explaining the law's provisions to the public and helping set public expectations; 2) encouraging the implementation of the law at the local level; and 3) showing citizens how to monitor the activities of educators and how to take part in school-based decision making. Building on its commitment of the late 1980s to increase the investment of citizen time and energy directly in schools, all the Committee's initiatives during the 1990s evolved over time into a heavy and primary emphasis on assisting parents in becoming more engaged in education reform by expanding, supporting, and sustaining parent involvement.

In the last few years, the Committee has further defined optimal parent engagement as activities that directly or indirectly impact student achievement, and it has worked to move parent training and support in this direction. The specific Committee-sponsored initiatives that have contributed to these goals include: Community Committees for Education and their Community Support Coordinators; the Parents and Teachers Talking Together Sessions; and the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership and accompanying parent-school projects.

Keep the Faith Committees: Community Committees for Education

Community Committees for Education (CCEs) were organized in 1991 as local affiliates of the Prichard Committee that were charged with addressing the first of the Committee's three goals – communicating to the public what had happened and helping the public be supportive. Typical CCE activities included information forums and discussions, special meetings responding to local issues, training seminars, surveys, and speaker presentations. Most CCEs also implemented Parents and Teachers Talking Together sessions, as well as corresponding training sessions for facilitators, which were universally well received as ongoing opportunities for meaningful school-home dialogue. This ambitious effort by the Prichard Committee to mobilize support for reform implementation through local base-building seems to be unique to Kentucky and has therefore been an effort and a strategy that other statewide groups have studied.

Seven regional coordinators worked with about 70 small committees of local parents and volunteers that Sexton called "keep the faith committees." As he describes:

They were people like our members who were saying this reform is what we ought to be doing. Stick with it, get involved, run for school councils, pay attention to who's superintendent, read the newspaper and see how the schools' doing, look at the data. They were supposed to be saying all that stuff. And they got going. They functioned for about five years.

Challenges to the Success and Sustainability of the CCEs

Because specific local activities for the voluntary CCEs could not be required, an evaluation of the Committees conducted by the New York nonprofit Institute for Education and Social Policy found considerable variation in the CCEs activities. The range of different CCE approaches included several using a community development strategy, others functioning as advocacy groups or information providers, and still others serving primarily as issue forums. According to the evaluation, "the social, economic and political

dynamics of the local context were found to be the key variable affecting the extent and the limits of CCE effectiveness” (Fruchter & Jarvis, 1995, p. 3).

Resistance and Inertia: Local Politics and Nepotism. Contextual barriers identified included the resistance to reform and the entrenched power of local political elites, superintendents, and school administrators, and organized attack by conservative church and political groups.

The challenges that made it hard to maintain the CCE network included, according to Sexton, “difficulties figuring out exactly what to do and difficulties responding to controversy. They weren’t raising hell anymore – we were saying our group is in favor of patience. There’s not much sex appeal there. They also had to know more about the details of the reform than it was possible for the average lay citizen to know. And then the reform got controversial; it became very contentious fueled by the kind of conspiracy thinking that was present around the nation and by attacks by non-supporters. There were also the technical questions from the teachers. We had not had that kind of contention up through the passage of the reform. It became very hard for our local volunteers to handle. They were uncomfortable with a defensive posture.”

Challenges of Supporting CCE Leaders. Interestingly, all interview respondents gave very high marks to the support provided by the regional coordinators and the Prichard Committee staff who were described as responsive, informative, and supportive. Because of geographical distance, however, and the number of CCEs per coordinator, isolation and availability were reported as problematic for some. In addition, several CCE leaders mentioned that the regional coordinators might have been more effective if they had provided more specific direction to the CCE Leaders and more resources and support.

The Committee identified the main challenges to CCE effectiveness as keeping the volunteers involved once the reform was passed, inadequate preparation and training of community members, support in terms of intensity and guidance for activities promoting local school change. As Sexton explained, "We had to get them informed about the details of the reform so that they would be able to explain them to educators and other citizens."

New Directions: Investing Directly in Parents

In response to these challenges, the Prichard Committee restructured the work of the regional coordinators and committed itself to direct investment in parents by supporting, expanding, and sustaining parent involvement. They carried out this commitment via the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, Parent-School Projects, and Community Support Coordinators.

The Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership

After six years, the Prichard Committee realized that the CCEs had been useful in developing a cadre of more than 1,000 people around the state who were active reform allies and now knew more about the reform. But they also decided that they could not maintain the network due to logistical challenges. Besides, they thought a better approach would be to expand on the earlier concept of the Citizen Action Workshops to develop an institute to train individual parents to carry out specific student-achievement based projects with other parents. The training at the six-day Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership, initiated in 1997 under the leadership of Beverly Raimondo, had two themes: parent engagement and student achievement. The Commonwealth Institute included programs that helped parents better understand standards, student work, and information

on student achievement and how to foster it. According to Raimondo, the Commonwealth Institute was seen as "a process that develops a network of skilled and confident parents who are engaged as valued partners in a grassroots effort to improved Kentucky schools."

Based on research that clearly shows that parent involvement is the single most important factor in a student's educational success (Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Epstein, 1995), two goals of the Commonwealth Institute are: 1) to increase parent engagement in Kentucky public schools by providing a combination of information and skills for parents to use, and 2) to build a base for high academic achievement for Kentucky students by encouraging and training parents to become effective advocates for improved education and improved achievement for all students in their communities.

According to Sexton, the rationale for this emphasis is that "we needed parents to have some sense of what holding schools accountable and reaching standards could do for kids in the community. If parents know that, they can help the teachers understand it so it is not very subtle as an effort to influence teachers. We now have some parents who know more about the concept of this than their teachers."

Through an interactive, exciting curriculum built upon the themes of parent engagement and student achievement, the Commonwealth Institute seeks to:

1. Inform and train parents to understand and discuss Kentucky's standards-based education system, to use student data and student work in school decision making, and to take action to improve student achievement by designing and implementing a project that will involve teachers and other parents.
2. Motivate parents to be leaders in their public schools and communities who can bring parents and schools together, work to create family-friendly schools, and contribute to the pipeline of parents on school-based decision-making councils and school boards.
3. Recognize parents who have been active education volunteers and move them to the next level of involvement, and reach out to under-involved parents to support their participation (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 1999b).

To be selected for participation, Commonwealth Institute participants, called Fellows, must have or previously have had children in public schools; they must complete an application, submit letters of reference, and document their volunteer experiences; and they must commit to the six days of training and commit to staying involved with the Commonwealth Institute for two years after the training. Fellows are a self-selected group of parents who respond to recruitment announcements that the Prichard Committee circulates throughout its network. The workshop sequence helps Fellows understand matters related to instruction and learning; their rights to learn about and gain access to school operation; key elements of Kentucky's reform legislation and policy; where to go and whom to contact for information about educational and community resources; and specific ways to act as advocates for school reform.

The training benefits parents who are experienced advocates as well as those who are novices. However, for the first two cohorts, the Prichard Committee targeted parents who already had some experience working in public schools but were interested in the additional training and resources of the Commonwealth Institute to help the Fellows focus on high academic standards, exemplary teaching, and reaching out to parents who are less involved.

Each year, 200 Fellows attend regional institutes, which include three two-day sessions and a statewide conference of all participants of the Commonwealth Institute. Fellows have included people from all socioeconomic backgrounds, including truck drivers, retail clerks, a mail carrier, retirees, grandparents, substitute teachers, tutors, classroom aides, day care operators, small business owners, a nurse, an accountant, a director of religious education, stay-at-home mothers, full-time volunteers, doctors, and lawyers. Tuition, meals, and lodging are free to Fellows.

The total budget for the Commonwealth Institute and all follow-up community and school projects is \$1.3 million per year. Financial support for the planning and implementation of the Commonwealth Institute currently comes from seven different foundations. Additional financial support from Kentucky businesses and individuals is necessary to defray the expenses of each participant.

During the Commonwealth Institute, Fellows work together to gather new knowledge and skills, to build on their own experiences as volunteers. Through hands-on activities, group participation, and homework assignments, they learn what is happening in Kentucky's public schools and how to reach out to other parents in their communities. The curriculum includes leadership training, group process skills, and organizing strategies. After graduating from the Commonwealth Institute, Fellows are brought together in regional groups to share their knowledge and experiences. Fellows are supported and assisted in carrying out their projects and other local activities by the Prichard Committee's regional support coordinators and by PTA volunteers.

Although the Commonwealth Institute is still a very new initiative, its successes to date include a cohort of 476 Fellows and 225 Fellows who will complete their training in fall of 2000. These graduate Fellows are parent activists who are committed to the reform principles and understand enough to influence school reform in their communities. Further, these Fellows are focused on student achievement. Sexton observes, "It might not be the way policy people would talk about it, but what they talk about is what the kids are learning, or they talk about how the school leaves certain kids out; they talk about school data and how people are teaching."

Parent-School Projects

The idea of an army of engaged parents reaching other parents is implemented when Fellows return to their communities and initiate projects related to student achievement. The Parent-School Project is the most promising and the most challenging component of the Commonwealth Institute. It is promising because of the potential for significant collective impact on achievement, but challenging because of the support, resources, and strategies needed to counter Fellows' isolation and inexperience.

The first few cohorts of parents that went through the Commonwealth Institute's training were given great autonomy in designing and implementing their projects. This proved challenging to the some of parents' capacities to independently organize and implement these projects in school environments that were often less than supportive. Over the past two years, the Commonwealth Institute has been trying to increase support and standardize and develop model projects, giving parents more specific and realistic projects to undertake. Another goal was to focus the parent work more directly on student achievement. The staff has also provided cohorts of parents with "parent friendly" achievement data as one tool for achieving this goal. The Commonwealth Institute now teaches parents how to read a detailed breakdown of assessment on their schools' achievement data. The data reports test scores for each subject over time and how these scores break down by sex and ethnicity. The idea is that if parents can learn to work with disaggregated data to identify learning gaps and a particular group is found to need extra

attention, parents can ask for it or propose ways to address student needs. Fellows are also provided with a project scoring guide that helps them focus on improving achievement, involving more parents, and creating a lasting impact as the criteria for shaping their project that gets graded as either distinguished, proficient, apprentice, or novice in each of these areas (Henderson, Jones, & Raimondo, 1999).

Parents have been engaged in a variety of projects in their children's schools that are connected to student achievement. Community support coordinators have collected many examples over the past several years. The four sample projects illustrate the work of three 1998 Fellows.

Four Sample Parent-School Projects

- In one elementary school, Fellow Amy Polk wrote a curriculum guide for kindergarten after learning that her son's school provided no information about the lessons he would cover throughout the year. Polk sponsored a meeting to share this information with other parents; this year she is working with other parents to write curriculum guides for each grade level of the school.
- At Wingo Elementary School, Fellow Katie Franklin started a drama club to address the problem of low attendance and performance rates of disadvantaged students. In order to demonstrate the importance of high achievement, Franklin required all participants to maintain at least a C average. Parents are involved, most for the first time, applying makeup, sewing costumes, and making sure their children attend practices. Franklin now works with other parents to expand the club to the older grades and collaborates with teachers to track the academic progress of participating students.
- At one high school, there were considerable gender differences in test scores, yet there was no mention of the disaggregated data in the school's Needs Assessment Summary. A 1998 Fellow responded by creating a partnership between school, parents, and other community members to work toward eliminating these performance gaps. His other goals were to create a tradition of discussing performance gaps and seek shared solutions; to develop a systematic plan to address learning gaps; and to actively involve parents in implementing those plan components each year.
- In one middle school, only 20 percent of students met state standards in arts and humanities. To address this issue, another Fellow created a project to increase parent and teacher knowledge of the arts and humanities core content and how the school could implement these standards. Another goal was to have 40 percent of the students meet state standards in arts and humanities as shown by 2003. (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 1999a)

Interim Evaluation: Parents as Learners and Leaders

The Pew Charitable Trust sponsored an interim evaluation of the Commonwealth Institute's 1998 cohort. The evaluation assessed the Institute's primary goals of improving student achievement, parental involvement, and leadership in school reform by examining changes in the schools that could be attributed to Fellows' efforts. The evaluation focuses on building the capacity of parents and developing reform leadership among parents, which have been identified as key aspects of the Commonwealth Institute's effectiveness. Building the capacity of parents is defined as the Institute's impact on parents' knowledge of school reform and on their ability to carry out school reform advocacy activities in their communities. Reform leadership is defined as the Institute's impact on parents' ability to influence school staff, operations, and policy through their Parent-School Projects and their ability to work with teachers and other parents to improve student achievement (Corbett & Wilson, 1999)

The Commonwealth Institute promotes the development of Fellows as learners in four categories: 1) understanding standards-based education, 2) exercising leadership and group facilitation, 3) enhancing parent involvement, and 4) conducting project design. Reactions to the training sessions were assessed via survey questions, which probed how much parents' knowledge had increased in each area, how comfortable they were in applying that knowledge in conversations and activities in their local schools, and how important they felt that knowledge was.

Fellows' gave high ratings to the knowledge building aspect of the training for all four key content categories: understanding standards-based education, exercising leadership and group facilitation, enhancing parent involvement, and conducting project activities. There was no appreciable difference in knowledge gain between Fellows with less education and those with more, between Fellows who served on school councils and those who had not, or between those from different geographical regions. This suggests that the workshops were equally effective in introducing Fellows to new content, extending their understanding of more familiar topics, and reinforcing information they already knew. Fellows made clear that the process the Commonwealth Institute used to present the information, with frequent opportunities for discussion with other participants, was noteworthy for them.

With regard to their comfort in applying new knowledge in their work, Fellows indicated they were quite comfortable with all four knowledge categories. They were less comfortable, however, applying their knowledge of the standards-based system than about the other three content areas, citing difficulties with the jargon of reform talk. Their self-reported comfort level was a function of both a boost in self-confidence they obtained during the workshop and the addition of new skills to their repertoire.

The final area assessed was whether the information gained was relevant to the Fellows' own situations. In this area, Fellows' responses were even more positive. The training also touched them in other important ways: their self-confidence as learners and advocates grew, their status as legitimate players in the education arena was enhanced, and their networking capabilities were broadened, especially in knowing where to turn for information and other resources. Speaking for the vast majority of their peers, two Fellows gave a ringing endorsement to their workshop experiences:

Having been involved in schools for 12 years, I have been to many dull, boring, ineffective meetings that don't accomplish anything. Prichard is different. Every meeting I went to I came away excited about what I had learned. There is something empowering about meeting with a whole group of people who are there for the same reason: They care about kids and want to make a difference in a community. I could not have done any of this without them.

I go to a lot of training meetings for my job. During those six days at the Commonwealth Institute, not one time did I ever have that “wake-up-in-morning dread” about having to go. It was all very well organized and facilitated. We received lots of new information, but we also had time to talk about it and absorb it. They also blended in some fun.

Although KERA had provided for school-based decision-making councils as one way to promote parent leadership, the Prichard Committee determined early on that this open door created only a *possibility* of parent influence in school policy; it did not ensure that parents would be heard and heeded, nor did it guarantee that this forum would delve into student learning in any substantial way. Given the reality of the school-based councils, the Commonwealth Institute focused on structuring other situations in which school staff and community members could engage one another in work relevant to promoting student achievement.

The Commonwealth Institute promoted the development of parents as leaders by expecting them to begin via two activities: Parents and Teachers Talking Together (PT3) and the Parent-School Projects. Parents and Teachers Talking Together was to be a guided, open-ended discussion about school needs, with a definite emphasis on students. The Parent-School Project, which could be the product of this discussion, was supposed to establish one’s presence in the school as an advocate for higher achievement for all students (not just one’s own child) and as a facilitator of increased parent involvement in the school. There was an additional goal that the project become sustainable in the school.

According to survey results, parents felt well prepared to return home and carry out discussion sessions. Spending one-half a workshop day on this strategy – including actually role-playing a mock discussion and carefully exploring skills necessary to make it a success, served them well. Among survey respondents, two out of three said they actually carried out such a discussion in their community during the first year. For the most part, parents felt that these exchanges were successful. At a minimum, they resulted in better communication among parents and teachers and in a better understanding of where each stood on important school matters. In many cases, they resulted in tangible outcomes such as new policies, programs, or facility changes. Parents also reported a growing awareness of the amount of work that had to go into preparing parents and school staff in order for leadership activities to be productive. This finding cut across all categories of responses.

When asked to describe the purpose of their projects, three-fourths of the Fellows specifically mentioned improving student achievement and increasing parent involvement. The high number who used nearly identical language indicates a commonly shared understanding of the Fellows’ role. Projects fell into two general categories. First, projects that successfully combined all three project goals (i.e., advocating for student achievement, facilitating parent involvement and creating a sustainable project in the school) usually focused the project content on a student skill, and the project’s implementation on parents’ learning about and reinforcing this skill in children. Many of these projects made their way into the consolidated plan of the school that formally committed the school to continuing the activity.

The second type of project concentrated on informing parents. Fellows argued that their efforts would indirectly affect student learning via parents who would be better informed about instruction, curriculum, and assessment via project-produced newsletters, handbooks, and brochures. Other projects sought to increase the number of parents in the

school through volunteer programs or making the school environment more welcoming. Another focus was projects that helped students and parents successfully navigate the transition from one level of schooling to another, so that achievement would not suffer due to school change. Yet another group of projects worked to facilitate achievement via building or technology improvements, promoting safe schools, or boosting staff or student morale.

Fellows have a two-year time frame to implement their projects and were in various stages of project implementation. First, based on their training, Fellows write a plan of action that they will implement in their respective communities. Next, they review the project with the community support coordinators, and receive suggestions and approval from them. Fellows then turn to the formidable task of implementing the idea. This, they have stressed, has not come easily. The Fellows often tread into territory where few parents have ventured, so no one has paved the way for them to exercise leadership. Because of this, the challenges of access and support have been great. These challenges are detailed below along with the Prichard Committee's current and planned responses to those challenges.

The Commonwealth Institute and Conway Middle School

Conway Middle School in Jefferson County is one example of a school that embodies the capacity to deal with the many potential challenges of involving parents. These challenges include sending a team, including the principal, PTA President, teachers, and parents to the Commonwealth Institute. The school's answer to the question "What is the proper role for parents in a public school?" is "Partnership, shared responsibility, and feeling that they have a say in what's going on." Principal Steve St. Clair answers the question "Is parent involvement always risky?" in this way:

No. But we're trying things that are different, that are out of people's comfort zones. Anytime you do things with parents that are outside the traditional PTA activities – like looking at student work together, for example, you run the risk of a parent saying, "You're not doing a good job. My kid can do better than this. That teacher is doing better than that other teacher."

PTA President Marsha Kennison explains how the emphasis of PTA activities has changed as a result of the Commonwealth Institute: "Our PTA's mandate is to help with student achievement. We're asking our members to step out of the traditional box and get involved with learning in our school." Teacher Glenda Mellick explains that for her, school reform is about partnership with parents. She emphasizes that "When they become partners, they see themselves as equals. Some other teachers, though, are still at the 'better communications' stage and may not have given much thought yet to the deeper implications of shared responsibility."

As a result of parent and staff projects growing out of participation in the Commonwealth Institute, many changes have occurred at Conway. Perhaps most important among them is the change in the public perception of the school. Four years ago, Conway had the lowest student "holding" rate in the district, meaning that more students transferred out of Conway every year than out of any other school in the district. This situation has been reversed and Conway now has a waiting list of students interested in transferring into the school. A sample of other positive outcomes includes:

- A parent now chairs the school council instead of the principal.
- The school has reaching out meetings for parents in which they spend a morning examining student work and discuss with teachers how they assess student work.

- Parents provide one-on-one academic tutoring within the school day.
- Showcase nights are held so students can demonstrate their learning to parents.
- The principal spends time building teachers' skills, mentoring parent leaders, building a team to take responsibility for student success, and modeling involvement with parents for teachers.
- There are now student-led parent-teacher conferences in which students discuss their learning needs and strengths based on their actual school work.

This combination of initiatives is a good example of changes that can happen within a school environment that is dedicated to student achievement. However, many other challenges still face the Prichard Committee and the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2000).

Challenges to Success and Sustainability

Building the capacity of parent leaders to become effective advocates for improved education represents a long-term human resource investment. In promoting leadership development, the Prichard Committee navigates through some challenges in recruiting and supporting parent leaders and in demonstrating the impact of Fellows' work on student achievement.

Working with the Diversity of Fellows

Although the Prichard Committee canvasses a wide range of people and organizations, connects with superintendents, and encourages community support coordinators to use their local contacts to recruit participants, Prichard Committee staff continue to face the challenge of having a very diverse pool of participants. One struggle is finding parents who are willing and able to volunteer a large amount of time to Commonwealth Institute activities and ensuring they reach out to parents who traditionally have not been very active in their children's schools. The concern is that these parents have little in common with each other and that, given the nomination criteria, the former group would be over-represented in the Institute. Commonwealth Institute staff members have struggled with this issue for some time, and attempted to address this challenge by developing a standardized assessment to identify "good" candidates. However, this effort was abandoned when it was limited in its success and it was realized that the qualities of "good" candidates were too diverse and idiosyncratic for to be defined in this way.

Fellows' self-reports from the first two cohorts show that they were an extremely active group of parents, many of whom had already taken on leadership roles in their schools and communities. These Fellows had children in schools that were moderately more wealthy than others in the state and slightly higher performing. One major challenge for the Commonwealth Institute as it moves forward is to ensure that its Fellows are representative of parents in the state. It is important that each cohort includes parents from the full range of school settings in Kentucky to ensure that historically under performing schools are not excluded from the benefit of Fellows' efforts. The Commonwealth Institute has considered how to address the reality that the factors that diminish disadvantaged parents' visibility in school settings in the first place also hinders their enacting the more extensive role that the Institute envisions. More recently, the Commonwealth Institute has intentionally focused on already involved parents who have the capacity and potential to engage hard to reach parents in their communities. This strategy has been a success thus far.

Another strategy explored by the Prichard Committee is for the Commonwealth Institute to target certain communities that have schools with large numbers of low-achieving students and with traditionally under-served populations. Via this targeted approach, the Prichard Committee has been able to increase socioeconomic diversity of its Fellows. Fifty percent of the cohorts are parents who work outside the home. At the same time, the Prichard Committee has gained the participation of parents who may be illiterate but are committed to the Commonwealth Institute's goals. The Prichard Committee has also made strides in promoting the involvement of minority parents. While minority groups make up only 8 percent of the state population, 14 percent of the Fellows were minority between 1997 and 1999. Eighteen percent of the fall 2000 cohort will be minority. Providing weekend trainings, daycare to participants, and writing letters to applicants' employers asking for their cooperation have all helped to increase the socioeconomic and ethnic diversity of the Fellows.

Connecting Changes in Student Achievement to Fellows' Efforts

At this point in the Commonwealth Institute's history, with one third of Fellows' projects already implemented, one third approved, and another third in the planning stage, it is not yet possible to gather a complete picture of the Institute's impact on public schools. There is an opportunity at this point, however, to reflect carefully on how to view and capture its outcomes. Fellows have chosen both direct and indirect routes to improve achievement via their projects. The emphasis on student achievement is evolving rapidly within the goals of the Commonwealth Institute. Teachers in Kentucky have mixed views regarding the accountability system as mandated by KERA. One version of the state test has been modified. Despite this setback, student achievement data still play a powerful role for the Prichard Committee in the effort to connect parents to local school change. Yet, there are unanswered questions for the Prichard Committee that will pose challenges well into the new millennium. Is the connection to achievement expected to be a substantial one, resulting in measurable differences in student performance? Is it more of a symbolic one, a shared value used to judge the inherent worthiness of an action more than its actual impact?

Both tracks are fraught with difficulties. Even among Fellows whose projects have a direct connection to student achievement, it is difficult to determine whether a positive effect was a result of the parents' work. This is a not just a challenge for the Prichard Committee, but rather a problem of the larger educational arena. The Prichard Committee, educators in Kentucky, and researchers around the nation know that it is very difficult to attribute the mostly modest rise and fall of student achievement test scores to a parent initiative or any particular initiative for that matter. Yet, the Prichard Committee and its major supporters and funders remain committed to the idea of parent engagement and the role that parents' examination of achievement data can play in improving education.

The other approach, viewing achievement as a core value of the participants' work but not as a measurable result, continues to be a view that the Prichard Committee supports even though this position may be criticized as lacking accountability. Among parents, however, using achievement more symbolically than substantively has considerable credibility. As long as an activity has value as something positive for students, then parents are likely to lend their support.

One recommendation might be for the Commonwealth Institute to consider holding itself accountable by creating intermediate benchmarks more closely connected to what Fellows say and do in the public schools. School results would then be more closely linked to the parents' influence. Two such measures might include: Are the Fellows' schools more open to parental influence in educational matters than they were in previous years?

And Are the Fellows' schools better off for having had parent leaders active in their buildings? Measures such as these take into account both the process of trying to exert leadership in a school and the outcomes of exerting that leadership.

Implementing a Consolidated Plan

The current expectation for projects is based on identified school needs, written in the style of a consolidated plan, and addressing achievement, parental involvement, and sustainability goals. This formal expectation may not fit well with the daily circumstances of all volunteer participants and the idiosyncratic circumstances of their communities. In addition, regardless of the Fellows' progress with their projects, they all have to spend considerable time and energy on "stage setting" activities to make their schools more amenable to their projects. These stage setting activities – which involve navigating the organizational, political, cultural, and educational terrain of schools and communities to pave the way for subsequent activities – have outcomes of their own along the way to project completion. Because the preparatory activities already take parents well beyond the role they have traditionally played in schools, they are in themselves evidence of new reform leadership for which the Prichard Committee should be recognized. Still, it is unclear whether parents have enough strategies, support, or energy to address the resistance among school staff that they may encounter.

Supporting Parent Leaders

The difficulty of parents taking on educational leadership roles in schools cannot be overstated. While the Commonwealth Institute expects Fellows to exert noticeable influence on schools, many school staff do not share that expectation. A major recurring topic in interviews with Commonwealth Institute Fellows concerns the uphill battle they face as parents in establishing a relationship with a school and in enlisting the efforts of other parents. Three common remarks concern: 1) lack of time to do the Commonwealth Institute activities; 2) concern that schools do not welcome their involvement; and 3) as was the case for the earlier CCEs – awareness of how local politics, economics, and culture complicate the change process. More personally, community support coordinators have expressed the difficulty of separating private life from the work of the Commonwealth Institute, a problem endemic with individuals who work mainly from home. Commonwealth Institute leadership has responded to many of these challenges by surveying staff about their needs, holding focus groups, offering stress reduction workshops, and strategizing with consultants. Through the technical assistance process, under the contract with the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Dissemination Project, the Harvard Family Research Project has tried to respond to many of the Commonwealth Institute's needs by providing training and support activities, including: A Needs and Resource Assessment, putting together Technical Assistance Packages (TAPS) on hard-to-reach families, and additional training on coaching, mentoring, and communicating with parents, managing and prioritizing work, community organizing, and coalition-building strategies.

Discomfort for the Fellows comes partly from lack of content knowledge about how to proceed, but also from realistic knowledge of the contexts they are trying to change. With the principal as gatekeeper, a major first task in overcoming school resistance is to obtain the principal's support and overcome the perception that the discussion sessions or projects will be unproductive, unnecessary, or threatening. The Fellows' transition from the role of learner to that of leader requires considerable support in the field. This requires the Commonwealth Institute to continue providing the careful thought and design that was present in the initial training. Another approach that has great potential is recruiting teams of parents and school staff from targeted communities. The second task would involve

having current Commonwealth Institute Fellows in a specific community recruit new Fellows to the training. This strategy is essential for the intense mentoring and capacity building needed to build strong community leaders. Furthermore, it holds great promise for the work that has already begun in the urban neighborhoods of Louisville as a result of a Clark Grant.

The Role of Community Support Coordinators

The Fellows' success in implementing their projects and providing local leadership depends on the quality and intensity of ongoing support provided by the Prichard Committee after graduation. The Prichard Committee reorganized its community support staff (formerly regional coordinators) by giving them the expanded responsibility of being resources for Commonwealth Institute participants and becoming program coordinators. These Community Support Coordinators (CSC) serve as faculty members and hosts for the Commonwealth Institute regional sessions; they help to write the Institute's curriculum and plan sessions; and they work with Fellows when they return to their communities to implement their Parent-School Projects. The CSCs also oversee Parents and Teachers Talking Together sessions, train members of school-based decision-making councils, and serve as local representatives of the Prichard Committee on behalf of its members, volunteers, and others. (See Appendix B.)

Most Fellows have reported that access to the community support coordinators (CSC) has been essential to their perseverance and completion of projects. However, each CSC has a vast geographical area to cover and making frequent contacts with parents has proved demanding. Some CSCs have used e-mail, faxes, and regular phone contacts, but the general feeling is that face-to-face meetings are necessary to sustain parent motivation and overcome feelings of isolation.

Fellows have identified three areas of support that have been particularly important to them:

1. Motivating and encouraging Fellows to keep up their efforts in the schools: coordinator as cheerleader.
2. Facilitating school activities, reacting to ideas, making suggestions about possibilities, and being available to respond to questions: coordinator as technical assistance agent.
3. Serving as connection points to other Fellows, information, and other human resources: coordinator as communicator.

In short, to provide more support to the Fellows, the Prichard Committee must give attention to the professional development of the community support coordinators. Challenges related to the community support coordinators include creating a support system for them to develop their work in the field; this support includes receiving ongoing mentoring while they in turn mentor Fellows who work with parents. If this seamless web of support could be supported financially by the Commonwealth Institute, isolation, stress, and termination of fieldwork may lessen due to an intentional emphasis on ongoing development.

Conclusion: The Prichard Committee and the 21st Century

What is the future of the Prichard Committee and the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership? The Committee sees a worst case and a best case scenario. In the worst case situation, if the Commonwealth Institute cannot be maintained past its current funding period, the Committee will have mobilized and trained 600 or 700 people. One funding possibility is for the Prichard Committee to convince local school districts to underwrite the cost of the Commonwealth Institute's training. However, Sexton notes that the Prichard Committee leadership is justifiably concerned that the Commonwealth Institute could lose its autonomy and position to speak critically about the public schools.

In the best case situation, in the future, the Committee will build alliances with local community organizations to carry on the training using Commonwealth Institute graduates as trainers. As far as the Committee itself goes, according to Sexton, "we've never seen ourselves as a permanent organization. We don't provide services. We are a citizens' lobbying group; and theoretically a citizens' lobbying group goes out of business. So we see ourselves as having come together to get a job done." Regardless of which path the Prichard Committee takes in the future, clearly, their work in public engagement will leave a indelible mark on education reform in this country and improve the life prospects of Kentucky citizens for generations to come.

Research Method

This case study is based on various data sources collected in 1998-1999. It draws upon an extensive document base that includes the Prichard Committee marketing and training materials, news and evaluation reports, and books and journal articles.

Because the case study was part of a technical assistance process supported by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, additional information was obtained from observation and participation in training sessions. Formal interviews and focus groups were held with Prichard Committee directors and staff. The Prichard Committee also gave presentations at the annual grantee meeting of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The transcriptions and notes from these meetings provided data sources as well. Multiple drafts of the case study were shared with Robert Sexton and Beverly Raimondo to assure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the information presented.

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Appendix A: Case Study Summary of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

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URL: <http://www.prichardcommittee.org>

Brief History

Founded in 1983, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence is an independent, non-partisan organization of Kentucky parents and citizens whose mission is to give citizens a voice in education reform efforts. The Prichard Committee advocates for every student's success; informs the public, legislators, governors, and other education officials; and mobilizes local parents and citizens.

Number of Sites

Two hundred parents throughout Kentucky participate in the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership annually.

Sources of Funding

Primary support for the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership comes from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The Commonwealth Institute receives additional funds from foundations, corporations, and personal donations from both within Kentucky and nationally.

The Prichard Committee provides primary sponsorship of the Commonwealth Institute. The Institute is also sponsored by the Kentucky Congress of Parents and Teachers and the Association of Older Kentuckians.

Operating Budget

The Commonwealth Institute's operating budget is \$1.3 million.

Organization

Beverly N. Raimondo, Director, oversees operations of the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership with support from Robert Sexton, Executive Director of the Prichard Committee, and Cindy Heine, Associate Executive Director. Additional staff members of the Commonwealth Institute include Kerry Zack, Project Coordinator, and Rene Buck, Administrative Assistant. Seven regional community support coordinators and a community support consultant assist participants with their local activities.

Description of Training

The Prichard Committee's Commonwealth Institute, formed in response to the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act, trains parents for leadership roles. With a focus on standards and assessment, parents learn how to use test results to improve student achievement. The curriculum builds parents' capacity to more effectively advocate for students' success by: providing information and strategies on ways to expand their role in their children's education and the larger education community; training them to assume leadership roles and build their confidence; and increasing their understanding of Kentucky's standards-based education system and what it requires of schools and teachers. Participants conduct their own projects to involve other parents and increase student achievement.

Technical Assistance Services

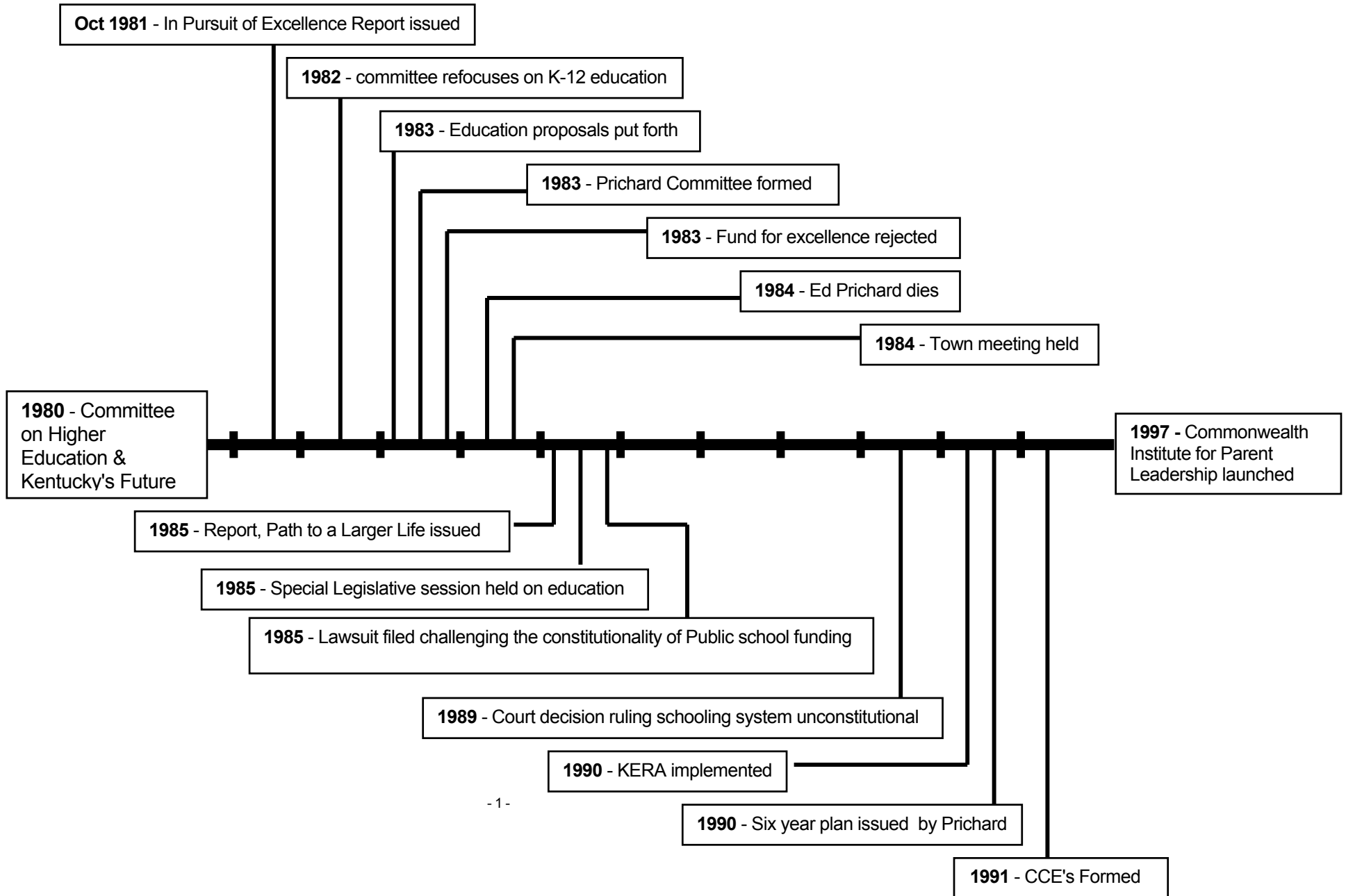
In addition to a statewide conference of all participants, the Institute includes three two-day sessions that are held in each of seven geographic regions of the state. The cost of participants' tuition, meals, and lodging is provided. After training, regional staff members of the Prichard Committee and PTA volunteers assist participants with their local activities. The Institute also convenes graduates to share their experiences.

Numerous publications include guidebooks on school-based decision making and school law, a quarterly newsletter, and a monthly newspaper column. There is also a toll-free telephone line open for questions and interactive Web site.

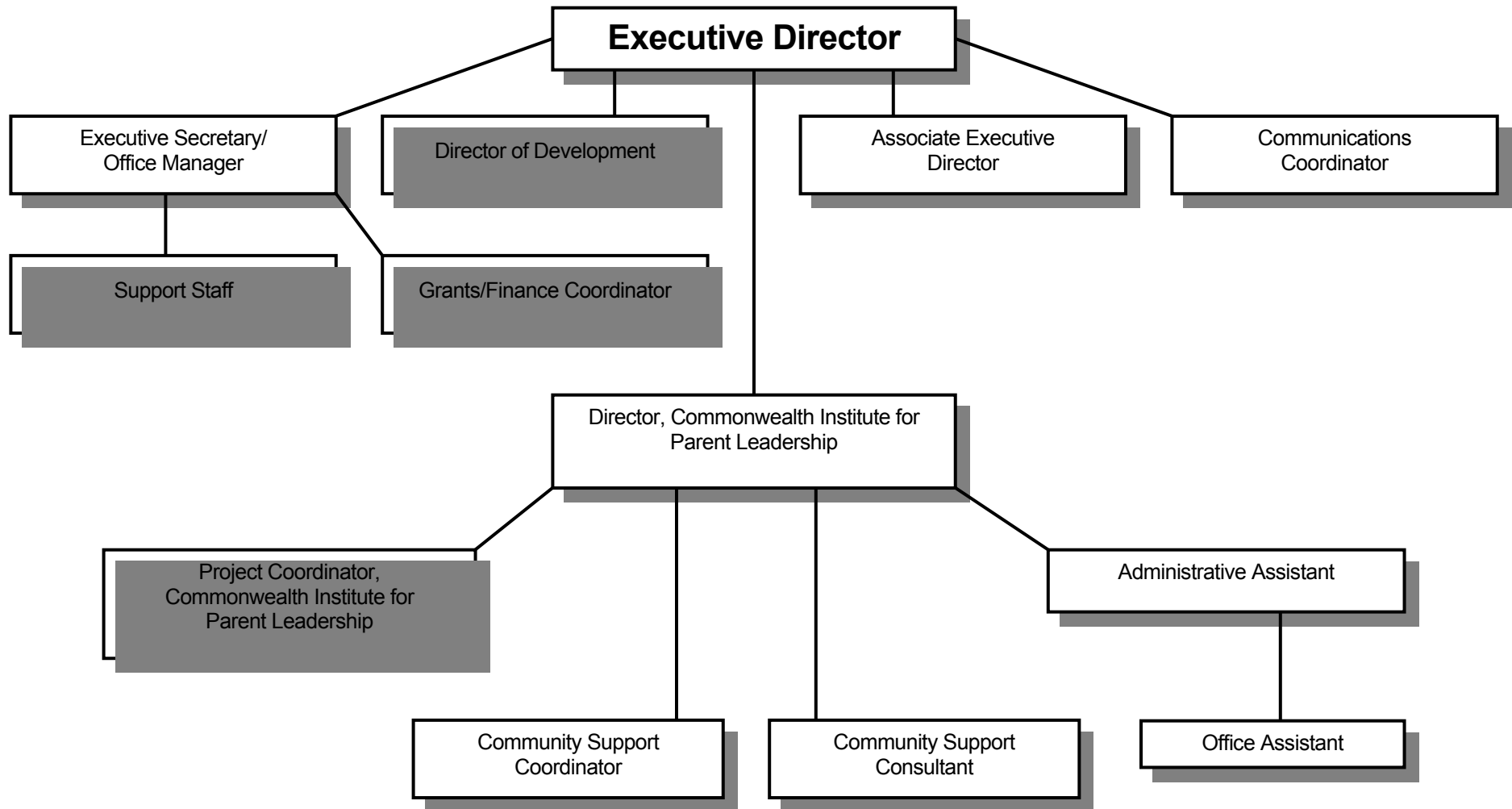
Evaluation

Several funders support an external evaluation of the Commonwealth Institute

Appendix B: History of the Prichard Committee



Appendix C: Prichard Committee Staff Organizational Chart



Contributors

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Authors

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