

What is an Advisory Council?

Chapter 7: Advisory Councils

Since the beginning of the Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) pilot programs in 1974, advisory councils have been required by law. According to Minnesota Statute 121.882 (1984), the school board of any district establishing or expanding an early childhood family education program "shall appoint an advisory council for the area in which the program is provided. A majority of the council shall be parents participating in the program. The council shall assist the board in developing, planning, and monitoring the early childhood family education program. The council shall report to the school board and the community education advisory council."

Advisory councils are designed to give advice and counsel as their name implies. They differ from boards in that they have no legal authority for administering the business matters of the program and thus are not responsible for budgets, hiring, firing, or policy setting. This is not to say that councils are not as important or valuable as boards; they simply have different roles. Early Childhood Family Education Advisory Councils perform a variety of valuable functions as described in this chapter.

Who is on an Advisory Council? Which Groups Should be Represented?

The composition of an advisory council can vary greatly, but the majority of members must always be parents active in the program. As long as they have this parent majority, advisory councils can be jointly formed with those for other early childhood programs, such as School Readiness, or have cross representation with site-based councils. The advisory council should meet at least four times per year and include a majority of parents, supplemented by local community professional or agency representatives who offer technical input and guidance. If needed, parent subcommittees can also meet monthly or more as needed to plan fundraisers and program operations. Although many Early Childhood Family Education programs do not have advisory council bylaws, some school districts find them helpful. Free child care should always be provided for advisory council meetings.

Parent members who comprise the majority of the advisory council should, if possible, reflect the demographics of parents in the community and may include both fathers and mothers as follows:

- Single parents
- Parents from all income levels
- Parents of children from all age groups: one-, two-, three- and four-year-olds, and newborns
- Parents from all attendance areas of the school district
- Rural, suburban, and urban parents if school district includes these areas
- Parents who are working outside the home, as well as parents who work primarily in the home.

It may be difficult to recruit fathers for the advisory council; however, they can be a tremendous asset to the program. Parents with business, budgeting and fundraising backgrounds are valuable council members. It is vital that council membership be representative of all the income levels in the community so that the council does not become either a "poverty program" or an "elite group of parents." Finally, it is essential that single parents, nontraditional families, and parents who work outside the home be represented so that their programming needs are considered in planning and evaluation.

The professional or agency representatives on the council will vary with the local community structure and the program's need for input. Typical professional members could include some of the following:

- School district administrator
- Elementary counselor/social worker
- Kindergarten teacher
- Head Start director/parent involvement staff person
- Clergy member
- Director of child care or early childhood program
- Public health nurse
- Area council PTA/PTSA representative
- Special education teacher
- Pediatrician or family practice physician
- Nonpublic school representative (teacher or principal) School board member
- Social services child abuse prevention worker
- Mental health center representative

- Counseling agency representative
- Child guidance clinic representative LaLeche League member Childbirth instructor
- Law enforcement representative

What is the Ideal Size for an Advisory Council?

Most advisory councils range in size from 10-20 members with size being determined by the size of the program or community and the amount of work council members are expected to do. If the council is primarily work or task-oriented, it needs to be larger to spread the jobs among more people. If the council is organized primarily to provide input, it can be smaller as long as it is representative of the community.

How Long Should Council Members Serve?

A one- to two-year commitment may be long enough for many members. When members enjoy serving on the council, they may ask to sign on for an additional one- or two-year commitment at the end of their first term. It often takes members the entire first year to become thoroughly familiar with the program and the advisory council's functions, leaving them only one year of active service after the initial learning period. An additional term will result in more productive service time. Having a two- or three-year service commitment reduces the need to continually train new members, yet allows the program to periodically get new blood and enthusiasm onto the council. Specific service terms also make it easier to let go of disruptive members or encourage inactive members to move on.

These policies should be flexible, however, and adapted to the needs of the local program. If a program has a difficult time recruiting advisory council members, it does not need to stipulate a minimum or maximum term length. If the program has more persons wanting to serve than positions available, it may be helpful to have term limits renewable by mutual agreement. Long- term advisory council members frequently become excellent parent leaders.

How Can Good Council Members Be Recruited and Trained?

One way to recruit new members is to solicit applications and keep them on file. Staff can encourage participating parents to apply and ask professional colleagues to refer other

possible candidates. Current advisory council members can suggest the names of other potential members. When a council vacancy opens, the applications are reviewed by the council or by the executive committee (the council officers). Selection of members is based upon qualifications, current membership balance of council, council demographics relative to community composition, and interest of the applicant. The president of the council then calls the new members and sets a time for an orientation session. A well-planned orientation can enhance the effectiveness of council members. Without training, council members may take a long time to become attuned to the program's goals and the council's mission. With training, they are ready to start work and contribute ideas immediately.

A training team of one parent volunteer and one staff person can provide an effective, efficient orientation. Brief information on the program's history will give the council member some idea of program origins and changes. Basic information on the role of members, meeting time and place, description of program services, the budget, and the program goals are essential parts of the training. Committee job descriptions, legal limitations of the advisory council, by-laws, and minutes from past meetings should be distributed to new members. When recruiting board members, it is essential to include the requirement of attendance at the orientation session.

Because ECFE advisory councils do not have the legal responsibilities of policy boards and thus the power, influence, and authority to enforce their recommendations, it is critical that staff build in rewards for serving on the advisory council. Regular communication and feedback from the staff on the council's work and value to the program are essential. Accurate and realistic job descriptions and orientation to the board help to ensure that advisory council members enjoy their Early Childhood Family Education program service. Some advisory councils have one or two gatherings per year for members and their spouses and/or children. These could include a seasonal party, picnic, or a progressive dinner. Awards, plaques and public recognition also serve to reward the active advisory council member.

What are the Areas in Which Advisory Councils can be Especially Effective?

There are at least six major areas in which advisory councils can be very helpful to the operation of Early Childhood Family Education programs.

1. Contributing recommendations for program policies, goals, objectives, and ideas:

The council should begin by formally or informally assessing community needs. Because advisory members represent diverse groups, they bring information from the larger community and offer a wide range of viewpoints, experience, and skills to help determine programming and solve problems facing the program. Through their involvement in other community activities, members can contribute information on innovative and effective approaches used elsewhere. Members can also serve as a bridge to other agencies to promote program collaboration and linkage in order to provide better services to particular groups. For example, ECFE collaboration with a child care center could serve employed parents and enhance both agencies' services to this population.

After they annually update the community needs assessment and program goals and objectives, council members can make recommendations on length of sessions, scheduling of classes, fee amounts and policies, family activities, field trips, session formats, curriculum planning, program changes, and guest speakers.

2. Developing a source of volunteers and training volunteers:

Once goals and objectives have been recommended by the advisory council and adopted by the program, the staff is primarily responsible for their implementation. Advisory councils remain involved at this stage by monitoring program progress and by developing an active group of volunteers to assist with program operations. Council members themselves are often active in many aspects of direct volunteer service to the agency, but they can also help recruit and train a cadre of volunteers to ensure smooth program operations.

Volunteers can assist the program in actual operations by:

- becoming home visitors,
- facilitating parent involvement in activities,
- assisting with children's classes or providing occasional child care, acting as guest lecturers or leading workshops,
- directing family night activities,
- serving as resource librarians,

- helping in selection and inventory of resource library materials, making and fixing toys and games for the classroom or library, building a loft or play equipment for the children's classroom, sharing their cultural heritage, foods, and traditions, arranging and leading field trips,
- keyboarding or other clerical duties,
- designing graphics for program flyers and newsletters,
- acting as an occasional substitute for ill staff,
- providing transportation for fellow participants,
- organizing monthly guest speaker nights,
- preparing an annotated bibliography of books on parenting, writing parenting columns for local newspapers, and
- sharing general housekeeping duties.

When developing volunteer positions, staff and council members should write up clear job descriptions including job duties and functions, skills and qualifications needed, and important deadlines. It is essential to involve parents at the level at which they are most comfortable. As parents' skills and self-confidence increase, so will their readiness to take on bigger and more complicated volunteer positions. The more that parents are involved in the actual operations of the program, the more likely they are to become committed to the program and see its successes as their own.

3. Promoting the program, outreach, and community relations:

Promoting the program within the community is one of the most important functions of an advisory council. An advisory council with broad-based representation from the community acts as a conduit for information from various constituencies to the program and its staff. It also carries information from the program back to eligible parents in the community, other agencies and groups, potential donors or funding sources, and the general public.

By serving on the council, members give their personal and community sanction to the program and its work. They can build community relations by developing an outreach and dissemination package. These efforts can include a calling committee, poster design and distribution, newsletter preparations, press releases, plans for special outreach events and open houses, and presentations on the program for local community groups. By assisting in the

development of slide presentations, video clips, photo displays, program brochures, and program logos, council members can improve dissemination efforts.

4. Assisting in program evaluation:

The advisory council works with the staff to assess program effectiveness and to determine how well the program is meeting its goals. With evaluation material gathered by Early Childhood Family Education staff, along with members' observations, feedback from families and agencies and other information, the advisory council can help to assess whether the program is meeting community needs. Council members can assist with evaluation efforts by reading summaries of parent evaluation surveys that protect the confidentiality of staff and parents, and by participating in discussions with staff and program participants. The resulting information can be used by council members and staff to make recommendations for future programming and changes in operations and services. Advisory council members can also use this information to examine their council's operations in terms of membership, roles, training, and volunteer opportunities. The evaluation of ECFE program staff and other personnel matters are the responsibility of the ECFE Coordinator and other district administrators, and thus are outside the purview of the advisory council.

5. Serving as an advocate for Early Childhood Family Education programs in the community and Legislature:

Since the existence of Early Childhood Family Education programs depends on community support and legislative financing, advocacy is a primary responsibility of ECFE advisory councils. Council members can organize or participate in public awareness and advocacy efforts to ensure program continuation and increased funding. Planning open houses for community members, legislators, school board members, local educators, and the general public are important parts of this role. Council members can join other parents statewide by becoming active in the annual Early Childhood Education Parent Rally Day and other activities sponsored by the parent-run Rally Day Committee and the Advocacy Committee for Minnesota Early Childhood Family Education, School Readiness, and Early Childhood Screening.

6. Expanding resource development:

The area of resource development includes personnel as well as fund raising. An advisory council could help participate in staff selection if possible within district guidelines. Some school districts encourage advisory council input on staff hiring, while others discourage involvement in this area. If the school administration is agreeable, advisory members can serve on screening or interview committees in hiring. They can also provide valuable feedback on the performance of program staff.

Development of financial and material resources requires close staff and advisory council teamwork. The advisory members can provide information about and access to community sources of funds and materials. They also validate the program's funding requests by assuring the community that a valuable and effective service is being provided for the school district's families. Although staff is ultimately responsible for preparation of proposals, fund raising projects, and presentations to school boards and funding sources, council members can be involved in all of these efforts.

7. Fundraising

When ECFE coordinators need to expand their program resources through fundraisers and other funding resources, they will want to carefully plan these efforts. In selecting a fundraiser, consider the expertise and talents of advisory council members, program participants, and staff and how these may define or enhance the fundraiser. Consider if the fundraiser can be used from year to year, planning it for the same time annually. For example, a community can come to expect and anticipate a large garage sale sponsored by the program every spring. Most importantly, discuss and clear all fundraising plans with school district administration well in advance. Since district policies vary on use of supplemental money for school programs, be sure to include district administrators in the planning process from the very beginning. Keep all funds raised by the advisory council in a separate account that allows parent discretion over how funds are spent. The advisory council chairperson and the program coordinator can be designated as co-signers for this separate account.

As alternatives or complements to fundraisers, think about developing and using volunteers, collaborating with other programs to reduce costs of particular offerings, and writing grant proposals to local businesses or private donors to fund specific efforts or items.

Consider asking senior citizen groups or vocational or college students to serve as program assistants for little or no cost. If a community has active service organizations, these groups may be willing to designate one of their fundraisers for an ECFE program. Begin by showing the 13-minute state ECFE videotape and speaking to various service clubs about the program and its benefits to the community. Parent advisory council members may be excellent speakers or co-speakers. Next, develop a letter stating specifically why you are asking for funds and for what they will be used. Then send it to the most receptive of these audiences. Service clubs often want to fund concrete, lasting items such as new baby gifts, classroom equipment, or resource library supplies.

A prime consideration in fund raising projects is the amount of work involved in relation to the amount of money a project produces. Ideally, all fundraisers would involve little effort and yield big profits. In reality, the experienced fundraiser knows that most profitable fundraisers are a lot of work, and those that are not often net slim profits. There are always exceptions to these generalizations, however. When conceptualizing and carrying out fund raising efforts, the more practical yet creative program staff and advisory council members can be, the more successful their fundraising efforts are likely to be.

What are the Benefits of Having an Advisory Council?

The major reason for having an advisory council is that national research on early childhood and family education programs strongly indicates that programs in which parents were not involved in planning, participation, and organization did not succeed. The children did not sustain cognitive gains regardless of the theoretical model or program design. Programs were not successful in obtaining parent participation if parents were not involved in planning, evaluation, and outreach.

Benefits to parent advisory council members include expanded knowledge and skills, as well as enhanced parental self-esteem and confidence. Active membership provides relevant job-related experiences and an excellent addition to a resume for an individual entering or reentering the field of employment. For these benefits to accrue, staff members must work to ensure the advisory council plays an active, relevant role with actual responsibilities and input and doesn't just serve as a rubber stamp for staff ideas and programs. There should be opportunities for individual growth through interaction with staff, site visits, participation in staff training and conferences, and movement to paid employment, if appropriate.

Parent advisory councils strengthen parent commitment to Early Childhood Family Education. Without enthusiastic committed parents, program continuation and expansion are not possible. Legislators who fund ECFE programs are generally more responsive to parent-constituents communication and advocacy than they are to similar efforts by staff. Over time, advisory council members develop deeper confidence and trust in the program. Their willingness to take on volunteer commitments and to enhance program resources increases. When staff and council members work together as a team, diversity of leadership, communication skills, knowledge of community resources, and program operations and growth are significantly enriched.

Appendix 7A – EARLY CHILDHOOD FAMILY EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL

According to *Minnesota Statute 121.882, (1984)* the school board of any district establishing or expanding an early childhood family education program "*shall appoint an advisory council for the area in which the program is provided. A majority of the council shall be parents participating in the program. The council shall assist the board in developing, planning and monitoring the early childhood family education program. The council shall report to the school board and the community education advisory council.*"

Suggested Areas of Representation on Advisory Council

- Health (doctors, nurses, health educators)
- Clergy
- Law Enforcement
- Human Services
- Special Education
- Child Care Providers, Child Care Resource and Referral
- Head Start
- Other Early Childhood Education Providers
- Community Education Advisory Council
- Kindergarten Teachers
- Elementary Principals
- School Board
- Others

Consider balance in terms of fathers, mothers, traditional vs. non-traditional families, families of color, families which include parents or children with disabilities, variety of ages and income levels.

FUNCTIONS OF ADVISORY COUNCIL

1. Contributing recommendations for program policies, goals, objectives, and ideas
2. Developing a source of volunteers and training volunteers
3. Promoting the program, outreach, and community relations
4. Assisting in program evaluation
5. Serving as an advocate for Early Childhood Family Education programs in the community and Legislature
6. Expanding resource development

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