

LAUSD Parent Advisory Committee

Chairperson's Report

March 7, 2019

To my esteemed PAC colleagues:

Yes, this report *is* longer than previous chairpersons presented, but we have a lot on our plate right now, and it's important that we understand what's facing us as our work begins. You have my word that future reports will not look like this one. The more progress we make here together, the shorter my reports to you will be.

They say you can't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been. With this thought in mind, let's review where the PAC has been, and where I believe we should go. Fasten your seatbelts!

Our Parent Advisory Committee is now five years old. It first met in February 2014. At that time PAC meetings resembled a seminar or working group, much like the LCAP Study Groups many of us attended until recently. Early PAC agendas listed all items as being managed or presented by PCS administrators and staff. Then members organized and successfully pushed to create bylaws and get an elected Executive Board.

Rachel Greene, our first PAC chair, helped convince the California Legislature to create an exemption from the Brown Act for all LCAP parent advisory committees throughout the state. This is why we now operate under the Greene Act (no relation to Rachel), which is less restrictive on how our committee operates and on how we communicate with each other outside meetings. This exemption recognizes that advisory committees of volunteer parents should not be bound by the same rules that govern a board of education or a city council.

Before the transition from Brown to Greene, however, PAC members received a letter from a District lawyer, who stated that we might be at risk for what she called "criminal penalties" simply because a few members had started an e-mail conversation about the need for a formal committee structure. Fortunately, this bizarre threat never materialized, and the attorney who signed the letter left LAUSD not long after it was sent.

Since then the PAC has been diligent in performing its duties each year, sitting through countless presentations by District directors, specialists and other staff, then using members' insights to generate successive sets of comments on five draft LCAPs. Even with this record of successfully carrying out its mission, members have become increasingly concerned that we've never received any follow-up presentations to show us which of our carefully crafted LCAP comments have been implemented and, beyond that, which have actually led to changes in the way LAUSD educates our children. It feels as if the PAC is repeating 2014 every year since.

This longstanding concern is the reason your Executive Board asked PCS staff to provide copies of all LCAP comments submitted over the past two years, along with responses to these comments, received from two different superintendents. We do have access to comments from the first three years of the PAC as well, though for now let's focus on the two most recent sets of comments, for LCAP years 2017-18 and 2018-19.

Now for some good news: I'm pleased to tell you that at least two PAC LCAP comments *have* resulted in real, significant changes. First, the District policy bulletin covering visitors to school campuses now includes a new section on how a parent can appeal the issuance of a "disruptive person letter" or *DPL* given to them by a principal. These letters have been used for many years, just as often to push out a parent whom a principal would rather not deal with, for various reasons, as it is to keep students safe from a truly disruptive person.

The second "win" for parents came earlier this year, when our Board of Education voted to approve a waiver of the \$56 Livescan fingerprinting fee for parents who apply to become volunteers at their kids' schools. This

is truly a significant victory, and it came about because the PAC highlighted their concern in a nearly identical LCAP comment for three years in a row about obstacles facing parents who simply want to help in schools.

As these two examples demonstrate, *change is possible*. We just need to be focused and persistent in asking.

Turning to goals for the PAC, we must fill all vacant member positions on our committee as soon as possible. This includes alternates along with those appointed by Board Members. It's concerning that we still have numerous empty spots — *English Learner, Low Income, At Large*, and particularly *Foster Youth* — which by now should have been filled. With so many vacancies, getting our work done is that much harder.

Another very important topic for our committee is *training*. In the past, member training has not been planned in a cohesive way, with isolated sessions on the Brown or Greene act, Robert's Rules, or the role of the PAC. However, we've not had any training on something that is at least as important as those other topics, and in some ways even more important: *Parent leadership*. We need to learn how to find our voice and use it. This skill will help us in many areas of our lives, not only here in our meetings. Along the same line is a training session which would be hugely beneficial to us, offered by Dr. Brenda Manuel right here at PCS. Her presentation on *Group Dynamics* will help us understand the differences in our personal styles, so we can work together much more effectively. The better trained we are, the better we can advocate for our children.

Next, you may have heard comments, questions or complaints from other members on the new practice this year of starting off with six LCAP Study Groups which met for several months, then parents in these groups elected members to serve on the full committee here beginning in late February. This scheme is not working.

As I see it, we should have *both* the Local District study groups *and* the PAC in session all year long, with regular communication between the study groups and us at the "central" district level. Such a structure would be much closer to what the committee has been advocating from the beginning. Even with the change in our committee structure, however, the average parent at a school *still* has no idea of what we do here or that a PAC exists at all. This is the question to be answered: How can we connect the PAC with school sites?

Also, our committee spent nearly a year and a half in the process of amending its Bylaws, from February 2017 through May 2018. We finally voted to approve these updated Bylaws at our very last meeting of the year, but for some reason they were never signed. You received this document in your packets at our election event.

Now we have another bylaws issue to deal with: The document was written to control a committee that meets during most of the school year, with its officers being elected in October. The thing is, LAUSD unilaterally changed this committee structure, without our consent, mandating that PAC meetings at PCS don't start until late February. This means our freshly revised, recently approved yet unsigned Bylaws are already obsolete. Such a unilateral change is unacceptable. We have an obligation to make sure that our Bylaws reflect how the committee actually operates, and also that the PAC operates in a way which gives us enough time to generate LCAP comments without being rushed to do it. The current structure does not serve us well.

Those are the priorities I see as most important to us going forward. Now here are a few words on decorum.

We all have different personalities and certainly different ways of expressing ourselves. Just like kids on the playground, some parents have louder voices, and some talk more, while others prefer to mostly listen. I understand that we are passionate about the things that matter to us, and some of these things will be discussed in our meetings. Even so, at all times during our discussions, it's critically important that we *respect* each other, give each other the space to share opinions, and monitor what I recently heard described as "air time."

How much “air time” do *you* use in a meeting? If you feel the need to ask a lot of questions, make a lot of comments, or express a lot of concerns, consider how the air time you use affects other members. Comment sheets and note cards are on each of your tables, so please use these as much as you like. Your Executive Board will review all comments and, with the assistance of presenters and PCS staff, get you the right answer.

As your chairperson, I’m not eager to play the “bad cop” and gently remind you that a question or motion is not relevant or appropriate at the moment. I certainly don’t want to announce in front of everyone, with much love and respect, “The Chair rules that Member XYZ is out of order.” However, to be fair and impartial to all members, I have a responsibility to keep our meetings moving and honor everyone’s time, so I will ask now for the gift of your forgiveness in case that awkward, regrettable moment should ever arise in the future.

The only way our school district will ever take us seriously as a group representing parents and students is if we take ourselves seriously. We cannot treat our committee as a place to come and dump all our complaints about schools, principals, and PCS staff. Naturally we *do* care about each other’s concerns, and I personally help parents solve problems at their kids’ schools all the time. But we must discuss those individual concerns outside this room. The PAC was not created so we could take up everyone’s precious time with personal stories, and it’s not the place to lecture others on what we think they’re doing or not doing. This committee exists for us to help educators do a better job of educating our kids. I ask you now to please remember that.

Distinguished members, we’re here to do the work we signed up to do, the work we were elected to do, which is to learn everything we can about the various services provided to students, and then generate comments on the draft LCAP before the end of this school year. That is our official role, and I would not imply otherwise.

What I am saying, and I urge you to keep this in the back of your mind every time we enter the room, is that if you can take back to your school anything you learn here, and help other parents to become informed, engaged, and maybe even empowered, in the same way I hope *you* will become empowered as a fully participating member of the Parent Advisory Committee, then I will have done my job as your chairperson, and my colleagues on the Executive Board will have done theirs. We are all volunteers who do right by kids.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this report or about the PAC. I want you to understand what’s going on with our committee, and I will answer every message I receive. Here is the e-mail address I’m using to stay in touch with PAC members and guests, to get your thoughts and to better serve you:

PaulPACRobak@gmail.com

In closing, we owe it to our kids, to their classmates, and to children we will never meet, to learn how to be leaders. As thoughtful people have been asking themselves forever, “If not me, who? If not now, when?”

It all starts right now, with each of us. Let’s get down to work, for the benefit of all LAUSD students, and for the empowerment of their parents. Abraham Lincoln once said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

We are better together.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul Robak
Chairperson, LAUSD Parent Advisory Committee