

Democratic Engagement in District Reform: The Evolving Role of Parents in the Los Angeles Public School Choice Initiative

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Abstract

This article examines parent engagement in a Los Angeles portfolio district reform. Based on data from a 3-year study, we use the lens of democratic theory to examine the design and implementation of mechanisms seeking parent input in the selection of plans to operate low-performing and new schools. We find that despite significant efforts to move toward a more deliberative model over time, the process remained primarily interest-based in most cases, due in large part to structural constraints, limited access to information, and mistrust. The article concludes with implications for policy, practice, and research.

Keywords

education reform, policy implementation, parent involvement, democratic theory, district reform, portfolio district, school turnaround

Increasingly, policymakers are recognizing the important roles parents play in children's schooling (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Lareau, 1987; B. Schneider

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& Coleman, 1993) and school improvement (Bryk, 2010; Furstenberg, 1999), and have attempted to engage them in multiple ways. Although many of these efforts focus at the school level (e.g., including parents onsite governance committees, encouraging parent volunteerism, educating parents on how to be more active in their children's education), others involve parents substantively in district-level reform and decision making.

Consistent with policymakers' beliefs, deliberative and participatory democratic theories assert that substantive engagement of citizens in decision making generates a host of positive outcomes, including more impartial, legitimate, and effective decisions; greater motivation to implement the decisions; enhanced social justice and equity; greater acceptance of collective decisions; increased sense of belonging to a community; the development of civic skills; and improved democracy overall (Cohen, 1997; Fung & Wright, 2003; Gambetta, 1998; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2000). Although studies have attempted to measure the realization of these democratic principles and outcomes in real-world settings (e.g., Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002), few have examined their enactment in schools and districts (for exceptions, see Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Fung, 2001; Fung & Wright, 2003; Marsh, 2007; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2000). Given recent trends toward greater parent participation in school reform, it behooves researchers to further attend to this issue (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002; Warren, 2011).

This article extends the previous literature on parent engagement¹ in school reform by examining the ways in which democratic principles played out in a district reform effort, the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI). Adopted in 2009, PSCI allowed teams of internal and external stakeholders to compete to turn around the district's lowest performing "focus" schools (selected by LAUSD administrators based on a diverse set of performance indicators) and to operate newly constructed "relief" schools designated to ease overcrowding. One of more than 25 urban districts nationwide adopting the "portfolio" strategy, Los Angeles' ultimate goal for this reform was to build a diverse portfolio of high-performing schools tailored to and supported by the local community (Hill, Campbell, & Gross, 2012). One central lever of change within PSCI was the involvement of parents and community members in developing and providing input into the selection of plans to operate PSCI schools. Leaders advocating for this element of policy believed that such engagement was essential for providing those affected by the reform an opportunity to shape the decisions and attain "voice."

Based on data from a 3-year study, we examine the design and implementation of the PSCI parent engagement mechanisms through the lens of

democratic theory. This framework calls attention to who participated, how they interacted, what they hoped to achieve, and what enabled and constrained these efforts. Through this lens, we analyze how PSCI parent engagement mechanisms played out over time and the factors shaping its evolution.

Our findings contribute to policy, practice, and research about parent engagement. To date, there has been only limited empirical research on the role of parents in *district*-level reform (Ascher, 1996; Mapp, 2003; M. Schneider & Buckley, 2002). At a time when policymakers and reformers continue to push for greater parent engagement in reform, it is particularly important to gain a better understanding of what parent engagement looks like, what shapes it, and what might improve it. In the end, the article provides a framework and findings to help understand and improve on district-level efforts to involve parents in school improvement, and advances our understanding of education policy implementation.

In the remainder of this article, we first present the theoretical and empirical literature grounding this inquiry, background on PSCI, and an explanation of our research methods. We then provide answers to our research questions and conclude with implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Grounding the Inquiry

Two bodies of literature guide our analysis. First, we draw on democratic theory to frame our understanding of how parent engagement processes might be designed and implemented. These theories provide a descriptive lens for understanding *who* is involved, *what* is the purpose of the decision-making process, and *how* decision making operates. Second, we turn to past research of parent engagement in educational reform for lessons on implementation and the factors that might influence engagement.

*Democratic Theory*²

As Figure 1 illustrates, democratic theories outline models of decision making that fall along two continua. The horizontal spectrum focuses on *who* is involved and ranges from participatory to representative models of democracy. *Participatory* democratic theory suggests involving the maximum number of individuals who will be affected by the decision at hand, and that participants have equal power to determine the outcome of the decision. These theories argue that increasing participation in governance will prevent abuse of power by elected officials, help individuals connect private and public interests, and assist in the acceptance of collective decisions (Gutmann &

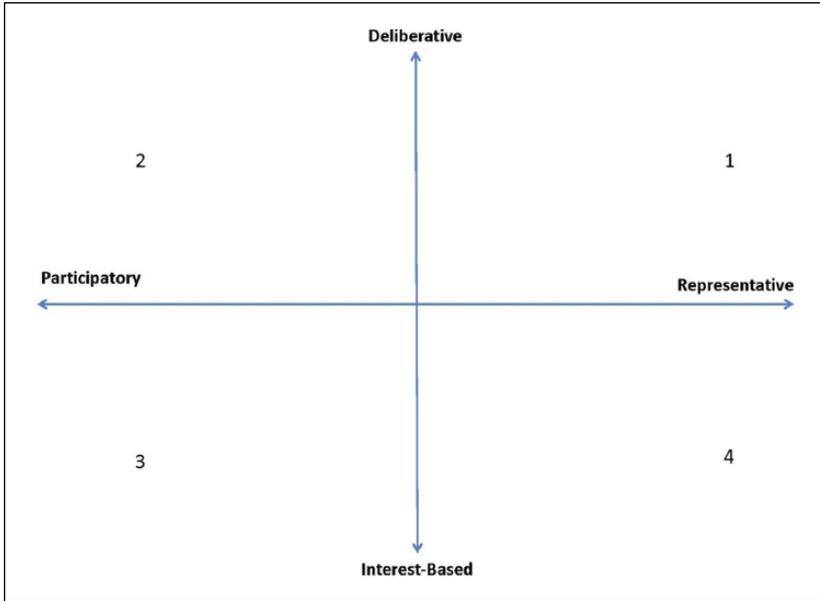


Figure 1. Democratic governance models.

Thompson, 1996; Pateman, 1975). Carole Pateman (1975)—a significant contributor to the revival of participatory politics in America in the 1960s and 1970s—argued that instead of representative institutions at the national level, a democratic society requires maximum participation by all people at the local level to provide individuals with “the necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities” (p. 42).

At the other end of the spectrum, *representative* democratic theory argues that widespread participation is not necessary, but instead potentially detrimental to democratic society. These theories posit that increased participation from apathetic and disinterested citizens would weaken consensus around the norms of an electoral democratic system (Pateman, 1975; Schumpeter, 1942). In an ideal representative democracy, there is limited participation of a minority of leaders who represent their constituents’ interests. One advocate of a representative system, Joseph Schumpeter (1942) argued that competition among leaders for votes is what makes this model democratic.

The vertical continua pertain to *what* is the purpose of decision making and *how* things should operate, and ranges from deliberative to interest-based models. An *interest-based* democratic model intends to maximize self-interest through a process of bargaining and voting. This conception of

democracy assumes a “rational actor,” self-interested model, in which individuals calculate how to best maximize their personal gain (Bohman, 1997; Phillips, 1995). Decisions are made by aggregative mechanisms (e.g., voting) and there is no requirement that reasons for decisions be stated publicly. Advocates of an interest-based model believe that individuals generally act in self-interested ways and that there is no such thing as the common good (Schumpeter, 1942).

In contrast, a *deliberative* democratic model seeks to promote the common good and to base decisions on reasoned argument and public discourse. Theorists argue that this model contributes to more legitimate, effective, impartial, and equitable decisions; improves democratic and citizenship skills; and improves the quality of democracy over time. Although theorists have adopted various names for the concept of deliberative democracy, they share many of the same basic principles: Conversations and decisions are aimed at the common good; decisions are based on reasoned argument; reasoning must be reciprocal (i.e., participants appeal to reasons and premises that are shared or could be shared by fellow participants); reasons given are public, and information needed to assess those reasons are accessible; there is a shared understanding that all voices are heard; participants are accountable to all who may be bound by decisions and formal linkages exist to ensure this accountability; and action follows (Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 1989; Elster, 1997; Fung & Wright, 2003; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Young, 1997).

Although this description depicts the “ideal” models at all four ends of the spectra, there are clearly a series of gradations or alternatives that exist in between the ends of the deliberative–interest based and participatory–representative continua. For example, an interest-based governance body can become more deliberative by including public debate as a prerequisite to voting. Applied to the case of PSCI, one can imagine that the design and implementation of a parent engagement process could fall into any one of the four quadrants. After describing our methods, we will return to this lens to compare the design and implementation of the PSCI over time, paying particular attention to *who* participated, *what* participants tried to achieve, and *how* the process operated.

Empirical Research

School- and district-level studies provide insights into the nature and common obstacles and facilitators of parent engagement. Recent decades have demonstrated a trend toward participatory reform in education, and parental input remains an important factor in reform success (Auerbach, 2007). Bryk’s (2010) research in Chicago concluded that family engagement is among the

most important factors influencing school success, noting that limited parent input increased the likelihood that low-performing schools would remain stagnant. Parent and community involvement are significant factors mediating large-scale reform efforts, as policy execution is inevitably influenced by the degree to which affected community members are receptive to its implementation (Honig, 2006). When democratic parent engagement is authentically executed, research also indicates that parents experience increased ownership of the school and teachers gain awareness of stakeholder perspectives (Epstein et al., 2008).

The democratic ideal, however, is often far from the reality of implementation, as there is frequently a notable gap “between the ideological and material power granted to parents” (Fine, 1993).

Empirical studies highlight several key mediating factors that shape parent engagement in these reform efforts. These include social capital (Allensworth, Bryk, & Sebring, 2010; Bryk et al., 1998; Orr, 1996) and access to information (Gyurko & Henig, 2010; Levin, Daschbach, & Perry, 2010), particularly in the face of rapidly changing educational options with which parents may be unfamiliar (Menefee-Libey, 2010). Time also affects parent participation, as school engagement is commonly inhibited by other parental responsibilities (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Henry, 1996; Heymann & Earle, 2000). The time factor is increasingly relevant for families experiencing economic stress (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007; Weiss et al., 2003). Moreover, language differences can constrain engagement before parents reach the school site: Research demonstrates that parents can be hesitant to participate in school activities based on their lack of English proficiency (Shirley, 1997). Differences in language may also hinder participant understanding, again limiting the quality and quantity of parent participation (Marsh, 2007), sometimes leading to feelings of limited power and distrust in the system (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002).

Once parents are present, the method in which meetings are conducted matters. In his review of participatory efforts in schools, Anderson (1998) determined that a lack of two-way discourse can lead to control of participants rather than authentic input. Facilitation of interactive discourse, as a fundamental element of deliberative participation, requires training and experience, as illustrated in Malen and Ogawa’s (1988) case study of participatory governance councils.

Collectively, this research suggests that a number of factors are likely to affect the quality and quantity of parent engagement and the realization of democratic principles in LAUSD’s PSCI, including access to information, time, language and communication, and quality of facilitation.

Background on PSCI

Adopted by the LAUSD Board of Education in August 2009, the Public School Choice resolution established the long-term goal of creating “diverse options for high quality educational environments, with excellent teaching and learning, for students’ academic success” (Flores Aguilar, 2009, p. 1). Responding to the “chronic academic underperformance” of many district schools and the strong interest from parents and communities to “play a more active role” in “shaping and expanding the educational options” (Flores Aguilar, 2009, p. 1), the resolution invited individuals from internal (teachers, administrators) and external (charter schools, non-profits) teams to collaborate with the district to operate a set of new schools and low-performing schools. Although this process provided the community with the opportunity to participate in developing school plans, the ultimate “choice” in PSCI was made by the LAUSD Board (or, in later iterations, by the superintendent).

Designed for gradual scale-up, PSCI involved annual rounds (or cohorts) of schools in the process with the intention that over time all low-performing public schools would be transformed into high performers. In each round, teams applying for a PSCI school responded to a detailed Request for Proposals, submitting lengthy school plans that covered topics from curriculum and instruction to school organization and operations to professional development. In addition, applicants were asked to select one of a set of governance models that varied in the levels of autonomy schools had from district and/or union policies: ranging from traditional schools to pilot schools operating under “thin” teacher union contracts to independent charters. Submitted applications underwent a multi-stage review. Overall, 131 schools participated in the first 4 years of PSCI, starting in the first year with 28 relief (new) and 14 focus (turnaround) schools.

From the initiative’s inception, parent and community engagement was considered a key lever for change (for a full explanation of the theory of change, see Marsh, Strunk, & Bush, 2013). Parent and community members had several opportunities to shape the particular reforms that would be enacted in their schools of attendance and contribute to the intended positive outcomes for students. Parents could (1) provide input into plan *content*, by participating in plan-writing on teams along with educators or providing feedback to those writing the plan; (2) provide input into plan *selection* by evaluating the plans and providing this feedback to the final decision makers; (3) participate in educative opportunities that allow for more informed input and participation in school improvement more generally; and (4) help support and hold schools accountable once plans are implemented over time.³ This article focuses on parents’ roles in the selection process (#2 above)

because it was designed as the main democratic decision point intended to solicit broad parent input. Given PSCI policy changes made in 2011,⁴ we examine parent engagement in two phases: Phase I (involving school cohorts 1.0 and 2.0) and Phase II (cohorts 3.0 and 4.0).

Data and Methods

This article examines the PSCI parent engagement mechanisms during the first 4 years of PSCI by addressing the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How did the design of parent engagement mechanisms in PSCI change over time?

Research Question 2: To what extent did PSCI play out as intended in local communities?

Research Question 3: What factors shaped the evolution of parent engagement policy and practice over time?

To answer these questions, we draw on data collected during a 3-year study and analyzed as part of a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant-funded evaluation. Because this evaluation began in 2010, our data collection focuses on the 2010-2011 (2.0), 2011-2012 (3.0), and 2012-2013 (4.0) cohorts of this initiative. We collected data from school case studies going through plan development and selection in PSCI 2.0, 3.0, and 4.0, and supplemented with retrospective leader interviews and document review regarding the 2009-2010 (1.0) cohort of schools. As Table 1 illustrates, we collected data from three main sources: (a) interviews, focus groups, and observations in a purposeful sample of 16 school-community case studies selected to represent variation in grade levels served, geographic location, relief (new) and focus (turnaround) status, and number and type of applicant; (b) 36 district and partner organization leader interviews; and (c) a review of more than 300 documents.

We used semi-structured protocols in all interviews and focus groups and conducted parent focus groups in both Spanish and English with the assistance of a bilingual interpreter. All audio recordings were transcribed and focus groups conducted in Spanish were translated from Spanish to English prior to coding and analysis. We coded all interview and focus group transcripts and observation field notes along the dimensions of our theoretical framework. Following first phase open coding, we developed and applied a subset of detailed codes for key elements of our framework, based on emergent patterns. To enhance the internal validity and accuracy of findings, we triangulated data from multiple sources, comparing interview data with field notes and documents whenever possible.

Table 1. Description of Data Sources (2010-2013).

Case studies (<i>n</i> = 16)	Sample
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 from cohort 2.0: Implementing original parent engagement policy in “Phase I” • 6 from cohort 3.0, 5 from cohort 4.0: Implementing slightly altered policy in “Phase II” • Total of 3 relief schools, 13 focus schools • 5 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, 6 high schools • 5 North, 4 South, 2 East, and 5 West • 10 with only 1 applicant, 5 with 2 applicants, 3 with 3+ applicants • Total of 8 with external applicants and 8 with internal applicants
	<p>Data collection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 applicant team interviews, 16 focus groups with 112 parents, 50 observations of district-led parent meetings (128 hr)
Leader interviews (<i>n</i> = 36)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendents (2), LAUSD administrators, partner organization leaders (e.g., United Way, League of Women Voters), and union leaders
Document review (<i>n</i> = 300)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collected from LAUSD’s dedicated website with all PSCI publications; proposals; reports developed by community partners; copies of the curriculum and materials developed for use during parent meetings

Note. LAUSD = Los Angeles Unified School District; PSCI = Public School Choice Initiative.

First, we analyzed each case individually, developing detailed case memos. Next, we conducted a matrix analysis to compare across cases. We entered summaries of coded data into matrix cells, which allowed us to systematically analyze trends across multiple cases (Averill, 2002; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), examine how the main dimensions of democratic engagement played out during implementation, and the factors associated with patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To operationalize our matrix coding, we selected six matrix columns that exemplified the *who*, *what*, and *how* of decision making (and for which we had the most complete set of data), then categorized summaries as demonstrating low (1), medium (2), or high (3) based on column-specific criteria for

each level. We charted each case along our theoretical framework based on its scores for evidence of the nature of implementation along the continua from participatory to representative and interest-based to deliberative (Figure 1). Specifically, three of these columns concerned the *who*: How many and what kinds of parents participated in parent meetings and feedback processes and the extent to which efforts were more representative or participatory. The next columns concerned *what* and *how*: the nature and content of discourse along the spectrum of increasingly deliberative or interest-based.

There were several limitations to our data collection and analyses. First, although the scope of the initiative is quite large, finite resources limited us to 16 case studies. Although this number provides a great deal of insight into the implementation of parent engagement efforts in the initiative, it does not allow us to capture variation that may have occurred in the full sample of schools participating in PSCI. Resource constraints also prevented us from gathering representative data from all parents involved or expected to be involved with the initiative. Instead, we conducted parent focus groups with a limited number of parents and community members who attended district-sponsored meetings (they were invited to speak with us after they provided feedback to the district via vote or rubric response). This set of parents was likely to be more engaged than the average parent who did not attend PSCI parent meetings. Given that our case study data may not be wholly representative of the entire population of school and parent participants, our findings should be interpreted as exploratory.

Findings

How Did the Design of Parent Involvement Mechanisms in PSCI Shift Over Time?

Overall, our analysis reveals that the conceptualization of parent engagement in PSCI changed over time. In the first two rounds of the intervention (Phase I), the district embraced a more interest-based, participatory design. Parents were invited to participate in an aggregative advisory voting process that allowed them to privately voice their preferences for which operator would run their local school—with district leaders making the ultimate decision. The intent of this format was to engage the maximum number of affected individuals in the process (the *who*). According to most observers, the process was meant to be “inclusive,” involving all parents and community members belonging to each school community. However, some observers noted that the inclusion of a vote may have been tactical: Anticipating the potential outcry of individuals and groups claiming that they were not consulted, these

leaders believed it was crucial for everyone to feel that they were given an opportunity to weigh in on the decision. Others indicated a more genuine interest in learning from parents, “what do they know about their children that we don’t know, that therefore we are not bringing to the school?”

As for the *what* and *how* of the process, PSCI in Phase I clearly embraced an interest-based model. According to one administrator, leaders borrowed the idea from the Mayor’s Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, which required a majority of parents and staff to vote to partner with this non-profit organization:

They felt that that was . . . a good way to make it democratic. They wanted to make sure that parents, regardless of their sort of citizenship in this country, were able to give their vote, their information, or their opinion.

Although a few leaders signaled deliberative intent when calling for dialogue in meetings, in the end, these meetings were designed primarily to provide information to the community. Aside from time set aside for questions and answers, there was never an explicit expectation that participants coalesce around a common vision of what would be best for their community or that individuals discuss their reasons for voting for or against a particular plan.

Finally, in both Phase I rounds, the process was managed centrally by LAUSD and its partners. LAUSD staff informed parents about the meetings and worked with the United Way of Greater Los Angeles to train “impartial” community leaders from non-profits across the city to facilitate the meetings at each site.

In response to concerns about the quality and quantity of participation in the first two rounds, the district replaced the voting process in Round 3 with a series of parent academies intended to provide a forum in which small groups of parents would publicly discuss characteristics of a high-quality school and communicate their preferred plan. The design of this new model of engagement in Phase II was more deliberative and less participatory than that of years past. A member of the team developing this new process described the changes as a shift from quantity to quality:

[T]he Advisory Vote felt like . . . it was a politicized process that focused more on the quantity of showing 3,000 community members, parents, and students supported the teacher-written team. . . . We moved away from this quantity over to try and focus more on the quality. . . . because as much as a democratic process is important, we are not the county registrar. We were always uncomfortable by the fact that with the resources that we had, we were not going to effectively get through every stakeholder, parent, student, and give

them the right tools to make the best decision about the school plan choices that they had available at their school site.

The goal of the new process was to attract “a core group of parents” to provide input into the plans in a series of regional Academies and help sustain their involvement during the implementation of the plan in future years. The district also hoped that this core group would help attract more parents over time.

The new input mechanism also embraced more deliberative process goals than did the past design. Rather than a vote, parents now indicated whether they thought each plan “exceeds,” “meets,” “partially meets,” or “shows no evidence of meeting” their expectations and provided written comments, allowing parents to provide more of a rationale for their choices. The curriculum of workshops further pushed on deliberative principles, calling on parents to discuss strategies for ensuring high-quality education for *all* students. One administrator explained,

What we try to focus on in the curriculum is talking about what are the changes that are going to build a quality school for every child at the school. . . . Our conversation is about the school, the subgroups, and the parents, through their own experience, are always connected to talk about their students. . . . We always tell the parents, “So this is the cutout [paper] of the graduate that we envision. Think of this as being your child. . . . what are the things that you feel are essential for your child, but that are necessary for all students to be successful?”

Further evidence of a deliberative shift comes from new training provided to workshop facilitators that coached facilitators on how to ensure that all voices were heard (e.g., “how to encourage some parents to take a step forward when they’re not being as active in the conversation”) and that dialogue was rooted in parents’, not facilitators’, viewpoints (e.g., “We talk to them [facilitators] about . . . not bringing out their biases, their opinions”). Parents were also given new tools to help them in reasoning through the benefits and drawbacks of plans (e.g., facilitators worked with parents to develop questions to ask planning teams regarding core aspects of curriculum and assessment, student support, school staff, health and safety) and repeated opportunities to absorb the information in multiple workshops.

As for the overall management, this next phase of PSCI was more decentralized than the earlier phase. Unlike the past, in 3.0, the district and its partners contracted out to community-based organizations (CBOs) to run the Academies and conduct parent outreach. The United Way and other key partners strongly believed that these lead CBOs would be more neutral and trusted by parents.

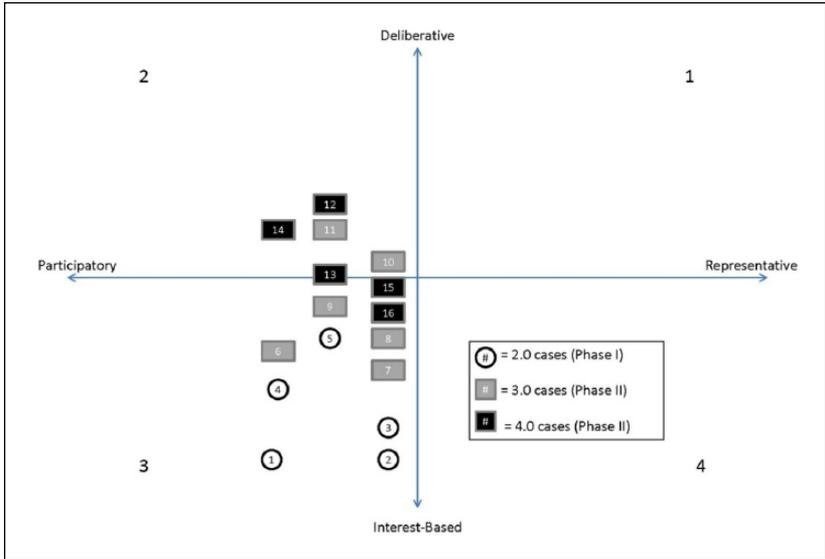


Figure 2. Models of parent engagement enacted in PSCI case study schools.
Note. PSCI = Public School Choice Initiative.

In summary, Phase I embraced an interest-based, participatory design, whereas the Phase II model of engagement was more deliberative and less participatory. In what follows, we show how these parent engagement efforts were implemented in PSCI schools.

How Did These Parent Engagement Efforts Play Out in Schools?

In this section, we describe the patterns of parent engagement observed in the case studies over time, including a careful analysis of the key dimensions of engagement (illustrated in Figure 2): *who* (the horizontal axis) and *what* and *how* (vertical axis). Figure 2 plots where on these participatory–representative and interest based–deliberative spectra each of our 16 cases were situated. Following an explanation of the identified patterns, we discuss factors that appeared to shape the quantity and quality of parent engagement.

Who

Who participates is a critical component differentiating participatory and representative democratic processes. The following analyses examine the extent

to which the implementation of parent engagement structures in the PSCI review and selection process was more participatory (as intended for Phase I) or representative (as leaders intended for Phase II).

Participation patterns. Changes to the design of parent engagement activities and feedback mechanisms from Phase I to Phase II clearly influenced who was at the table. District-wide and in both phases of PSCI, parent participation rates were extremely low. Across both phases, none of the case study sites attracted more than half of the parent population to participate in the vote or rubric assessments of plans. The League of Women Voters (LWV) reported that, overall, fewer than 1% of all eligible parents cast votes for PSCI 2.0 schools (Beltran, Cruz, Guevara, Holmquist, & Logan, 2011). Of our 2.0 cases, about one third of the eligible parents participated in two sites, whereas only 3% participated in the other three sites. We also observed a decrease in participation over time, with just 1% to 15% of the affected population (assuming one parent representative per student) submitting rubrics in our Phase II cases. This decrease was consistent with the intention of district leaders who believed that in Phase II, it was more important to attract a core group of parents than to bring in large numbers of potentially uninformed parents who may have been involved for more political reasons (as many believed to be the case in Phase I). Leaders acknowledged, nevertheless, that the proportion of parents participating in both phases was inadequate and not in line with their expectations. As Superintendent Deasy (2011) explained in an open letter, “[W]e were still vexed by the low turnout at many of these meetings. We also found it challenging to go deeper in our conversations, as we often had a new group of parents at each meeting.”

Although fewer parents participated in the feedback mechanisms in Phase II case study schools than in Phase I schools, these parents were more likely to attend informational meetings prior to providing feedback. In Phase I, some parents who cast votes did not attend the informational PSCI parent engagement meetings—raising questions about their level of understanding of the plans and the extent to which they were well-informed voters (a point we confirm below with further data). Although Phase II meeting attendance rates were lower than the voter turnout rate in the Phase I schools, almost all of the parents who attended Phase II meetings gave feedback to potential school teams, and some of our Phase II cases actually saw higher rates of meeting attendance than rubric submission. This is partially a result of the shift in meeting structure: In Phase I, there was an additional voting day, which was not preceded by a meeting, whereas in Phase II, the rubric process was integrated into the meeting structure. The content and structure of meetings also shifted from large public informational forums to smaller Academies focused on building parent capacity.

Overall, the character of parent engagement in PSCI was participatory, as both phases included outreach to all affected parents rather than a system of appointing or electing participants. Although LAUSD and partner organization leaders purposefully sought to engage highly involved parent and community leaders in Phase II meetings, the reported aim was to support increased participation over time. Changes to meeting structure and feedback mechanisms nevertheless made the process slightly more representative over time (as illustrated by the left-to-right shift along the horizontal axis).

The characteristics of participants are equally important as the quantity. Even if large numbers of parents turn out to participate, a truly democratic process is not achieved if these parents do not represent the school's population. We were unable to systematically quantify these trends because we lack descriptive data on all participants and the parent population in all case study sites. However, some case observations and leader interviews suggest that voters may not have been entirely representative of the intended populations during Phase I. In two of our Phase I case schools, for example, the observed demographic characteristics of those attending PSCI meetings did not accurately reflect the demographics of the school or neighborhood populations. There were also reports of parents and community members bused to voting sites from outside the school's enrollment boundary, young children being sent to vote, schools offering incentives to parents and students for voting (e.g., volunteer hours), and double-voting occurring at some sites. One LWV leader noted the challenges involved with this kind of mobilization:

In round one, we were very concerned that we thought there were people . . . who were being picked up on buses and being carried from place to place just to vote for a particular charter oversight company or just to vote for a UTLA sponsored group or whatever. So I am not sure how to think about those being stakeholders for a particular school or a particular kind of education. . . . What was abusive was . . . people . . . sending in minors with preprinted ballots.

Reports of voter intimidation in Phase I may have also affected who voted. We heard multiple reports of flyers warning undocumented parents that they would be deported if they voted for plans written by external (e.g., charter school) operators. Although LAUSD and the LWV made efforts to mitigate these political activities, many interviewed acknowledged that electioneering remained a problem throughout Phase I.

In Phase II, there was a noticeable decline in observed politically motivated efforts to engage parents—due in large part to negotiated changes in the broader PSCI, which decreased external applicant participation and competition. Changes to outreach efforts used by the district and its partners as well

as the significant modification of the meeting structure and feedback mechanism (from vote to rubric) also required a longer period of engagement. In all of our 11 Phase II cases, we observed that the race and ethnicity of meeting attendees appeared to match the schools' student demographics. Nevertheless, given our limited data, it is unclear whether parents involved in meetings represented all affected parents at case sites. For example, meeting participants may have had higher levels of education, more social capital, or more frequent involvement in the school than the broader parent population.

Summarizing and reflecting back on the theory. Representation and inclusion are key tenets of the democratic ideals guiding PSCI's design, and lack of either one can violate these goals. Low turnout and unequal participation were particularly problematic for Phase I, when leaders emphasized an interest-based, participatory model. Such a model depends on the doctrine of one-person, one-vote, that each person's vote should carry as much weight as any others. However, if one group is more likely to participate than another, then not all groups may be receiving "fair and equal" representation and the aggregation of votes may not represent the true interests of all parents (Mansbridge, 1983)—a conclusion clearly reached by the Superintendent and some Board members who discounted the Advisory Vote results when making their final decision and who removed the voting mechanism in Phase II. One could argue that low turnout and unequal participation are less problematic for the envisioned deliberative, representative model in Phase II; however, the execution of deliberative practices becomes essential to achieving this reality. For example, if facilitators encourage—and some might say, morally exhort—all parents attending meetings to consider and represent the interests of all parents not present and to advance the common good instead of their own self-interests, the low turnout and unequal participation may be less consequential.⁵ Thus, the dimension of *who* must be understood in the context of *what* and *how*. We turn to these dimensions next.

What and How

What participants tried to achieve and *how* the process operated are critical dimensions differentiating deliberative and interest-based democratic processes. The following analyses examine the extent to which the implementation of parent engagement structures in the PSCI review and selection process was more interest-based (as intended for Phase I) or deliberative (as leaders intended for Phase II). We conduct these analyses by examining patterns of discourse, content of discourse, and the level of understanding among parents.

Patterns of discourse. Patterns of discourse shifted significantly from Phase I to Phase II. In four out of five Phase I schools, we observed no examples of two-way conversation and participant voice was recognized almost exclusively during question and answer sessions. Questions were posed to facilitators, who then unidirectionally provided information to the audience. At times, parents wrote their questions on index cards, which were then read aloud and answered by facilitators and applicant team members. Parents did not dialogue with the presenters, or with one another. Limited interactive discussion at these meetings led some involved to describe the process as a “dog and pony show” and “sell job.”

In contrast, 8 of 11 Phase II case schools demonstrated highly interactive, two-way parent-to-parent conversations during workshops. Rather than using meeting time to exclusively disseminate information to parents, organizers placed participants with at least one other parent or facilitator in small groups to discuss a range of topics, from the PSCI process to community needs in school plans. Discussions were then debriefed in whole group. The increase in two-way parent discourse from Phases I to II coincided with intentional changes made in curriculum, as described earlier.

Content: Self- versus common interest. Although leaders signaled deliberative intent in Phase II, our case study observations indicate that discourse in both phases lacked a focus on common interests. In fact, we find that Phase II case participants exhibited *greater* self-interest than Phase I participants.

Overall, parent comments during observed meetings fell into three groups: personal interest (remarks only directed at the needs of one’s immediate family), small group interest (comments directed at specific categories of students, such as English language learners), or community interest (comments centered on the needs of the broader school community). In both phases, parent comments regarding personal interest significantly outnumbered comments centered on community interests. Although both phases were dominated by personal-interest-based discourse, the ratio of personal- to community-interest-based comments increased between Phase I and early Phase II (Cohort 3.0); our coding indicates that there were twice as many comments made about personal needs than about community needs in PSCI 3.0. In late Phase II (4.0), however, we saw a return to a similar distribution of personal interest versus community interest comments to that in Phase I. Parent comments were generally tied to their own families, such as expressing needs for their individual children (“My child doesn’t know how to read. Is there someone at your school who can help him?”), or recounting specific encounters they had with a teacher (“I told my wife to come in and talk to the teacher because my son is always crying in class and he doesn’t know his

ABCs. How do I help him?”). The pattern exhibited in PSCI 3.0 may be indicative of challenges associated with implementing a new curriculum: Facilitators may have still been learning the curriculum and the materials may not have clearly communicated the intended deliberative shift. In contrast, in PSCI 4.0, modifications to the curriculum explicitly asked the parents to consider the interests of their own children and then to apply the same process to consider the interests of all students. In addition, facilitators in PSCI 4.0 cases were observed redirecting personal questions toward the meeting goals.

Content: Emotional versus reason-based. From Phase I to Phase II, content of discourse at case study parent meetings shifted in other ways. In the first phase, team member presentations were dominated by emotional appeals to garner parent support for plans in the Advisory Vote. Rather than focusing on curricular details or goals of the school plans, team members often asked students and families from existing schools to provide personal stories about their experiences. These emotional appeals included telling participants that students at their schools “feel like part of a family” (School 4). In other examples, teams emphasized their status as “insiders” with the school, depicting newer applicants as outsiders with little experience in their community. One presenting teacher stated, “Don’t be fooled . . . They’re big business! They say they’re a charity, they say they’re a non-profit, but they’re making millions on the backs of our students, our babies” (School 5).

Consistent with the intent to be more deliberative, we observed more reason-based dialogue in Phase II cases. When teams presented to parents, they invoked reasons and evidence—not emotion—to convince them of the merits of their plans. They often addressed such issues as team member experience, implementation timelines, and rationales for curricular decisions. For example, discussion at a School 9 meeting focused on thematic programs and curricular differences among proposed plans.

Levels of understanding. Although the content of discourse became more reason-based in Phase II cases, parent understanding of the process and purpose of PSCI remained low throughout both stages. In Phase I, although parents in focus groups at two of five case schools reported high levels of understanding of PSCI, the same participants demonstrated a limited grasp of why they were attending the meetings, how plans would be selected, and in what ways their input would be used in the process. In the remaining three Phase I schools, parents stated that they did not have a clear understanding of the process and that the content was not communicated clearly. As a parent at one of these schools reported, “The information that they presented about charter schools—no one knows what a charter [is]. And everything was confusing.”

In Phase II, participant understanding was also low in many cases. Despite changes in the workshop design that were intended to build parent understanding, focus group parents at three of the six Phase II case schools consistently noted that they were unclear about how their input would be used, how the process worked, and the complexities of the school plans. Similar to responses in Phase I, some parents noted that the content was not communicated in a digestible manner, either due to complex terminology and concepts, language barriers, or facilitation. By the end of the fourth parent workshop at School 9, parents were unable to explain the purpose of PSCI in their own words.

Summarizing and reflecting back on the theory. Overall, these patterns of discourse and understanding indicate that as district leaders intended, engagement in Phase II case study sites was more deliberative than in the Phase I sites. Yet, the case data also suggest that achieving a truly deliberative process is not always easy. Parents' widespread confusion about PSCI and their role in the reform call into question the capacity for deliberative exchange. Furthermore, although the Phase II schools showed more signs of reason-based decision making and two-way dialogue, the engagement was still not as deliberative as some may have hoped and overall remained within the realm of an interest-based model, involving very little conversation aimed at improving the common good of all students in each school.

The observed tendency to approach deliberation from an interest-based perspective becomes particularly problematic when combined with the previous findings and concerns about *who* participated. If not all stakeholder groups are adequately represented by participants *and* if participants fail to consider the needs of those not present, then a truly democratic process and set of outcomes cannot be reached.

What Factors Mediated the Who, What, and How of Parent Engagement?

What explains the shift observed in the quantity and quality of parent engagement over time? We examine this question below.

Factors affecting participation. According to our analysis, several factors appeared to inhibit the quantity and perceived representative nature of parent participation in PSCI, including *skepticism* about its purpose, *mistrust*, *structural constraints*, *cultural and class differences*, and *power imbalances*.

District-wide, actors expressed skepticism about the purpose of parent engagement and the district's accountability to parent feedback, which may

have influenced their motivation to participate. Stakeholders at all levels expressed concern about the true role of parents in this initiative and questioned whether parent input would factor into final decisions. Applicant teams in Phase I repeatedly observed that parent engagement was not meant to contribute to district decision making, but rather, as one applicant team leader stated, “to give the illusion of democracy.” Many observers, including parents themselves, noted that parents were treated as “pawns” and “puppets” to advance the interests of competing teams. In interviews, all applicant team leaders and parents at half of our case sites expressed concerns that parent feedback via the Advisory Vote would have little influence on the final selection decision. As one parent shared, “A lot of the parents that I’ve spoken to that live in the neighborhood, their concern is ultimately it doesn’t matter what we vote. The district will decide whatever they want so why [vote]?”

Interestingly, final plan selection results in PSCI 1.0 and 2.0 indicate some truth to these perceptions. In PSCI 1.0, plans that “won” the parent Advisory Vote were selected by the Board in only 48% of schools. It is unclear whether parents in later cohorts were aware that parent recommendations were not always followed, but it is possible that these results might have affected subsequent participation rates. In explaining his decision to diverge from Advisory Vote results, Superintendent Cortines cited concerns about the “representativeness” of voters:

I recognized it in my recommendation, I went against [the Advisory Vote] sometimes when, because I knew that there had been lobbying and all of that and I said, “Yes, there was a lot [of votes cast] but I’m not sure it generally reflected the school community.

This explanation illustrates how important perceptions of representation are to democratic parent engagement. Without confidence in the representative nature of participants, their input may be disregarded.

These perceptions persisted in early Phase II (PSCI 3.0), when many parents reported that their input was sought too late in the process: They would have preferred to voice their opinions about the school plan during the writing process rather than after plans had been submitted. These views might in part be a result of the large number of schools for which there was only one plan submitted. In such cases, parents may have questioned the value of parent feedback in selection when in fact no selection would take place. In the end, most observers recognized that without a sense that their input would factor into final decisions, parents may not have been motivated to participate. When asked how the district might involve more parents, one parent stated that more might attend “if they would know that, or even see some proof, you know, that your input actually does matter.”

Skepticism regarding district accountability to parent feedback may have also weakened parent trust in the process. In addition, the prevalence of misinformation circulated during meetings and outreach (see discussion below) may have further increased parent distrust in the process and discouraged them from sustained participation. In fact, in all five Phase I cases, parents reported distrusting or being suspicious of at least one applicant team. Distrust was noted in 4 of 11 cases during Phase II.

Several structural constraints also appeared to influence participation. Location was a concern in a few of our case study schools in both phases. Because LAUSD located Phase I meetings and voting opportunities at school sites affected by the policy (either the focus school itself or a feeder school for a relief site), complaints arose about the accessibility of campuses to all affected parents and the potential bias this might incur on voting. At multiple schools, the LWV recorded complaints, generally from external teams, that locating the vote at the district team's school naturally gave the internal team an advantage in mobilizing supportive parents. As one team leader explained,

The incumbents have the total advantage. It's like how many may come to you and say, "We're going to decide whether UCLA has a better basketball team or USC has the better basketball team. We're going to hold this vote at UCLA."

Faced with greater numbers of sites and limitations in resources in Phase II, district leaders shifted to regional meetings, designed to host parents from several schools at the same site. Because the meeting site was often not the affected school, some attendees raised concerns that other affected parents might not have been aware of meetings, willing to make a trip to an unfamiliar school, or able to access appropriate transportation to a site further from their homes. It is important to note that LAUSD and its partners made significant efforts to address structural constraints over the course of the initiative, such as returning to school-based meetings in PSCI 4.0 and accommodating parent work schedules by hosting several meetings during the school day, after school, and on the weekend. Food, child care, and participation incentives (e.g., gift card raffles, participation awards) were also provided at later Phase II cohort meetings to incentivize parent participation and facilitate meaningful engagement.

Furthermore, some participants reported that cultural and class differences may have affected participation rates and representation. One applicant team leader identified potential differences in how various groups think about the role of parents in education:

In Latino communities, you are very trustful of an institution. So like in your home country, when you send a kid to school, you trust that they're getting

everything they need . . . whereas middle class parents are more willing to kind of see what are options out there, they have more resources to kind of look around.

In this way, certain subgroups of parents may have been hesitant to participate in PSCI because they did not consider it part of their expected role. In applicant team interviews, parent focus groups, and meetings in all case sites, we also documented racial and cultural tensions that may have made participation in school events less comfortable. Three Hispanic women in a parent focus group explained their concerns:

Parent 1: Things need to be fair between people.

Parent 2: When we go to the school office if a Black person shows up, “Good morning, what would you like?” But if a Hispanic person shows up . . .

Parent 3: They are very nice to the Black people but with us, no. We stay quiet.

Such tensions may have affected parent motivation to participate in the PSCI process and the level of representation at meetings.

Finally, power imbalances may have contributed to the participation patterns we observed. Many believed there was an uneven playing field in the PSCI review process. In particular, several leaders reported that teams supported by those with political and financial capital were better able to mobilize parents for the Advisory Vote in Phase I, such as bussing in parents and conducting get-out-the-vote drives. Several leaders dismissed these problems as endemic to voting in general (“Politics are inherent to any election,” said one district leader). Recognizing the challenges to administering a fair election due to power imbalances, leaders at the LWV and LAUSD nevertheless set out to mitigate the influence of power and politics on the voting process—by creating a safe environment at the voting site, monitoring the process, and educating as many parents as possible about the process. In the words of one LWV leader, “I don’t think it can be purely without [politics], but in, my goal, it’s as much as possible to give them some objective chances to try and decide this.” Our data indicate, however, that not all of these efforts were able to contain the political forces shaping who participated, particularly in Phase I.

Factors affecting the content and nature of discourse. Several factors appeared to shape the ways in which the content and focus of parent engagement evolved across our cases over time, including *facilitation, language, time, and availability of accurate information.*

Consistent with past research (Levine, Fung, & Gastil, 2005), meeting facilitators appeared to greatly influence the nature of discourse and understanding. First, facilitators' actions were associated with the degree of deliberative discourse. In the single outlier case school (School 11), where discussions were significantly more focused on the common good of the community than at other schools, and parents demonstrated higher levels of understanding, the facilitator appeared to be instrumental, directing conversations away from personal interests to the needs of the community. For example, in each parent workshop, she repeated goals that were inclusive of larger needs: "We want to raise the academic achievement of every child"; "The goal is to make this school something that the community is proud of"; "[You can help by] going back to other parents and telling them to get involved. You can be a spokesperson for your community." In contrast, in schools with less deliberative discourse, facilitators often did not direct parents to focus on broader interests. In other cases, facilitators failed to correct false statements made by parents, which may have allowed for the spread of misinformation.

Challenges overcoming language barriers may have also contributed to the low levels of participant understanding at many case schools. A large percentage of parents in case schools spoke Spanish as their first or only language. This added a layer of complexity to the discourse at parent workshops, as not all facilitators were Spanish speakers. Facilitation therefore was frequently mediated by an interpreter, and written materials were translated prior to distribution. In both phases of the reform, participants at several case schools questioned the accuracy of the translation. In a few case meetings, English-speaking parents were separated into one room and Spanish speakers in another. Although this eliminated possible problems associated with the use of headsets for translation, it also created potential differences in content between groups. Because parents in one room were not privy to conversations in the other room, this arrangement also prevented the realization of key deliberative principles that all voices are heard and that all reasons for and against the decision at hand are publicized.

In addition to the language barriers, time limits may have constrained parent understanding and opportunities for reason-based dialogue. One CBO that monitored the Phase I parent engagement process determined that there was not enough time for parents throughout PSCI to learn about the complexities of the PSCI initiative and plans presented (Patterson & Cruz, 2011). Parents left these meetings unclear about the process and how their feedback would be used in the final school decision. According to district officials and applicant team leaders, this lack of parent understanding also may have resulted from the complexity of the information presented; as Superintendent

Deasy noted, “Do I understand the nuances of putting a stint in a cardiac catheterization? Absolutely not and it’s like asking people to understand the language of [experts, which] the average parent doesn’t.” Although the redesigned Phase II activities were intended to build parent capacity in this manner (e.g., multiple workshops to build on participant knowledge from prior weeks’ presentations), inconsistencies in parent attendance led to confusion and not the intended deepening of understanding.

Availability of accurate information also affected the nature of discourse and level of understanding observed throughout the process. Interest-based and deliberative democratic practice require that participants have accurate information needed to make informed, and in the case of deliberative democracy, reason-based decisions. Our data suggest, however, that accurate, unbiased information was not always available to all parents due to several factors. First, the onus of responsibility for distributing information largely fell to educators within existing schools, which may have created a conflict of interest. At some schools, we heard reports of current teachers urging students and parents to keep the school in the same hands. At times, this included spreading negative information—sometimes untrue—about outside groups such as charter organizations. One parent explained,

The problem is that [in this school] teachers have taken it upon themselves to confuse parents. They’ve come outside while I’m waiting for my son saying that they’re [the outside applicant] going to fire the teachers. I asked because I like to know both sides. I went to the meeting for the other group and I asked them that, whether teachers would be fired and all of that. He said “no.” . . . But there are a lot of things that are untrue.

Second, there were few objective sources of information available to all participants. In fact, we found evidence about information being controlled, manipulated, and promulgated through print and social media. For example, an article in a local paper protesting the decision to award a PSCI school to a non-profit Charter Management Organization (CMO) explained, “The community should be aware that charter schools are run by outside entities. They are businesses, designed to make profits” (Walker, 2011).

Much like our observations of the relationship between politics and participation, potential power imbalances may have also affected the quality of information available to parents. In an ideal deliberative democratic process, those with more political or financial capital should not be able to assert their ideas more so than those with fewer resources. Yet, our data indicate that was not always the case throughout PSCI. For example, lobbying of parents was particularly strong in Phase I, when teams were seeking parent support in the

Advisory Vote. Several teams' members and their advocates went door-to-door to garner support, giving a potential advantage to the existing school team members, who had student and family addresses and phone numbers from school databases, whereas external teams did not have access to this information. Conversely, internal teams believed that external teams benefited from additional resources not available to those in traditional schools, such as funds for promotional materials or personnel dedicated to marketing and publicity.

Conclusions and Implications

In summary, our analysis indicates that LAUSD leaders made concerted efforts in PSCI to solicit parent input into decisions concerning the operation and design of their children's schools. Adjusting the design to address challenges incurred along the way, leaders shifted from a participatory–interest based model to a more deliberative and slightly less participatory approach in later years. In many respects, these changes greatly improved the process over time. The parent Academies ran fairly smooth and rarely achieved the level of conflict witnessed in the early years of the Advisory Vote. Yet, despite the efforts of district leaders and partners, and significant investments in supporting the process, our case data indicate that the democratic goals for the process were not fully realized in all schools. Most notably, low participation rates, concerns about representation, interest-based approaches to discourse, and low levels of understanding raise questions about the democratic nature of these efforts. Our research also indicates that several factors contributed to the patterns we observed. Skepticism, structural constraints, cultural and class differences, and power imbalances inhibited the quantity and perceived representative nature of participation. Furthermore, the nature of facilitation, time, and availability of information shaped the patterns and content of discourse. Language barriers and location also contributed to the challenges observed in both the quantity and quality of engagement. As such, the case of PSCI demonstrates the difficulty of engaging parents in districtwide reform.

Although the input of parents may have informed some district leaders when they selected plans, parent voice could have been much stronger had a truly democratic process been achieved. Without solid implementation of a democratic process, one might also question whether the process achieved any of the theorized benefits referenced at the start of this article. Although our research did not systematically measure effects of participation on parents, it raises some questions about what we might likely find in the way of the predicted outcomes of a democratic process. For example, the educative effects may have eluded parents because they were not consistently pushed to

develop deliberative skills (e.g., consider the viewpoints of others not present) or encouraged to take broader views on issues than they might otherwise have taken. Widespread skepticism about the process also suggests that participation may have led some parents to lose trust in the democratic process. Furthermore, in theory, decisions or input arrived at through a deliberative process may be more legitimate overall and more acceptable to those who disagree with the results, if they see that everyone's claims have been considered on their merits and that all viewpoints have been considered. Without these conditions, however, the decisions or input may lack this legitimacy, as witnessed at the outset of PSCI when some leaders discounted Advisory Vote results.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The results presented above lead to several implications that might aid future parent engagement efforts in better achieving democratic ideals. Developing mechanisms that ensure effective parent engagement in the design and implementation of reforms in urban districts, such as the portfolio district strategy, is a lingering challenge that deserves further attention. As one city leader stated, "we can all criticize the process, it's very difficult to come up with the right formula moving forward."

To boost participation, district leaders and partners should think carefully about structures that inhibit and attract parents. LAUSD administrators worked to schedule meetings at multiple times in the day and week to ensure that working and non-working parents could attend. In later years, they also provided child care, food, and in some cases, incentives, which are also important. Yet, the low turnout is an unresolved challenge not just for LAUSD but for most schools generally when trying to engage parents. Given the limitations of parents' schedules, time, and potential interest, it may be worth considering models relying on a representative group of parents for direct participation, with an expectation that this group solicits the views of others (e.g., via surveys, focus groups) and commits to representing the interests of those not directly involved. Leaders might also consider identifying representatives within various stakeholder groups to ensure inclusivity (e.g., ensuring there are parents of children from all grade levels, racial-ethnic backgrounds, special populations). Well-trained facilitators could then enforce deliberative practices to ensure that all voices are truly heard and considered in discussions and decision making (see Marsh, 2007, for more suggestions on structure and facilitation of deliberative meetings).

Districts considering similar reforms should also anticipate potential language barriers and consider investing in the development of unbiased, high-quality information, well-trained facilitators, and engagement opportunities

that include sufficient time and support to ensure understanding and common expectations around the nature of discourse. Resource constraints clearly limit the possibilities for many districts, but community partners and intermediary organizations may be able to assist in developing and disseminating unbiased information and preventing the spread of misinformation. One idea proposed early on in PSCI (and ultimately not adopted due to process changes and limited funds) was for a neutral party such as the LWV to create and distribute a pamphlet with information about each of the proposed plans prior to the vote, much like they do with ballot propositions in statewide elections. Such efforts could also help mitigate power imbalances, preventing one set of organized interests from making their voices heard above others. CBOs with a history of working with parents could also play an important role in developing the deliberative skills of parents, such as how to weigh the merits of one claim against another and how to evaluate evidence (see Pamental, 1998, for further discussion of deliberative skills). At a few of our case study sites, teams and parents utilized social media to mobilize parents, to share information, and to advocate for their interests. Although we do not have adequate evidence to complete a systematic analysis of the role of social media in deliberative decision making, this is an important area for future research. In particular, social media may at once expand (e.g., for those outside the direct community or with little access to information) and restrict (e.g., for those without Internet resources or capacities) participation and alter representation, and also influence the nature of the democratic process.

This research also illustrates the value of using a democratic framework to understand the implementation of parent engagement policies. It draws important attention to the dimensions of *who*, *what*, and *how*, and raises valuable questions about the intent and execution of such reforms. In this case, LAUSD leaders appeared to shift their intentions over time toward a participatory, deliberative feedback process, and attempted to mitigate the impact of factors constraining its implementation such as distrust, misinformation, language barriers, and structural issues. Our findings reaffirm the importance of trust to the realization of democratic principles writ large (Cohen, 1999; Hardin, 1999) and in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Marsh, 2007), as well as the ways in which power imbalances threaten these ideals.

Finally, our findings shed light on important questions about the scope of decision making in such reforms. Specifically, two dimensions of scope—balancing the interests of the individual and the community, and matching the content of decision to parent capacity—emerged as potential factors influencing the application of democratic principles. Despite modifications to the structure and process in Phase II to encourage parents to consider the interests of the broader community, including parents not present was a challenge.

We identified several strategies important for encouraging the consideration of community interests, including quality facilitation and the provision of accurate, unbiased information. One element not yet discussed, however, is the importance of providing parents with opportunities to learn about the needs and interests of others. Typically associated with representative structures, the absence of such opportunities in this deliberative, participatory model may have impeded the consideration of and accountability to community interests.

Second, the content of decision making must be matched to parent capacity. Dewey (1927) described the idealized role of participants in a representative democracy: “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied” (p. 207). Over the course of LAUSD’s initiative, parents were brought to the table for both purposes—to identify problems in schools in need of turnaround and to select the best solutions. The ambiguity of the role of parents, in this unique participatory, deliberative process, raised questions about the capacity of parents to engage in decision making about the complex and wide-ranging topics concerning school turnaround. In some cases, educators and administrators viewed parents as experts on the shortcomings of the school, but ill-equipped to make decisions about complex curricular, instructional, and operational changes. In contrast, some parent engagement advocates believed that, with the provision of quality capacity building (e.g., training, information), parents would be able to select quality turnaround plans for their schools. Striking a balance between these opposing perspectives proved to be a challenge, in part because of the institutionally embedded beliefs regarding the capacity of parents to engage in decision making. Not only are capacity-building opportunities for parents essential to their engagement in complex decision making, but districts and schools must also consider, and possibly modify, existing institutionally held beliefs regarding the role and ability of parents to ensure effective implementation of participatory, deliberative models for parent engagement in school decision making.

Finally, the PSCI case provides important lessons about policy implementation more broadly, notably the challenges of implementing reform over time and of embedding multiple mechanisms of change within complex policies (Honig, 2006). As illustrated here and elsewhere (Marsh et al., 2013), the political activity resulting from competition—another key lever of change in PSCI—greatly affected the quantity and quality of parent engagement. As such, districts initiating complex policies should continually reassess the extent to which planned activities—within and across levers of change—play out as intended at multiple points in time. This purposeful reflection may

enable policymakers, much like LAUSD leaders and partners attempted, to make mid-course adjustments and address unintended consequences.

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Notes

1. Parent *engagement* and parent *involvement* are used synonymously in much of the literature. Some authors distinguish between the two, referring to “engagement” as a more active, dynamic partnership with parents and “involvement” as more passive parent participation (Auerbach, 2007). Given the design of the reform we studied and the intent of its leaders, we use “engagement” throughout this article.
2. This section of our article draws heavily on Marsh (2007).
3. Although not the focus of this article, a select number of parents were also appointed to participate on review panels along with representatives from other stakeholder groups (e.g., labor unions, charter schools, higher education) in the first 3 years. These review panels were meant to be more representative, involving key leaders representing the interests of their constituency. We did not focus our data collection on these review panels or participants, but instead on the broader engagement efforts. Of course, parents’ interests were also theoretically represented in this process by their Board Members, who parents and other voters elect and who have the final authority in the early rounds of Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI) to select school operators.
4. Under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), ratified by union members and approved by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Board in December 2011, external teams of charter operators and non-profits were only eligible to participate in PSCI if they agreed to operate the school using district employees under the current collective bargaining agreement. In exchange, all

district schools now had the option of adopting a governance model allowing for greater freedoms. As a result, in the first two rounds of PSCI prior to the MOU (Phase I), there was greater participation from external teams. In the two rounds subsequent to the MOU (Phase II), few external teams participated and many schools received only one application.

5. However, one could also argue that even with these directions, parents may find it difficult to represent the interests of others and that a truly deliberative process must at a minimum include representatives of the major constituency groups in a community (see Marsh, 2007). Also, engaging parents early in the design of plans may further lessen the need for widespread participation in judging plans. In other words, if plans truly embrace parent interests during development, it becomes less important for parents to evaluate plans at the end.

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