The NYS legislature must empower parents to participate in meaningful decision-making and to enforce current provisions of NY State Education Law.

Background:
Mayoral control has systematically disenfranchised parents, denying their right to democratic participation in decision-making on matters that affect their children and communities. Meetings are often held without required public notice. Parents are frequently frustrated by insufficient opportunity to evaluate and propose input to policy and regulatory changes. Meeting minutes and results are often cloaked in secrecy.

Despite specific safeguards in the legislation that were intended to protect parents’ rights, the Department of Education, without authorization from the state, eliminated community school boards, created a layer of top-down regional administration and rendered districts into meaningless entities in 2003. The reforms proposed in January 2007 include increasing the number of schools in the Empowerment Zone and eliminating Regions. Just as Charter Schools operate outside of the normal channels of governance, appeal and protection, offering no uniform safeguards of meaningful parent participation, the empowerment schools are disconnected from the traditional support and supervision networks, leaving parents no clear channel for appeal or complaint. The latest changes that eliminate regions allow the Legislature another chance to strengthen existing district structures and clarify their legal authority until the governance law is revised in 2009.

Proposal:
The Legislature should restore the functions held by Community Districts, under the supervision of Community Superintendents with the authority to implement policy and address community needs for every school in their district, including those in the new empowerment and private contractor networks. Community District Education Council’s (CDEC’s) role as conduits for public input into decisions on capital, zoning, and education policy should be strengthened, expanded and clarified, and the Legislature needs to fund training and ensure better oversight to guarantee functioning Parent Associations (PA’s) and School Leadership Teams (SLT’s) in all schools.

School Leadership Teams
- Created in 1996 by state law to include parents, teachers and principals in school-based decision making, assessment of school educational programs on student achievement, and alignment of the school budget to those goals, few SLT’s are actually functioning as intended.
- The Legislature must fund necessary training and ensure oversight to guarantee functioning SLTs in all schools, with support and accountability by District Leadership Teams (DLT’s), CDEC’s, and District officers.
- The Legislature must direct the State Education Department to survey each SLT annually (in lieu of the CR 100.11 Biennial Review Form, which the DoE failed to carry out when last due on Feb. 1, 2006).
District Leadership Teams:
- Make certain that DLT’s support and review all district SLT’s in keeping with the Regulations of the Commissioner (CR 100.11), making public the results of a comprehensive annual, rather than biennial, review.
- Appoint district SLT coordinator to guarantee training, oversight and consequences for non-compliance of State Ed Dept. SLT/DLT requirements.

Community School Districts:
- Restore the Community School Districts as meaningful entities. Enrollment, zoning, administrative support, reporting, planning, evaluation tools and opportunity for community input should reflect parents/pupils requirement to attend schools within district boundaries.
- Reinstate a transparent district budgeting process, with oversight by CDEC’s and Presidents’ Councils (PC’s).
- Reinstate Community District Superintendents’ responsibilities that were lost with superimposition of regions, rendering districts into compliance-only entities. Ensure that every school, including those in the new empowerment and private contractor networks, is fully answerable to the Community District Superintendent, CDEC and PC.
- Include the public in the process to select and evaluate district superintendents, expanding the powers of the CDEC’s, in consultation with PC’s, to select candidates, linking evaluation to hire/fire/promotion decisions.
- Hold Community District Superintendents accountable for CDEC execution of duties, as part of evaluation (includes: regular public meetings/general support and consultation of constituencies ranging from principals/schools to SLT’s, PA’s, and PC’s; review of District Comprehensive Education Plan (DCEP), capital plan, capacity report, mid-year report on district goals & objectives and relevant timely district annual report card).

Community District Education Councils and Citywide Councils (CCHS and CCSE):
- Ensure that the duties entrusted to the CDEC’s by NY State Education Law 2590-e (2003) are carried out. Provide funding for adequate information, training, technical support and mechanisms for oversight and accountability, to be reported on publicly by the new Dept of Ed’s CEO of Parent Engagement.
- Expand the specific powers of CDEC’s and Citywide Councils to hold hearings and approve zoning changes beyond Chancellor’s Regulations A-185, to encompass any and all proposed structural changes to district schools, including: restructuring, displacing, truncating, combining, expanding, disbanding, placing or incubating new, charter or existing schools in leased, new, or existing school buildings. CDEC’s and Citywide Councils in consultation with PC’s should also have authority to review any proposal to close any school or sell any school building in the district. The hearing window should be extended from 45 to 90 days.
- Improve public feedback to the Capital Plan by requiring sound and relevant data and ample hearing time. Require a hearing window of at least 45 days from publication of most recent Building Condition Assessment Surveys. Reform Capacity/Utilization report to include current year school enrollment and space utilization figures, as well as city planning data on new construction, to be confirmed by each SLT in every school building. CDEC’s, in consultation with PC’s, must be given the power to review any leasing of school buildings in the district.
- Bolster the role of CDECs and Citywide Councils to report community input to Panel on Education Policy so that the public shapes discussion around central policy issues before they are decided. PEP borough members should be obligated to report input from all CDEC’s and Citywide Councils in consultation with PC’s in their borough before any vote on major policy changes, allowing ample time for hearing (90 days for each CDEC/PC).
- Relieve unnecessarily burdensome of financial disclosure obligation on volunteer parents by reintroducing Bill A 11509-A (Brennan), or Bill A 11721 by removing the term “at a minimum” in the definition of new financial disclosure requirements.
- Maintain the two Citywide Councils (CCHS and CCSE) and give them similar rights and responsibilities as the CDEC’s.