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Advocates hope parents stay involved

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Five months ago, Irvington Citizens for Fiscal Responsibility didn't exist.

The loose-knit group of about a dozen residents in the Irvington school district formed in March to fight what it believed to be excessive spending in next year's school budget. But with the start of a new fiscal year for schools, marked by new trustees sworn in throughout the region this week and next, members plan to stay involved in schools year-round, not just during the budget season.

"We saw what we did as the first step in a very long process," said Wilson Van Law, 45, an Irvington parent with two children in district schools. "We're in it for the long haul."

They won't be alone.

Both the African American Men of Westchester and Westchester Children's Association hope to spread that level of civic engagement throughout the county.

The groups are hosting a series of workshops titled "Improving Education Outcomes Through Community Advocacy" to educate taxpayers about the importance of being involved in schools, and how to advance important issues.

The first meeting was held last month in White Plains, where about 40 residents learned "Advocacy 101," or tips on identifying community concerns and organizing their neighbors. Future meetings are being planned for Mount Vernon and Yonkers, said Melvin Burruss, president of AAMW.

Parents often complain about the lack of communication from trustees, but many are unaware of the impact their combined voices can have on curriculum, spending and other issues, he said.

"We just want parents to become active in the education of their kids," Burruss said. "That school board needs them, just as much as they need the board. There has to be a partnership in education."

The lagging economy last school year prompted an unusually high level of community participation in many districts, with residents successfully demanding tax increases kept in the low single digits. Attendance at school board meetings spiked, and some districts moved gatherings to larger rooms.

The fervor of the election season carried over to the Mount Vernon school district's first 2009-10 board meeting on Wednesday. Hundreds of residents and staff gathered in the A.B. Davis Middle School auditorium to protest planned staff cuts at Lincoln Elementary School.

Parent Sheila Figueroa said the community showed the power of organizing when it joined together to stop cuts at the school last year.

"If you want your voice heard, you have to come out," Figueroa said. "You can't complain if you don't vote. You can't complain if you don't speak out."

But Cora Greenberg, executive director of the WCA, said public interest in schools centers around taxes and other controversial issues, like the cuts at Lincoln. To affect policy on spending and other

issues, an "engaged citizenry" must be present at board meetings and in schools all year long, she said.

"The Board of Education is concerned with things other than budgets," Greenberg said. "There is an ongoing conversation year-round about things affecting the schools."

The Irvington parents group admittedly came into the budget process late, Van Law said, and few of their suggestions for cuts were included in the final budget. But members plan to form a citizens committee to review budgets and curriculum and to speak at board meetings, he said.

"It really is difficult to have any impact unless you're really following things," Van Law said.

Lisa Davis, executive director of the Westchester-Putnam School Boards Association, said trustees value input from residents, and often hold informal talks or work with parent-teacher associations to address issues outside of monthly meetings.

She urges parents to join local PTAs, which often have committees that help districts with budget planning and legislative issues.

"As a parent, you're really much more knowledgeable about what's going on in your schools," said Davis, a former member of the Chappaqua school board. "You can advocate for your child and more broadly for all children, and be a part of that partnership that should exist."

Additional Facts

To learn more

For information on upcoming education advocacy workshops hosted by African American Men of Westchester and Westchester Children's Association, visit <http://wca4kids.org>. Information will be posted when available.
