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### **Parents to help govern schools**

#### **Alonso reform plan unprecedented in city**

By Sara Neufeld

Sun reporter

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Parents of Baltimore City students will soon be involved in evaluating their school principals. They'll be able to check homework assignments online. And they'll have summer classes of their own to learn what to expect when their kids go to middle and high school.

Baltimore school administrators unveiled last night an unprecedented initiative to get parents involved not only in the education of their children but also in the governance of their children's schools.

The school board signed off on spending about \$1 million in public and privately raised money next academic year to contract with community-based organizations, which would be charged with getting parents involved and forming PTAs in the many schools that don't have them.

Recognizing that having involved parents is critical to a school's success, city schools Chief Executive Officer Andres Alonso has said for months that a parent engagement initiative would be one of his three signature reforms during his first year on the job. The other two are the creation of six new middle/high schools and the overhaul of how schools are funded, with power decentralized to the schools. July 1 will mark a year since Alonso began his job as CEO.

As Alonso gives more power to principals, parents would serve as a balance of power. For every school, Alonso and his staff are proposing that the PTA or other organized parent group elect four parent and two community representatives. Those six people would have input into a principal's selection and evaluation, and they would be responsible for giving Alonso feedback on the principal's annual school budget. That part of the proposal, which must be approved by the school board, is generating controversy. Dozens of administrators attended last night's board meeting as their union president, Jimmy Gittings, expressed a variety of concerns about the system's decentralization, among them how principals will be evaluated. Dennis Moulden, chair of the system's Parent and Community Advisory Board, said the group will not endorse the proposal until it is publicly debated.

The six elected parent and community representatives would undergo extensive training and serve on the school improvement team. Existing school improvement teams have only two parent representatives, whose roles are not clearly defined.

Other measures under way include tightening up procedures for distributing annual school climate surveys so that parent, student and staff responses can be used in evaluating principals.

The system is offering courses this summer for parents of new middle and high school students, telling

them what to expect. And it is giving parents log-ins to an internal system Web site, where they will be able to check their children's grades and homework assignments and find a directory of teacher e-mail addresses.

The initiative is being led by Michael Sarbanes - the son of former Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes and the brother of Rep. John Sarbanes - who was hired this year to coordinate parent and community involvement in the city schools.

Sarbanes said he believes every city school has the capacity for an active parent body, but he acknowledges that "we've got a ton of work to do" to get there: Only about 50 of the city's 192 public schools have active PTAs or PTOs on record with the central office.

During his first year in Baltimore, Alonso has attended dozens of PTA meetings and seen widely different levels of parent involvement in schools serving similar populations, demonstrating that the climate a school creates can affect parent participation.

The reasons parents do, or do not, get involved in their children's education are varied and complex. In a city with many single-parent households, where many children live with adults other than their parents, and where many parents must work long hours to make ends meet, several Baltimore schools have long struggled with parent involvement. In some cases, parents are incarcerated or addicted to drugs. In other cases, parents had a negative experience in school when they were young, or their child's school has made them feel unwelcome, or they don't know how to navigate the bureaucracy.

Last night, the board authorized the Family League of Baltimore City to disburse \$500,000 in system money to community-based organizations that will submit proposals for parent mobilization through the city procurement process. Also, the system has received a \$300,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and other grant applications are pending. Sarbanes said the system will likely have about \$1 million of public and private money combined, which would serve about 60 schools in the first year.

Examples of community-based organizations that will likely take on the role of parent mobilization include after-school programs and church-based nonprofits.

Organizations will be invited to apply for a grant of about \$15,000 to mobilize a particular school; Sarbanes said he expects many organizations will apply to serve multiple schools. An organization serving three schools would have enough money to hire a full-time employee to oversee the work.

Renewal of the organizations' contracts would be subject to their ability to increase several things: the return rate on school climate surveys, the number of parents participating in school activities, participation in the school's PTA or other parent group, and the number of families completing applications for free or reduced-price meals.

Schools get extra federal funds if they have a high percentage of students living in poverty, as measured by subsidized meal applications. Included in the funds is about \$4,000 per school earmarked for parent and community engagement; in the city, Sarbanes said, the money often goes unused. The elected parent and community representatives would be in charge of making sure it gets spent.

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