

Education Consumer Associations

www.education-consumers.org

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What is an Education Consumers Association?

An Education Consumers Association (ECA) is local or state level citizen group that is dedicated to empowering parents, school board members, employers, and all others who have a consumer's stake in public schooling. Just as teacher organizations and other educator groups represent the unique interests of their members, ECAs represent the consumer's interests. It is like a parent network but broader and includes all community members who pay for or make use of the local schools. An ECA represents the interests of education's consumers, not education's providers.

The primary focus of an Education Consumer Association is student learning outcomes. However, it also serves as a forum for discussion of other educational issues of local concern. For example, school or district aims, priorities, or other matters pertaining to educational policy or practice may be discussed--even if such issues are not commonly addressed by the public or school boards.

In the partnership between educators and the public, parents and taxpayers are the senior partners—just as buyers are the decision-makers in their relationship with sellers. And, just as educators are represented by an organization representing their unique interests as providers, parents and taxpayers are justified in having an organization to represent their interests as consumers. ECAs work with schools and districts in the interest of children but they maintain a businesslike relationship—just as do buyers and sellers in a marketplace. Educators are welcome to participate in ECAs, but they must wear their consumer caps.

What do ECAs do?

Local school systems are a publicly funded monopoly. Customer satisfaction is not a requirement for them to stay in business. With little accountability and assured funding, schools have little economic incentive to do more than maintain a positive appearance. ECAs provide a way for parents and interested citizens to more accurately assess the quality of their local schools and to deal with them as informed consumers.

Broadly speaking, ECAs improve education by informing consumers. ECA's independently gather and disseminate information that helps them assess what their children are getting for their school experience. ECA reports can significantly impact school quality because they are a form of consumer feedback that is independent and can be ignored only at the peril of voter dissatisfaction.

ECAs enable education's consumers to pool their knowledge. Parents, taxpayers, and their elected representatives are able to find and understand school performance information that is not easily accessed by the public. An enormous amount of factual information about school quality is publically

available but it must be located and interpreted (often through a cloud of jargon and spin). ECAs are an answer to this problem.

Reliable factual information about local school performance can be useful to a variety of consumers. For example, it can afford parents on the market for a new home a way of finding the best schools or contacting parents who already have a child enrolled in a given school. Employers seeking to relocate a business are afforded a way of contacting parents or other employers about the quality of local schools. Unlike the informants available in communities that lack an ECA, ECA members can provide school assessments based on fact, not just shallow impressions.

ECAs pool their information and inform the public through a variety of activities. Examples include organizing a communications network, maintaining a website, holding meetings, electing leaders, and organizing public forums for school board candidates.

ECAs have access to the [Education Consumers Foundation](#) (ECF) website--an online source for consumer-friendly education research and policy analysis. ECF is a non-profit that is wholly independent of any government or educational group. In addition to providing access to useful information, the Foundation is linked to the Education Consumers Consultants Network™ --a group of consumer-friendly scholars and credentialed experts.

At a time when a significant and growing number of parents have opted for home, private or charter schooling, a ECAs can play a key role in their success. They provide parents consumer-friendly information about the quality of the available choices. The [Memphis School Guide](#) and [SCHOOLSCORES](#) website are excellent examples of such resources.

How to Form an Education Consumer Association

It only takes a few steps to get started: Identify some likely partners, explain your idea, start networking, and prepare for growth.

1. Here are some starter activities.
 - If you know people who have expressed an interest in education issues, explain and ask them to join with you.
 - Hand out flyers at the door of the next school board meeting. State the “who, where, what, and why” and make it clear that the ECA’s primary aims are improved achievement, accountability, and cost-effectiveness. Be sure to include local contact information and the Education Consumers Foundation’s web address: www.education-consumers.org
 - Write a letter to the editor of your local paper to bring your efforts to the attention of interested others. *See an example.*
 - Use social media to inform and recruit concerned citizens. Ask them to network or attend a meeting and become involved. Contact reporters at local media outlets.
2. Hold a meeting and form a communications loop. A web site is a convenient and low cost way to disseminate information.

3. Bring the activities of your group to the attention of local media outlets. Be sure to describe it as non-partisan, non-sectarian, and grassroots—a group that views schools from a consumer’s perspective. Make it clear that the focus is student achievement. Again, your linkage to the ECF will be helpful. It is important for you to define your group for the public rather than allow others to do so.

4. When local media run a story on education, use the opportunity to present a response: supportive or critical. For example, when schools report something about achievement levels, send a clear and fact based letter to the editor that assesses the report from a consumer viewpoint. Feel free to agree with good points but not hesitate to point to weaknesses and seek improvement. Send copies of any such letter to your local education writer or columnist as well.

5. Other activities:

- Develop a list of local educational needs, concerns, and priorities as seen from a consumer perspective.
- Review current, past, and proposed initiatives undertaken by the school system with regard to their success or failure in improving student achievement.
- Prepare a list of results-oriented recommendations for school board consideration.

Creating a New Relationship between Consumers and Schools

ECAs have an enormous potential for impacting school outcomes because they fill a void in the conversations about education that take place in almost all communities. Most school districts have PTAs but they are a medium for collaboration, not a forum for consumer advocacy. An organization voicing parent and taxpayer concerns about third-rate learning outcomes, for example, is apt to be a significant addition to the public conversation about local schools. Typically, school districts dominate such discussions because they have communications resources dedicated to maintaining a favorable public image and to discouraging the opposite.

In the absence of recognized, consumer-friendly sources, journalists are limited in their ability to balance their stories and the public hears only the school district’s perspective. As a result, school accomplishments are hyped and shortcomings attributed to a lack of funding or the result of faulty parenting, not teaching/learning weaknesses. Similarly, issues such as accountability, cost-effectiveness, and convenience to parents are often invisible at the local level. Serious failures are often reported only if their disclosure is inevitable or some intrepid reporter digs them out.

Even when there is widespread sentiment about a schooling issue, consumers may have little influence. Schools act to diffuse opposition to their policies. Committees formed to address school issues are typically organized by schools and stacked to suit their purposes. Parent and community participants are added or removed at the pleasure of the schools. Meetings are frequently orchestrated so as to pacify rather than make substantive changes. In typical public/school district partnerships, consumers are treated as the junior partner.

ECA Independence

With an ECA acting as a voice for local consumers, tenor of the relationship between schools and consumers can be much different. Consumer concerns cannot so easily be ignored, dismissed, or discredited.

ECAs have their own organizational structure, set their own agenda, appoint their own committees, and conduct their own meetings. ECAs are not dependent on the local schools for invitations, input, or validation of their views. An ECA's role is to monitor the actions of schools and to comment and report to the public as they deem necessary and appropriate. Member opinion, community surveys, and various forms of objective data are collected, summarized, and disseminated in consumer-friendly form. Schools may provide input but they do so at the invitation of the ECA—as would be the case with any organization that is wholly independent of the schools.

Information Needed by the Consuming Public

The need for an independent, consumer-friendly source of information often becomes especially evident when innovative school policy changes are under consideration. The question facing the public is: Can the representations of a school system that may have been doing a mediocre job be trusted as a guide to a significant educational change?

The answer: In the absence of consumer-friendly external review and accountability, probably not. The recent implementation of the Common Core curriculum is a useful example. A community with an ECA would have been able to pull together relevant research, share it with the public, and encourage wider and better informed engagement. As it was, however, most states and communities had Common Core forced on them with little public discussion.

Objective data on school performance is available from state and national databases but opinion data can be gathered too. Groups that might be surveyed with regard to a venture like Common Core include recent graduates, parents of recent graduates, employers who hire recent graduates, professors who teach recent graduates, and teachers who have worked with recent graduates.

Education's consumers fund school districts and vote for their leaders but they cannot exert meaningful influence on district aims, priorities, and performance if they are kept in the dark. Candidates for school board rarely mention student learning issues, in part, because school board elections are dominated by district employees whose interests and priorities often center on the conditions of their employment. In truth, however, the primary reason student learning goes unmentioned is that neither the candidates nor their constituents are sufficiently well informed to make it an issue or to hold leaders accountable. By shining the light of consumer-friendly information on learning outcomes, an ECA can create a sea change in the quality of local schooling.

The following is a sample letter calling for the establishment of an ECA:

Dear Editor:

Are we getting the whole story about how much our kids are learning in school?

Not long ago, I read an online letter from an angry parent. She said my kids (ages 10 and 12) are bright, they get "A"s and "B"s in most subjects, but neither of them can spell, write a correct sentence, summarize readings accurately, or organize their thoughts on paper. My 7th grader had only two English assignments this semester and they were "collaborative."

I sent my children to the public school trusting that they would come out with the skills they need to become productive adults. Now, I worry that I made a big mistake.

I know other parents who have similar concerns. Their kids get good report cards but don't really seem to be learning. For example, one had a son who finished high school with a "B" average but did so badly on the ACT that he had to take several remedial courses in college. Good grades reflect real learning only if a school's standards are high. Parents assume that they are adequate but how do they know?

In truth, it's hard for a parent to know what kind of education their child is getting because most parents aren't experts and almost everything they know about their schools comes from the schools themselves. Not surprisingly, almost all of it is favorable. Even the educational accountability reports published by the state typically do not make it easy for users to compare and evaluate local schools. Often, they are like financial reports: useful mainly to experts.

Parents and communities need a way to learn about their schools that is independent of the perspective presented by the schools themselves. Parents and taxpayers are education's consumers and the schools are its producers. Each has a unique set of interests.

Education Consumers Associations are a response to this need and one is now forming in our area. They are nonprofit grassroots organizations dedicated primarily to improved student learning and better preparation for college and the job market. For more information, call Jane Doe at 555-your-number or email her at jane@youremailaddress.com