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Parent Voting for School Councils Is Moving Online

By [SAM ROBERTS](#)

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You may not know it yet, but next month New York City will conduct what election officials are billing as the first exclusively online public election in the United States.



The city's Department of Education is conducting an experiment in participatory democracy. Nearly a million public school parents will be able to cast advisory votes for members of their community education councils. The council members, who are unpaid, play a role in school rezoning, in helping schools develop their budgets and in advising the department on the need for new schools.

The parents can vote on a secure Web site from home, from schools, from libraries — any place with Internet access — 24 hours a day from April 6 to 12.

But if the past is any guide, it is not clear how many parents will bother to vote, however convenient the process. School board elections have historically produced dismally low turnouts, and a number of critics have expressed skepticism that the latest campaign will galvanize voters.

[Betsy Gotbaum](#), the city's public advocate, describes this year's online voting as "an interesting concept," but cautions that its success depends on how widely it is publicized.

Echoing a fundamental complaint of some parent groups, Ms. Gotbaum said that "the reason people don't want to get involved is that the councils have no power and nobody listens to them."

Jacqueline Lipson, the Department of Education's community council coordinator, says that a nonprofit group, [Grassroots Initiative](#), has been hired to promote the vote. [Election-America](#), a private company, is providing the technical expertise. Less than \$500,000 has been budgeted for the effort — less than half the cost in 2007, the last time the councils were chosen.

"We wanted to make the election open to a wider audience," Ms. Lipson said. "We hope that will drive the numbers up."

Parents have until Thursday to apply to be candidates for the local councils and for two citywide councils: one for high school and one for special education. Public forums will follow, and then the advisory voting will begin. After that, in May, official parent selectors — officers of each school's parent association or Parent-Teacher Association — will cast the official vote. The city says that the selectors "are expected to vote in good faith and take the results of the parent's advisory vote into serious consideration."

Ballot information in nine languages is available from a department-sanctioned Web site, powertotheparents.org.

Except for the city's public campaign-financing program, New York has never been regarded as a paradigm of participatory democracy, what with one-party rule in many jurisdictions, gerrymandered districts, obstacles to registration and ballot access and the staying power of incumbency.

The city's local school board elections have offered a striking example of voters staying away in droves. In 1999, the last time there were regular direct elections for the old boards (which were abolished when [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) won mayoral control over the school system), 95 percent of parents of public school children did not vote.

Many parents argued that the boards (like their successors, the community education councils), did not count, that the old system of weighted voting was too complicated, or that the electoral process was rigged to disproportionately empower the teachers' union and other organized groups.

Two years ago, the last time there were community education council elections, 690 candidates ran for 307 seats. In one district, 60 candidates competed for 9 seats. But in three others, there were more seats than candidates.

Parents could attend public forums and fill out advisory paper ballots, but few did. Fewer than half the designated parent association or PTA officers voted to ratify the community councils.

Today, 66 seats on the 34 community and citywide councils are unfilled.

Parents are eligible to nominate themselves online for the councils unless they are department employees, elected officials, have been convicted of a felony or are determined to have a financial conflict of interest. Forums are scheduled from March 23 to April 6, when the straw vote will begin. Parents can vote using an identification number that is supposed to be mailed home this month or that they can otherwise obtain from their children's schools. One parent per student is permitted to vote.

No one is predicting how many parents will vote, but school officials expressed hope that participation will increase because mayoral control is up for renewal, innovative [charter schools](#) are being debated and [President Obama](#) himself has declared education to be a priority.

One gauge may be whether more parents vote for the community councils than the 5 percent who turned out in the last school board election 10 years ago.