

Lessons from the Field of School Reform Organizing

A Review of Strategies for Organizers and Leaders



Lecciones del Campo de la Organización para la Reformas Escolar

Informe de estrategias para organizadores y líderes



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This report was produced by the Institute's Community Involvement Program (CIP). CIP was initiated in 1996 to support community organizing for school reform. CIP provides support to community groups organizing parents and young people to improve their schools, as well as to groups collaborating to shape more effective and equitable education policies in New York City and in major cities in the northeast. We also conduct research on school reform organizing nationally.

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About Lessons from the Field

Spurred by the economic boom of the late 1990s and a decades-old national standards movement that increased both the transparency of assessment results and the awareness of urban public school failure, communities across the country are turning to community organizing as a strategy for improving public education. Community service organizations, housing, youth and economic development groups, as well as immigrant rights and advocacy groups, are developing education organizing components to improve their local schools, many prompted by their work starting after-school programs.

As organizations confront the problems of local schools, they are creating forums for parents, youth and community residents to discuss concerns and work collectively for improvement. As these efforts mature, groups are developing and refining school improvement strategies that combine broad accountability pressure with a school-level focus. They are learning how to hold school system leadership accountable for better academic outcomes while building the relationships between school staff and administrators and parents, youth and community that are so critical to schooling success.

Based on a 2000 survey of school reform organizing nationally and subsequent research conducted by the New York University Institute for Education and Social Policy, this publication offers community organizers, parents, youth and residents a number of field-tested strategies for organizing for school improvement. Through a series of issue briefs, we explore how community groups are responding to three strategic organizing challenges: 1) developing partnerships with schools based on accountability; 2) organizing both youth and adults for public education reform; and 3) improving instructional practice in low performing schools.

For more information about school reform organizing, as well as about the organizing groups profiled in this document, please visit our website at www.nyu.edu/iesp, or call us at 212/998-5880.

BUILDING POWER AND PARTNERSHIP TO IMPROVE NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS

Most groups begin school reform organizing in response to parent, youth or community concerns about local public schools. Parents may be concerned about school safety, or poor student achievement. Youth may be angry about arbitrary discipline, the lack of adequate textbooks, or limited access to guidance counseling. Community residents or local churches may be concerned that the schools are under-funded or are not providing the quality of education that residents desire. As they tackle these issues, school reform organizing groups have learned that they must combine inside and outside strategies for change: they must build external accountability pressure for schooling improvement while simultaneously developing partnerships with the educators whose beliefs and practice they hope to change.

LESSON 1

Build an Independent Source of Power

When community-based groups initiate school organizing, they are often surprised at the level of suspicion their efforts engender among school staff. Most schools have an officially sanctioned organization (a PTA or similar parent group, or a student government group) to represent parental or youth concerns, and principals and teachers have little experience working with outside organizations. Because schools are often so isolated from the community they serve, and too often also defensive about their practice and academic outcomes, they may have little knowledge of a local organization's track record in serving the community. Thus school officials

may refuse to meet with, or even actively discredit, the outside group.

Recruiting parents, youth or community members is the first step for groups in establishing their legitimacy as genuinely representing constituencies served by the school. Groups that can mobilize large numbers of members through collective action tactics can use this power base to force administrators to meet with them, and acknowledge their concerns. Austin Interfaith, an affiliate of the Texas Interfaith Education Fund, reaches parents through school-based organizing, and recruits community members through congregation-based organizing in churches and synagogues committed to school reform as part of a larger vision of community improvement. Members from schools and congregations meet in a collective leadership team to discuss issues and develop campaigns. Through its congregations, Austin Interfaith is able to mobilize a stable, sizable constituency to support its school reform goals. As a multi-issue group, Austin Interfaith also draws on the power and influence built through organizing on other neighborhood issues, such as housing, welfare reform or immigration policy, to fight for schooling change.

LESSON 2

Look for strategic allies within the system

Without access to a school's data about its academic achievement, or access to the school facility so that parents can engage with teachers and administrators and learn first hand

about school climate, culture and conditions, groups struggle to develop sharp and directed campaigns for reform. Groups need the facts and figures about student academic outcomes broken down by race, ethnicity and poverty in order to assess, for instance, whether poor black students score consistently lower on reading tests or are referred to special education at much higher rates than white students. Groups need information about teacher certification and other teacher quality measures so they can understand whether experienced teachers are predominantly located in the district's most advantaged schools. Groups need physical access to failing schools so they can actively engage teachers and administrators in ongoing dialogues about improving school performance.

Although many schools are defensive and deny access to parents and community groups, many such groups have found ways to work around school resistance. To get data, some groups file Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests or simply conduct their own investigations. For example, to explore the extent to which children of color were denied access to special programs, ACORN in New York City sent separate teams of black and white parents to ask about enrollment procedures for gifted programs. Some groups may gain access to necessary school information, such as test score results, through their members on local school councils, or through their support for parent members on those councils. But the key to acquiring the data to analyze how well or how poorly the school is serving the neighborhood's children depends on developing – and maintaining – relationships with a school's principal or core of powerful teachers. Building alliances with strategic allies can legitimize the group and provide access to information, as well provide entry into the school.

LESSON 3

Developing relationships with teachers

Developing relationships with teachers is essential to community-based efforts to improve schools. Schools and districts cannot generate the improvement their children desperately need if school administrators, teachers, and community groups are continually at odds. Yet community groups often encounter several obstacles in developing relationships with teachers. Some teachers are reluctant to work with organizing groups since district administrators may single them out as troublemakers. Other teachers react to parent-organizing efforts with hostility based on fear that parents will dictate how teachers should teach. Sometimes there is no real willingness among school staffs to see parents as contributors to their children's education. Schools are used to (and more comfortable with) parents playing a traditional support and involvement role, rather than focusing on school-level education issues such as reading achievement, bilingual education and graduation rates.

To develop a base of both parents and teachers, groups often start with a non-controversial (and winnable) issue, and focus on a target outside the school. This tactic can help build sufficient power and trust to address the more difficult issue of improving student achievement. For instance, upon discovering a link between poor student performance and low student attendance at a local elementary school, and recognizing that the low attendance rates were related to a lack of adequate affordable health care, Austin Interfaith campaigned for and won a local health clinic. This victory then helped position the group to raise the problem of poor student performance with staff, and focus collaboratively on improving instruction. When parents voiced concerns over how few students were accepted to a nearby middle school science magnet program, school staff

responded by creating a sixth grade science program to prepare students for the magnet program.

Though the strategies organizing groups use to gain access to educators vary, all are based on the premise that one to one relationships between parents and teachers are crucial. Close relationships break down stereotypes, build trust, and motivate people to tackle issues and avoid blaming each other. Some organizing groups form parent or youth teams inside schools that develop local campaigns and enlist school staff and administrators as allies. Others provide services to schools that can become a base for developing campaigns around mutual goals. Chicago's Logan Square Neighborhood Association, for instance, runs parent-led tutoring programs, which have served as springboard for parent-teacher dialogue about homework, grading and standards.

LESSON 4

Maintain external pressure for reform

The effort to maintain relationships with key school personnel can sometimes discourage organizers from applying external pressure for change. Yet, in the absence of pressure, the focus of the partnership can devolve into schooling support, rather than school improvement. Faced with bureaucratic and public pressure to improve test scores, schools often try to enlist parents and other outside partners in fundraising, or providing services, rather than

in a dialogue about how each side can work to improve school performance.

Groups sometimes try to maintain external pressure for reform without endangering local relationships by developing campaigns focused on targets at levels of the system beyond the school. Over its ten years of organizing, Mothers On the Move expanded its efforts from school-based organizing to develop broader campaigns for change at the district level, and joined with other New York City groups to push for class size reduction, increased school resources, and school governance reform. These broader campaigns help energize the base – members are engaged in rallies or press events – and they maintain the visibility of the group in the media, for example. The constant “presence on the streets” reminds school officials that the group is focused on schooling and is capable of taking action against them if the pace of reform is too slow.

Though maintaining this public presence is critical, community groups often find it difficult to be working simultaneously on multiple campaigns at multiple levels of the school system. The constant activity can overextend leaders. Multi-issue groups and institution-based groups can draw on different constituencies to back up their demands for reform. Parents in Austin Interfaith, for example, focus on developing collaborative relationships with school staff to improve school culture, while the members of Austin Interfaith churches press for reform through major public actions such as rallies with district and state level targets.

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ORGANIZING K-12: EMERGING MODELS FOR ORGANIZING YOUTH AND ADULTS

A 2001 study by the IESP found of the sixty-six groups we surveyed in eight sites, half worked only with adults, another quarter with youth, and only a quarter worked with both youth and adults. Improving public education requires working with all grade levels – from kindergarten through senior year in high school (or really, from pre-K to the public university system) – rather than isolating attention on elementary or middle school. Yet, few organizing groups have such a broad agenda. Groups work either with parents, often focusing on reform in the elementary school grades when parents are most active, or they work with high school youth and do not involve parents.

The reasons for working with both adults and youth are obvious: campaigns can draw on two power bases. Adults have voting power and established networks of connections and constituents; youth have firsthand knowledge of what goes on inside schools, energy and ideas for reform. Young people can also play an important mediator and spokesperson role in their family and community. In immigrant communities, youth often are the bridge between parents and schools, making it possible for immigrant families to interact with teachers and administrators across cultural and linguistic differences.

Today, a growing number of groups are attempting to work with both adults and youth, and are developing strategies for how to do this effectively.

Intergenerational Organizing: Creating space for youth in the Mississippi Delta

Mississippi-based Southern ECHO believes the fight for positive social change requires creating a new generation of community organizers. Their intergenerational model of organizing integrates young people into all aspects of the adult work – from serving on governance boards to participating in planning, implementing and evaluating campaigns. This model grew out of organizers' experience in the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee in the 1960's, and their conclusion that the lack of an intergenerational civil rights movement in Mississippi hampered their communities' struggle to implement the Voting Rights Act.

Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County, a Southern ECHO affiliate, uses a leadership program to recruit students from local elementary, middle and high schools. Young people joined the adults' efforts in a four-year fight to oppose the development of a new school facility to serve a sparsely populated white middle class neighborhood, and to demand the creation of a new school to relieve overcrowding in majority black and working class neighborhoods. Young people on the governing board of the Indianola Parent Student Group, another Southern ECHO affiliate, launched a successful campaign against chemical spraying at a nearby plantation, and led an adult/youth campaign to win new science labs, books, and science curricula for their school. Youth and adult organizers presented the school board with data about unused funds from the lease of school lands to plantation

owners, and forced the board to earmark these funds for science education.

Working side-by-side, youth and adults in the Southern ECHO network learn to respect each other and often, to overcome deep-rooted mutual suspicions. Adult support for youth helps break down the barriers youth organizers face. Many youth organizers have encountered adult targets that distrust or dismiss their knowledge and commitment. Using negative stereotypes of young people as violent, irresponsible and uneducated, adults have discredited youth research and recommendations, and sometimes deliberately established hurdles by refusing to meet with them, not returning their phone calls, or preventing them from handing out fliers or surveys in school.

Moving beyond the transience of youth: Bronx organizers commit to long term reform

While Southern ECHO began from an intergenerational model, some groups that began by organizing either youth or adults are now seeing the benefits of working with both constituencies. Transience can make youth organizing a low priority for adult organizing groups because young people age out of the work so quickly. The Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC) had been an adult-led group for over two decades until it began organizing youth in 1999. “We initially stayed away from organizing youth because we didn’t think it made sense to invest so much time in leadership development for members who would grow up and move out of our organization,” says Mary Dailey of NWBCCC.

The NWBCCC had run a youth recreational program as a way to keep high school age youth off the streets. But as they worked with the young people, they realized youth shared the adults’ concerns about neighborhood problems.

Organizer Laura Vasquez began to draw youth into campaigns on local school issues related to overcrowding, street crossings, and a campaign to convert a local Armory into school space. In 2000, the youth named themselves Sistas and Brothas United (SBU). SBU realized it needed a “youth only” space to work on building leadership skills, but they also realized the importance of being a part of the larger organization and working with the adults. Vasquez explains that, when the youth do outreach, they organize other youth and adults the same way – although they may change their language and approach when trying to involve an elderly adult without children, for example.

Besides working on campaigns to improve school facilities and physical safety in the neighborhood, SBU has worked at several local high schools on increasing resources for security and curriculum. The group has provided an after-school tutoring program to supplement the schools’ curriculum as they work towards fighting for better schools. They have also developed teacher and student surveys to help them create a professional development program designed to improve teacher quality. As part of a citywide effort to transform large, failing high schools and replace them with new small schools, SBU is presently collaborating with Fordham University to develop a community-justice-high school.

While youth and adults worked together on organization-wide campaigns, integrating youth and adult organizing required a shift in the organization’s view of young people, from being perceived as supporters to being seen as potential leaders. Though the adults supported the youth, they were not used to listening to young people’s ideas and working with them to develop strategy. From its inception as a project of the NWBCCC, SBU has since evolved into an affiliate. Youth are integrated into all aspects of the NWBCCC, serving on

committees and the NWBCCC board with adult members. Vasquez explains that the young people of SBU have “changed the way parents in this neighborhood think about things,” and how youth are perceived. “It’s not just about putting a token youth in a room with adults,” Vasquez says, pointing to such effective engagement strategies as SBU transforming a PTA into a Parent Teacher Student Association at one school. “It was difficult to change the structure [of the organization],” says Vasquez. “In the beginning, adults would interrupt kids, but now they get upset if the students aren’t at meetings.”

Changing adult expectations and creating youth capacity: South Central L.A.

While Sistas and Brothas began as a project of the adult-led NWBCCC, in Los Angeles, youth have led the way for adults to take up education organizing. The South Central Youth Empowered through Action (SCYEA) is the youth arm of the decade-old multiracial Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment. SCYEA started out mobilizing youth around such issues as reducing the number of neighborhood liquor stores and decreasing the availability of illegal drugs, and began working on school reform issues in 1995. SCYEA’s first education campaign focused on ensuring that funds from a \$2.4 billion bond designated for physical repairs of LA schools went to the schools that needed it most. After SCYEA won this campaign, it moved to student achievement issues. For instance, it won two additional counselors in a school where surveys revealed that 81 percent of students had never spoken with a guidance counselor, and that 40% of the student body never received their class schedules until the fourth week of school.

In fostering a “pipeline” of younger student leaders, SCYEA has developed a political

education academy to help students work on such skills as public speaking, data analysis, and media outreach. The group trains its youth to work on school and community public policy issues, and has transcended a youth-only focus. In 2002, the Community Coalition began organizing parents in support of SCYEA. Because adults vote, pay taxes, and have legitimated roles in school decision-making, they can be powerful allies for a youth agenda. As director and coordinator Katynja Udengwu says, “A high school principal is more likely to listen to a parent than a student.” Also, Udengwu explains that for a successful campaign the group needs to mobilize hundreds of students, but only 20 to 40 parents to accomplish the same goals. It’s been more difficult for SCYEA to organize parents than youth – the youth are easy to reach out to, says Udengwu, because they’re all together in schools, while parents never congregate in equivalent spaces. Still the group finds ways to reach parents, and is often inspired by parental dedication. The youth leaders define campaigns in their schools through talking with other students, identifying problems and figuring out ways to resolve issues (such as a recent success in getting a principal to commit to getting textbooks on time) But when the group works with the parents on broad policy issues, youth leaders become full-fledged community organizers.

Bringing together youth and adults forces organizing groups to pay attention to power dynamics. Groups need to be attuned to youth needs for developing skills in their own spaces, and need to understand adult concerns about youth commitment and ability. To bridge the “generation gap” often requires a group to shift its cultural style of organizing. Groups need to be open to letting youth speak and make decisions, as in Southern ECHO and NWBCCC’s broad scale inclusion of youth on their governing boards. Incorporating youth

leaders doesn't have to become a revolving door because youth opt out when they graduate. Developing effective training, as SCYEA does, continually infuses the group with a new crop of strong youth leaders, and creates a pipeline of potential new community organizers. SBU's experience demonstrates that once the adults embrace participation by youths, the organization as a whole becomes stronger, and gets a renewed, and renewable, infusion

of energy. Adults from NWBCCC join youth to help education campaigns, and the youth come out to support adult-led housing actions. Though tackling projects hand-in-hand requires groups to rethink conventional approaches to organizing, and though youth are, of course, a transient base, training the "next generation" of community leaders may indeed help continue the long haul of reform efforts.

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Interview with Katynja Udengwu, Director and Coordinator of South Central Youth Empowered through Action (2004)

FOCUSING ON INSTRUCTION

To significantly improve student learning, schools must transform their instructional practice. Most waves of reform wash over schools but never change the deeper structures of school culture and instructional practice: the relationships among adults as well as between adults and students; the teacher attitudes, beliefs and expectations of what students can achieve; and the teacher and administrator skills and capacities focused on improving student outcomes.

As the field of school reform organizing matures, an increasing number of groups are focusing on improving instruction through increased teacher quality. They are drawing on recent research about the critical role of teachers in ensuring student achievement, and learning how to use the new federal mandate that states report on teacher quality and hold teachers to rigorous standards. This work has led to several promising strategies.

Changing attitudes: Sacramento ACT and teacher home visits

The chorus of blame is familiar to many schools: teachers think parents are indifferent or ignorant; parents think teachers don't respect them or don't understand their cultures or communities. In California, Sacramento Area Congregations Together (ACT), an affiliate of the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), developed a campaign to address what members saw as a crippling cultural divide in their schools. Because teachers didn't live in the same neighborhoods as their students, they had little connection or relationship to the families the schools served. And because parents did not

have the same education level as the teachers, they felt looked down upon by teachers and were hesitant to raise their concerns. Applying a basic organizing principle about the necessity to build relationships, ACT resolved to help parents and teachers get to know each other. In 1998 ACT began taking teachers into poor communities to visit their students' homes. The visits challenged teachers' stereotypes about families as uncaring, and challenged parents' fears about interacting with school staff.

ACT involved both parents and teachers in developing the teacher home visit project. The organization surveyed parents to learn if they were interested in home visits, and required a majority vote of school staffs to participate in the project. It took a year for ACT to build support among parents, teachers, and principals, and to win the cooperation of the district superintendent. Because support from school and district administrators was crucial to the project's success, the group conducted its outreach in a very cooperative manner. Instead of presenting the plan to principals, ACT worked with principals to design the plan. By engaging principals in the project, ACT found allies who were willing to hold meetings with teachers and discuss their participation. Parents participated in the design process by leading a campaign to ensure teachers were paid at premium rates for the visits, and won a commitment from the Superintendent to allocate sufficient funds. Parents also provided information on their neighborhoods to train teachers before the visits.

Through the efforts of the statewide PICO organization (Pacific Institute for Community Organizing), what began as a project in eight

schools has turned into its own entity – the California Home Visiting Center, supported with federal funds and modeled on the Sacramento ACT project. Hundreds of schools in California now sponsor thousands of home visits, with teachers going to students’ homes twice a year – once in August before school starts and again in January to report on student progress. The increased communication between teachers and parents and students in Sacramento has yielded positive results, including rising graduation rates, improved classroom behavior and lower in-school suspension rates, as well as improved standardized test scores.

Changing school cultures: OCO creates small schools

Groups like Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), a California faith-based organization and PICO affiliate, have sought to improve instruction by building new schools characterized by norms of parent, community and staff collaboration. OCO began education organizing on issues of school overcrowding, but quickly moved to develop campaigns to address the inequitable distribution of resources across Oakland’s schools.

Frustrated by the slow pace of district change, the group turned to charter schools as a way to create high quality schools for its members. But although community input in the newly opened charter schools was quite high, student test scores were not much better than in the other district schools.

In 1999, OCO began advocating for a district-wide small schools policy as a new systemic strategy for improving student achievement. OCO held a large public action in the fall of 1999, which included 2200 parents, teachers and leaders, and resulted in city and school officials’ support for a New Small Autonomous Schools Policy. In response,

the district partnered with OCO and the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) to develop a small schools policy and issue a formal Request for Proposals to open new small schools. The Request for Proposals, which OCO helped write, required teacher, parent and community collaboration in the planning. All three constituencies were required to participate in developing the vision of the school and proposing alternative approaches to instruction.

Since 2001, Oakland school district has opened 15 new small schools in collaboration with OCO and BayCES. Besides creating opportunities for more personal teacher/student interactions, the small schools provide flexible learning environments in which teachers meet with parents and community, and work with them to develop curricula and new instructional approaches. Underscoring the importance of community involvement and organizing for long-term and sustainable school reform, OCO organizes workshops for parents and teachers on topics ranging from the politics of accountability, parent rights, and volunteering at schools, to helping with students’ homework. OCO built local organizing committees in the new schools.

Changing who teaches: Chicago ACORN’s “Grow Your Own” teacher campaign

When Chicago ACORN parents learned about the poor test scores in their children’s schools, they quickly focused on improving teacher quality as a central strategy. The group approached school principals and learned that the rates of teacher turnover were so high in ACORN schools that district funded programs for teacher recruitment, induction, and professional development were almost completely ineffective and a huge waste of money. Research shows that teachers are most

effective in their 5th through 10th years. But if teachers in ACORN's schools were leaving after their first, second or third year, how would these schools ever develop a qualified teaching staff?

To reverse this trend of severe teacher attrition, ACORN members resolved to help people from their communities develop the credentials needed to become teachers in their schools. According to ACORN, people from low-income communities of color are more likely to stay in their neighborhood teaching positions. They tend to have a more respectful approach to students and parents, and they can serve as role models for students. However, these potential teachers are less likely to get the education that allows them to go into teaching in the first place.

To find ways to recruit new teachers who would stay, ACORN looked to existing models such as a 14-year-old program in North Carolina that trains paraprofessionals to become teachers in the state's hard-to-staff rural schools (and reports an 89 percent retention rate for these teachers). It also looked at the Grow Your Own project, developed by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, to help neighborhood parents get the credentials necessary to become teachers. These examples convinced ACORN to develop a campaign to introduce "Grow Your Own" on a citywide scale.

ACORN has enlisted the help of other Chicago school reform and policy groups in the Grow Your Own campaign. Logan Square Neighborhood Association, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, Designs for Change, as well as the University of Chicago's College of Education, are all supporting ACORN's efforts. ACORN is recruiting paraprofessionals to participate in the program. The campaign has won wide support from local universities and the Chicago Public Schools.

Focusing on increasing school funding, on curricula changes, on changing school disciplinary rules or improving school facilities are important in transforming schools, but without a focus on creating the school culture, teacher attitudes and staff commitment to deliver effective instruction, whatever achievement gains result may be temporary because the changes may represent only stopgap measures. Though building relationships with educators takes time and commitment, those relationships are critical to changing teacher beliefs and classroom practice. All three of the above organizations focused on building meaningful relationships between the community and teachers. Developing these lines of communication and relationship are essential to creating schools that are committed to working for their students and with their students.

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