Transforming Schools Through Community Organizing: A Research Review

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Community organizing engages parents in poor performing schools to improve children's educational outcomes. Although standard parent involvement practices such as monitoring children's homework, reading to them, and volunteering in schools are linked to students' positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2001), they are oftentimes insufficient to boost the achievement of low-income children in troubled schools. Parents in these failing schools realize that although they are responsible for supporting children's learning, schools are responsible for providing a quality education (Zachary & olatoye, 2001). Poor school performance, high dropout rates, lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate facilities demand new forms of parent engagement to hold schools accountable. Community organizing offers one strategy to engage parents to effect system change.

What Is Community Organizing for School Reform?

Community organizing for school reform, also known as education organizing, refers to the actions of parents and other residents of marginalized communities to transform low-performing schools towards higher performance through an "intentional building of power" (Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001, p. 5). Its goals are both building community capacity and reforming schools. Improving educational outcomes is just part of a broader agenda of creating power for low- and moderate-income communities. This makes community organizing distinctive from other school reform efforts (C. Brown, personal communication, October 3, 2003).

How Does Community Organizing Differ From Parent Involvement?

Community organizing differs from standard forms of parent involvement in important ways.

Goals

Unlike parent involvement projects whose goals focus on an individual child's school success, the goals of education organizing *focus on system change* and school accountability. While organizing sometimes involves helping individual children and reforming single schools, organizing groups work toward changing the system for *all children*. Primary issues addressed by community organizing include accountability, parent engagement, school environment, equity, standards and performance, special programs, and quality of instruction (National Center for Schools and Communities, 2002b).

Roles

Education organizing invites groups of parents to exercise their responsibilities as *citizens* to make needed changes in schools (Giles, 1998). It focuses on raising parents' consciousness and increasing awareness of their collective power to effect change (National Center for Schools and Communities, 2002b). This approach differs from parent involvement projects that relate to parents as individual *consumers* of education, or as "at-risk" adults who need to be "fixed" by educational professionals (Giles).

Community organizing also seeks to transform the way school personnel view parents. Rather than view parents and community members as problems that need to be remedied or contained, organizing influences educators to acknowledge the community as a resource, with its own "funds of knowledge" that can enrich student learning and teacher practice (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Relationships

Education organizing invests in building relationships among parents as the foundation of action. It focuses on "relational power," which is the power to act collectively in order to make system change (Cortés, 1993). All too often schools individualize systemic problems (C. Brown, personal communication, October 3, 2003). For example, a student might be faulted for poor performance when in reality the problem also lies in a lack of qualified teachers and instructional materials. Organizing counters this individualizing trend by bringing people into relationships with one another so that they can identify and act on school issues. Through one-on-one conversations, group dialogue, and reflection, parents and other residents develop a strong sense of community, and learn how to use their collective power to advocate for school change. In contrast, parent involvement approaches that focus on individual skill building rarely provide opportunities for dialogue about common problems. The absence of these opportunities often precludes parents' working together for school improvement (Giles, 1998).

Locus of Power

Standard parent involvement avoids issues of power and consigns parents to support the status quo (Shirley, 1997). While school-based shared decision making gives parents some influence over what happens in schools, educators remain in control (Henderson, 2001). Community organizing, on the other hand, intentionally builds parent power—it equips parents with the skills to leverage a more even playing field when it comes to tackling educational issues and shaping solutions. Although some of the changes organized parents propose are common types of parent involvement activities, such as family math sessions and open houses, parents are involved as decision makers, not just consumers.

In addition, parent groups work from a base outside the school, and do not depend on schools for approval and organizational support (Zachary & olatoye, 2001). This base outside the school typically consists of alliances with community-based entities that provide organizing assistance and support.

What Are the Characteristics of Community Organizing for School Reform?

Based on a survey of 200 groups engaged in community organizing for school reform, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and its partner organizations identified the following characteristics of community organizing groups (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002a, p. 12):

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- "They work to change public schools to make them more equitable and effective for all students."

- "They build a large base of members who take collective action to further their agenda."

- "They build relationships and collective responsibility by identifying shared concerns among neighborhood residents and creating alliances and coalitions that cross neighborhood and institutional boundaries."

- "They develop leadership among community residents to carry out agendas that the membership determines through a democratic governance structure."

- "They use the strategies of adult education, civic participation, public action, and negotiation to build power for residents of low- to moderate-income communities that results in action to address their concerns."

Although parents and community members may form grassroots organizations to address school issues, much of the current literature on community organizing focuses on professional community organizers and their roles in education organizing. These individuals and organizations have many years of experience in leadership development and political strategizing. In particular, organizations such as New York ACORN, the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, and Oakland Community Organizations have built political clout through their work in economic and social development projects and have brought their influence to education issues. They have developed a sophisticated method of organizing, and possess the expertise to mount effective campaigns.

Parents are the most important constituency in education organizing (National Center for Schools and Communities, 2002a). Groups that organize parents for school reform are diverse, consisting of housing and neighborhood associations, faith-based organizations, and parent groups. Some of the groups focus solely on educational issues while others organize around various social issues affecting neighborhoods. Some provide services and engage in community development while others concentrate on community organizing. Some groups are independent entities while others belong to national or regional networks (Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001; National Center for Schools and Communities, 2002a).

What Strategies Engage Parents in Community Organizing?

As community organizers conduct their work, they have to meet and serve the needs of individual community members, and what these members want is a good education for their children (Simon, Gold, & Brown, 2002). Their strategies are grounded in local concerns and focus on the development of community leaders who can use collective power to address important educational issues.

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Base Organizing on Parent Concern

People are motivated by issues that directly affect them (Beckwith & Lopez, 1997). Community organizing groups facilitate a process of issue identification, but it is parents and community members themselves who must define and act on their vision and goals. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) refers to this as the "iron rule"— "Never do for others what they can do for themselves" (Cortes, 1993, p. 299). The process of issue identification begins with "one-on-one" conversations and small group meetings to understand what parents are passionate about when it comes to their children's education. Through deep and ongoing dialogue parents define the concerns that become the driving force of organizing efforts.

Many times, however, parents' concerns are not about academic issues, but about children's health, safety, and after school hours, making it critical that organizing groups let parent voices be heard and validated first before tackling issues about classroom learning. These nonacademic issues are "winnable issues" that give people a sense of their own power to effect change. It is much easier to win an after school tutoring program than to hire highly qualified teachers for every classroom. Winning a campaign, no matter how small, builds parents' confidence. It creates a sense of efficacy to change public institutions. In some cases, parents' success in school campaigns leads to organizing on other social issues in the community.

Develop Parent Leadership

Community organizing depends on parent leaders to move forward and sustain the agenda of systemic school change. Consequently, community groups invest considerable effort on leadership development. This process involves knowledge and skill development and the exercise of leadership roles.

To develop knowledge and skills, parent leaders participate in trainings, mentoring sessions, small group meetings, and public actions. From these experiences parents and community members expand their understanding of educational matters. They learn how the school system works, including issues related to curriculum and budget. They acquire an understanding of school data and how to use it to leverage change. Moreover, parents and communities become skilled at public speaking, researching issues, leading meetings, and negotiating with public officials.

Parents gain opportunities to exercise various leadership roles in the work of organizing. They conduct community surveys, speak in rallies, mobilize parents to attend events, and plan and carry out campaigns. They may also assume formal leadership roles on the organizing groups' committees and boards.

By becoming immersed in organizing, parents experience a personal transformation and begin to think of themselves as leaders. For example, parents in a Texas borderland community who participated in leadership training increased their advocacy skills and self-confidence. They created stronger relationships with school staff and administrators and joined various decision-making committees on curricular programs and school governance (Quezeda, 2003).

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It is not unusual to find parents with little or no previous involvement with schools who develop into articulate and forceful leaders. Nonetheless, engaging parents in leadership roles can be difficult. Many parents work and some must work multiple jobs just to make a living. Policy campaigns can also be drawn out over time and the lack of concrete gains challenges sustained participation (Mediratta, Fruchter & Lewis, 2002).

Build Social Capital

Social capital refers to the relationships of trust and reciprocity within and across communities that form the basis of collective action. Through one-on-one conversations and small group meetings parents share their stories. These stories stir up empathy and invite parents to support each other in their strengths (Blanc, Brown, Nevarez-La Torre, & Brown, 2002). By discovering similar experiences and aspirations, parents become invested in working as a group.

In addition to promoting "bonding" social capital within a group of parents, community organizing also promotes "bridging" social capital, which connects parents, schools, community institutions, and public officials (Putnam, 2002). One survey of 40 organizing groups found that confrontational tactics are seldom used. Instead the groups focus on collaboration and negotiation. They build a parent and community base and recruit school administrators and public officials willing to collaborate with them on specific issues (National Center for Schools and Communities, 2002a). It is not difficult to see how organizing on school environment and equity issues such as overcrowding, lack of textbooks, and poor facilities in low-income areas are commonly understood problems among educators and likely to generate their support.

However, an ongoing challenge for community organizing is how to build bridging social capital when schools resist change and discourage parent activism. Organizing groups resort to confrontational tactics to strike at the very core of deeply rooted, fundamental problems (Beckwith & Lopez, 1997; Mediratta et al., 2002; Warren, 2001; Zachary & olatoye, 2001). When parents and community members press schools on sensitive issues and demand accountability, conflict often erupts. The stakes are extremely high when school leaders are publicly exposed and can lose office. Thus, community organizing is perceived to be threatening to many educators. Some teachers also show distrust of organizing activities and distance themselves from these activities (Mediratta et al., 2002; Quezada, 2003).

Still, some mechanisms are evolving in local contexts to build social capital between schools and community organizing groups. They include the following:

- *Principal meetings*. Community groups initiate meetings among principals in the schools where they have projects to share problems and strategies and develop new initiatives.

- *Home visits*. Teachers conduct home visits to learn about families and develop more positive relationships with parents.

- *Work groups*. Teachers and parents work together to design small schools, develop curriculum, and organize after school and arts programs.

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- *Organizing meetings*. Teachers and parents participate in small group meetings to identify shared concerns and develop an action agenda to be shared with the wider community.

For example, in one Austin, Texas, elementary school the principal and teachers felt frustrated by district resistance to assigning students to bilingual classes. They opened a series of dialogues with parents, which resulted in a vision of bilingual education. Realizing that change involved district-wide policy changes, the school and the parents organized a district-wide campaign. They held forums involving other schools and presented the research conducted by teachers and parents about the status of bilingual education in the district. As a result of the campaign, the district laid out a plan for bilingual education that reflected the ideas of parents and teachers, and released funds for the purchase of bilingual materials (Simon et al., 2002).

Mobilize Collective Power

Although low-income communities do not have economic power, they capitalize on their collective political power and strategic alliances to accomplish their goals. Parents participate in collective action that serves different purposes. One such purpose is to *affirm community power* among people who have traditionally been powerless. The IAF, for example, conducts neighborhood walks around the school periphery to rally public support for schools that have made a commitment to work with the community around common goals. It also uses public assemblies to transform communities' understanding of their strength and efficacy by giving parents set roles in conducting and speaking at these gatherings (Shirley, 1997).

Community organizing groups use collective action to *focus on public accountability*. Through public meetings, parents, school staff, and elected officials examine school information, deliberate on the issues, and commit themselves to solutions (Gold, Simon & Brown, 2003). Some of these meetings can be confrontational while others emphasize mutual commitment and support.

Parents also participate in the political arena to *counterbalance the influences on elected officials* (Gold et al., 2003). They join letter-writing campaigns and attend rallies, school board meetings, and other public events. They become active in voter drives and campaigns for elective offices. For example, the Chicago Board of Education decided to sell property to a developer even though it had been earmarked for a new middle school. The Logan Square Neighborhood Association and a group of parent mentors who work in the schools successfully mobilized the community to pressure the board to overturn that decision (Blanc et al., 2002).

What Does Community Organizing Accomplish?

Community organizing in education focuses on the policy and system changes needed to revitalize schools and ensure student achievement. Recent studies by Research for Action and the Cross City Campaign and by the Institute of Education and Social Policy report commitments from educators to implement changes concerning equity, high learning experiences, school-community linkages, school

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climate, and public accountability (Gold, Simon & Brown, 2002b; Mediratta et al., 2002).

Policy and System Changes

Community organizing has yielded a range of policy and system changes to transform poorly performing schools. Among others, they include new school facilities, the creation of small schools, new financial resources to schools for after school, health and safety programs, new academic programs in math and science, and increased professional development opportunities for teachers.

Community organizing operates at different levels. While the work begins locally, where people are, in order to achieve systemic results, organizing groups have sometimes been able to expand to the state level. Some community organizing networks such as the Texas IAF and the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO) affiliate in California have been able to leverage their local organizing to influence state-level policy. The Texas IAF succeeded in securing seed money from the Texas Education Agency to pilot 21 schools in low-income areas that would develop innovations and engage parents to enhance student achievement. The pilot eventually led to state legislation to fund public schools that would include parent and community involvement in restructuring efforts and school accountability for student achievement (Shirley, 1997; Simon et al., 2002). In California PICO developed legislation with the state education department to fund a new program supporting parent/teacher home visits and also secured funds for a statewide after school program.

Policy gains, however, are fragile and vulnerable to changes in leadership and the health of state and local education budgets. Community organizing is a continuous process that shifts between defending past gains and moving forward to realize unmet goals. Because community groups stay in the community their value added lies in serving as the "institutional memory of school reform" (C. Brown, personal communication, October 3, 2003). With school leadership changes, community groups provide a stable presence for renewing a base of support to sustain school reform efforts. Oakland Community Organization in California, for example, has worked to maintain the district's small schools initiative despite the state takeover of the school district.

Home-School Connections

Community organizing takes parent involvement to a new level of engagement with schools and communities (Gold et al., 2002b; Cortes, 1993). Parents increase their presence and roles in schools. They improve communications with teachers and, as they learn more about what goes on in the classroom, become more effective supporters of their children's learning at home. Parents serve as tutors in class and after school programs, lead parenting workshops, and help maintain school safety. In addition, parent leaders expand their roles beyond the school to address community-wide issues.

Although there are gains in parent engagement and leadership, not all parents welcome community organizing. Parents who are able to secure special individual

favors for their children from school principals feel threatened. Other parents feel that school leaders get distracted from their instructional responsibilities as they attend to parent and community needs (Shirley, 1997). Still other parents have not been effectively engaged because of work schedules, family obligations, and language barriers. These situations indicate that there are continuing issues that a community organizing strategy needs to address.

School Climate

Community organizing transforms family-school-community relationships. Schools are beginning to welcome parents and to serve as community centers that provide adult education programs and host community meetings. Both parents and teachers develop mutual respect, and teachers report raising their expectations of students' potential (Simon et al., 2002). This success does not come without its own challenges. As parents and community members develop "insider" connections and take formal school decision-making roles, they must also address how to safeguard their autonomy and avoid co-optation.

Student Achievement

Data about student achievement tends to be less reported in the research on community organizing. This is perhaps because there are a number of contributing factors that explain student achievement. Standardized test scores, which are commonly available, are only one form of measurement and do not give a comprehensive picture of student knowledge. Furthermore, organizing efforts focus on developing a political constituency that holds schools accountable. Long-lasting improvements in student test scores are more likely to occur in the context of policy and system changes in which educators are accountable (National Center for Schools and Communities, 2002a).

With these considerations in mind, Oakland Community Organizations reports success with its small schools campaign to address overcrowding. In these small schools, the general trend has been toward improved reading and math test scores (Oakland Community Organizations, n.d.). In the Texas Alliance Schools, a network of schools linked with community organizing groups, school performance shows mixed results by grade level; while gains have been made in the right direction, schools still have to catch up with the test scores for the general student population and for the population of disadvantaged students (Shirley, 1997).

Conclusion

Community organizing strengthens school reform efforts. However, it is only one among different pathways that connects schools and low-income communities to achieve a shared vision of success for all students. Another approach is the creation of learning communities based on the principles of parent and community involvement, collaborative governance, culturally responsive pedagogy and

advocacy-oriented assessment, which can produce outstanding results for migrant and low-income students (Reyes, Scribner & Scribner, 1999). Also, in schools where trust is established through the daily interactions of the school community, the achievement of low-income and ethnically diverse students improves over time (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). What community organizing shares with these other approaches is the social capital that works toward the best interests of students. What makes it different is turning social capital into political capital. Community organizing focuses not only on school reform, but also on empowerment. It drives home the point that parents and communities are powerful agents of reform. Because school reform is a political issue, organizing builds the political will to ensure that poor schools gain access to the resources they need to improve the quality of education.

Acknowledgements

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