Community Organizing: What We Know and Need to Know

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AERA, 2005

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What Community Organizing IS:

- Builds *power:* mobilizing large groups to address imbalance of political and economic power.

- Recruits *local leaders*: training to develop skills of parents, youth and educators to lead the organizing.

- Focuses on *accountability*: increasing quality and responsiveness of low-performing schools.

What community organizing for school reform is NOT:

- Not traditional parent involvement
  - Focused on all students, not individuals
  - Independent of the school

- Not service provision or advocacy
  - Iron rule: never do for others what they can do for themselves.

But community organizing often results in greater parent involvement:

- Parenting
- Communicating
- Volunteering
- Learning at home
- Decision-making
- Collaborating with the community to bring services and resources to the school

The roots of this work:

- Labor movement and Saul Alinsky's Back of the Yards project in the 1930s
- Mobilization of African American communities in civil rights and Black Power movements
- War on Poverty neighborhood-based citizen organizations, leading to poor people's groups, e.g. Welfare Rights Organization and ACORN
- Consensus-based, non-hierarchical decision-making in women's movement

Results of Community Organizing:

- **More Resources:** Funding for underserved schools, e.g. school construction, facility repairs and new programs.

- **New policy and leadership:** Increased equity, access and accountability, e.g. district-wide small schools policy in Oakland.

- **Teacher quality:** Innovative teacher recruitment and staff development programs, e.g. Grow Your Own program in Chicago.

Conceptual Framework

Assumptions - Theory of Change

Community Outcomes:

Members –> knowledge –> relationships –> power –> capacity to support school success

Organizational Inputs

Community Organizing Activities

Context Variables

School/ School System Outcomes:
Accountability relationships –> Shifting priorities–> Improvements in school capacity

I M P A C T S

Increased School Capacity

- **<u>School context</u>**: supportive policy, public support, community involvement, student readiness
- **<u>School climate</u>**: facility that supports learning, safe environment, trust-based relationships
- **<u>Professional culture</u>**: collegial relationships, high quality staff development, effective school leadership
- **<u>Instructional core</u>**: rigorous curriculum that reflects community values, standards-based instruction aligned to assessments, ample and appropriate instructional supplies.

What do We Need to Know?

- Do organizing efforts to equalize power dynamics result in increased accountability and engagement?

- Do these new relationships lead to changes in district priorities, resource allocation, and capacity?

- Do increased resources and capacity result in improved learning outcomes for students?

Appropriate Study Methods?

- Complex, cyclical processes
- Long-term work, with discrete initial, intermediate, and long-term activities and responses
- Outside pressure and support, yet change must come from inside
- Not suitable for experimental methods

Current study methods

- Theory of change framework
- Case study of organizing activities and their impact on school/district capacity for improvement
- Background research on local, state context
- Staged statistical analysis of indicators
- Other?

Other Questions

- How do families seek to influence schools and in what kind of decisions do they seek a voice?

- How are these attempts influenced by income, ethnicity and educational level?

- How do schools respond?

- What policies and supports would help schools become "laboratories of democracy?"

Major Studies

- Beam and Irani, 2002. ACORN Organizing. Fordham.
- Gold, Simon and Brown, 2002. Indicators study, www.crosscity.org
- Henderson and Mapp, 2002. A New Wave of Evidence (research review) www.sedl.org/connections
- Mediratta, Fruchter et al., 2001, 2003, 2004 www.nyu.edu/iesp
- Shirley, 1997. Community Organizing for Urban School Reform. U Texas Press.
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