

# The SAGE Handbook of Educational Leadership

Advances in Theory,  
Research, and Practice

Fenwick W. English Editor  
*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

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# Contents

Introduction: A Metadiscursive Perspective on the Landscape of Educational Leadership in the 21st Century <i>Fenwick W. English, General Editor</i> <i>University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill</i>	ix
About the Editor	xvii
About the Contributors	xviii
<b>PART I. MULTIPLE LENSES OF DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Coeditors: Frances K. Kochan and Cynthia J. Reed, Auburn University</i>	
1. A History of Public School Leadership: The First Century, 1837–1942 <i>Ira E. Bogotch, Florida Atlantic University</i>	7
2. Moral Leadership: Shifting the Management Paradigm <i>Michael E. Dantley, Miami University of Ohio</i>	34
3. Social Justice: Seeking a Common Language <i>Alan R. Shoho, University of Texas at San Antonio</i> <i>Betty M. Merchant, University of Texas at San Antonio</i> <i>Catherine A. Lugg, Rutgers University</i>	47
4. Collaborative Leadership, Community Building, and Democracy in Public Education <i>Frances K. Kochan, Auburn University</i> <i>Cynthia J. Reed, Auburn University</i>	68
<b>PART II. MANAGEMENT, ORGANIZATION, AND LAW</b>	<b>85</b>
<i>Editor: Charles J. Russo, University of Dayton</i>	
5. Leadership as Social Construct: The Expression of Human Agency Within Organizational Constraint <i>Rodney T. Ogawa, University of California at Santa Cruz</i>	89
6. Pivotal Points: History, Development, and Promise of the Principalship <i>Kathleen M. Brown, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill</i>	109

7. The School Superintendent: Roles, Challenges, and Issues 142  
*Theodore J. Kowalski, University of Dayton*  
*C. Cryss Brunner, University of Minnesota*
8. The Role of Education Law in Leadership Preparation Programs 168  
*Charles J. Russo, University of Dayton*

**PART III. EDUCATIONAL POLITICS AND POLICY:  
 CREATING EFFECTIVE, EQUITABLE, AND DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS 187**

- Editor: Gary L. Anderson, New York University*
9. Educational Leaders as Policy Analysts 191  
*Betty Malen, University of Maryland*
10. Educational Leadership and the New Economy:  
 Keeping the "Public" in Public Schools 216  
*Gary L. Anderson, New York University*  
*Monica Pini, National University of San Martin, Argentina*
11. A New Conception of Parent Engagement:  
 Community Organizing for School Reform 237  
*Eva Gold, Research for Action*  
*Elaine Simon, Research for Action*  
*Chris Brown, Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform*
12. Leading the School Through Culturally Responsive Inquiry 269  
*Ruth S. Johnson, California State University, Los Angeles*  
*Lawson Bush, V, California State University, Los Angeles*
13. Constructing a Democratic Foundation for School-Based Reform:  
 The Local Politics of School Autonomy and Internal Governance 297  
*Jesse Goodman, Indiana University and Harmony Education Center*  
*Daniel Baron, Harmony Education Center*  
*Carol Myers, Harmony Education Center*

**PART IV: THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP:  
 RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND PRACTICES 333**

- Coeditors: Margaret Grogan, University of Missouri-Columbia and  
 Gary M. Crow, University of Utah*
14. The Nature of Inquiry in Educational Leadership 337  
*Michelle D. Young, University Council  
 for Educational Administration*  
*Gerardo R. López, Indiana University*
15. The Development of Leadership Thought  
 and Practice in the United States 362  
*Gary M. Crow, University of Utah*  
*Margaret Grogan, University of Missouri-Columbia*
16. Leading in the Midst of Diversity: The Challenge of Our Times 380  
*Carolyn M. Shields, University of British Columbia*  
*Anish Sayani, University of British Columbia*

*Editor: Larry E. Frase, San Diego State University*

17. Curriculum Leadership: The Administrative Survival Skill in a Test-Driven Culture and a Competitive Educational Marketplace 407  
*Fenwick W. English, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*  
*Betty E. Steffy, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*
  18. Refocusing the Purposes of Teacher Supervision 430  
*Larry E. Frase, San Diego State University*
  19. Student Misbehavior and Violence: A Reexamination of the Enemy Within 463  
*George J. Petersen, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo*
  20. Issues of Teaching and Learning 483  
*Eric Haas, University of Connecticut*  
*Leslie Poynor, University of Connecticut*
  21. New Approaches for School Design 506  
*Jeffery A. Lackney, University of Wisconsin–Madison*
  22. Unions, Collective Bargaining, and the Challenges of Leading 538  
*Todd A. DeMitchell, University of New Hampshire*
  23. Finance, Planning, and Budgeting 550  
*William K. Poston, Jr., Iowa State University*
- Author Index 571
- Subject Index 589

## A New Conception of Parent Engagement

### *Community Organizing for School Reform*

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*Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform*

During the 1990s, schools changed for the better in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood, where there were significant increases in student achievement by the end of the decade.<sup>1</sup> In response to overcrowding in this low- to moderate-income community, the district has built five elementary school annexes and two new middle schools, with plans for a new high school in the works. A

program for parents trains them in pedagogy and leadership skills and brings them into classrooms, where they provide extra social and academic help to children.<sup>2</sup> Since this parent-teacher mentor program was initiated in 1995, more than 840 parents have participated. Teachers in the neighborhood's schools credit the program for increases in the individualized attention their students get, the level of

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Author's Note: We would like to thank the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and especially Anne Hallett, for her support of this study. A number of Research for Action staff participated on the research team, and we would like to especially note the contributions of Sukey Blanc. Leah Mundell contributed to reviewing the literature for this chapter. Last but not least, we thank the organizers and parent leaders of the community groups we studied, who have shared with us the work of education organizing and introduced us to their neighborhoods, cities, and schools.

parent-teacher communication, and their own ability to understand their students' neighborhood and Latino cultural backgrounds. With parents' presence in the schools, school climates are more orderly and respectful. Parent representatives on the local school council are more knowledgeable and capable leaders. School-based community centers have been established, and a neighborhood-wide literacy initiative is under way.

What provided the impetus for school improvement in the Logan Square neighborhood? Why were schools with a majority of low-income, Latino students the beneficiaries of new resources and innovative programs? Education reform groups, local teachers and principals, and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) contributed to the efforts to improve these neighborhood schools, but a neighborhood group, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), initiated and has sustained the school improvement effort. LSNA is a 40-year-old association of businesses, schools, congregations, and individuals in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood that has worked to improve local housing and economic well-being through community organizing. LSNA became more involved in education in 1988, when the Chicago School Reform Act created the opportunity for increased parent and community involvement in local schools. In the course of obtaining the central office's commitment to build new school facilities, LSNA developed strong relationships with local principals and teachers. The parent-teacher mentor program, designed and run by LSNA, was one outcome of these strong relationships. Parents trained through the program have been instrumental in starting and staffing the community centers and in running the literacy program, which reaches parents and community members throughout the neighborhood.

Across the country, groups like LSNA have been turning their attention to improving public education for their members, and the

number of community organizing groups working on education issues has grown significantly in the last decade (Gold & Simon with Brown, 2002c; Mediratta, Fruchter, & Lewis, 2002; see Box 11.1 for the characteristics of community organizing groups). These groups work at the neighborhood and policy levels to address the range of issues urban public schools face, such as overcrowding, deteriorating facilities, inadequate funding, high turnover of staff, lack of up-to-date textbooks, and the low test scores of students at these schools. Students attending these schools too often are shut out of high-quality academic programs, discouraged from going to college, and short-changed in their employment opportunities. In the dozen years that community organizing for school reform has taken hold and spread, community groups have begun to address these issues and to see their efforts pay off.

For 4 years, a partnership of Research for Action and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform documented the education organizing activities of five groups from across the country: the Alliance Organizing Project or AOP (Philadelphia), Austin Interfaith (Austin, Texas), LSNA (Chicago), New York ACORN (New York City), and Oakland Community Organizations or OCO (Oakland, California).<sup>3</sup> Our purpose was to develop a way to show the education reform accomplishments of community organizing and to explain how these accomplishments lead to improving schools and student achievement.

Our examination of the groups in this study revealed that their efforts are bringing new resources to schools with the highest need, improving school climate and creating better conditions for teaching and learning. Nonetheless, within the discourse of school reform, community organizing groups and their accomplishments remain largely unacknowledged, while the families in these low-income communities continue to be characterized as lacking in the skills and values necessary



### Box 11.1 The History and Characteristics of Community Organizing

Almost all community organizing groups trace back to Saul Alinsky, whose community organizing in the 1930s was the first to take the methods union organizers used to develop power and apply them to solve issues affecting neighborhoods. Over the years, community organizing has been influenced by the experiences of the civil rights movement, as well as by new leaders from within Alinsky's own Industrial Areas Foundation and other national community organizing networks.

#### Community organizing groups:

- Build relationships and collective responsibility by identifying shared concerns among neighborhood residents and creating alliances and coalitions that cross neighborhood and institutional boundaries
- Build a large base of members who take collective action to further their agenda
- Develop leadership among community residents to carry out agendas that the membership determines through a democratic governance structure
- Build power for residents of low- to moderate-income communities, which results in action to address their concerns using the strategies of adult education, civic participation, and public negotiation and action
- Work to strengthen public institutions to make them more equitable and accountable to low- and moderate-income communities

#### Read more about community organizing:

Alinsky, Saul D., *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*

Cortés, Ernesto, Jr., "Reweaving the Fabric: The Iron Rule and the IAF Strategy for Power and Politics"

Delgado, Gary, *Organizing the Movement: The Roots and Growth of ACORN*

Kahn, Si, *Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders*

Medoff, Peter, and Sklar, Holly, *Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood*

Payne, C., *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*

Ransby, B., *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*

Warren, M., *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*

NOTE: Complete publication information is found in the reference list.

to support their children's education. Our research expands the work of others who have pointed to the importance of new conceptions of parent engagement that challenge the discourse of deficit when considering the role of communities and parents in supporting

children's educational experience. This new conception is linked to the growing body of work on the relationship between schools and communities.

In this chapter, we provide an indicators framework for understanding the contributions

**Box 11.2    Research Approach to Developing the Indicators Framework  
for Education Organizing**

To develop an indicators framework, Research for Action and the Cross City Campaign used a research design with four levels of investigation:

- Conducting a broad search and creating a database of 140 community organizing groups working on school reform nationwide
- Selecting 19 groups for lengthy telephone interviews

Analysis of those interviews yielded a preliminary indicators framework:

- Selecting five groups for case studies, with the advice of a national advisory group
- Sending research teams and staff on two site visits of 3 days each in spring and fall of 2000 to each of the five sites, to collect data through: interviews with a wide array of public school stakeholders, including parents, teachers, administrators, elected officials, and education reform groups; and observations of community and school events relevant to local organizing

These interviews and observations, in combination with feedback sessions with the local groups in a third site visit and with a national advisory group, helped us to refine the preliminary indicators framework.

of community organizing to school reform. (See Box 11.2 for our research approach to developing an indicators framework for education organizing.) We show that community organizing is an effective vehicle for building community capacity, which plays a critical role in school reform. When school staff, parents, and community together engage in democratic decision making, they develop a sense of joint ownership of local schools. Voices external to schools and school systems are necessary to create the political will needed for genuine school improvement. Furthermore, when teachers value the knowledge parents and community members bring to children's learning, they can design challenging and culturally responsive curriculum.

In addition to an indicators framework for education organizing, we present a theory of change model that shows the link between school improvement and the work these groups

do to improve community capacity. By looking at the work of community organizing for school reform, we have found that when school reform goes hand-in-hand with building strong communities, the institution of schooling itself changes fundamentally, increasing the chances that reform efforts will be carried out and sustained.

#### **RETHINKING PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOOL REFORM**

*How come because we live in a lower income neighborhood do we have to get less? Our children have to drink out of lead fountains; our kids got to play in dirt. We don't have music lessons; we don't get gym until the second half of the year. But if you travel up the road to one of these prestigious schools, their kids [have these things]. But not mine.*

—Parent leader, Alliance Organizing Project, Philadelphia

By almost any measure, urban public schools are failing to provide an adequate education to their students. Such indicators of school well-being as student achievement, promotion rates, and retention of teachers have all continued to decline relative to schools in suburban and more affluent areas. The job of improving schools has been left primarily to professional educators and the education policy community. Yet, the persistence of urban school failure has confounded the professionals, as well as civic leaders and government officials. In this context of the widening disparity between the education schools can provide and what most urban public schools actually do provide, low- to moderate-income parents have turned to community organizing to make schools work for their children.

Much of the recent school reform literature has focused on the importance of tapping a community's assets and creating links between schools and communities. Some of this literature has begun to erode the professional paradigm that elevates professional expertise and overlooks the contributions of low-income families and communities to the educational process. In general, however, research still focuses on the ways that educational professionals involve parents and does not address the ways that parents themselves might gain influence in public education to best serve their children. Chicago's local school councils have offered researchers the opportunity to examine parent-professional relationships in which parents and community members are in the majority, an intentional strategy meant to counterbalance the power advantage professionals have from their position as school insiders. Although a number of these studies note the importance of social trust in the school setting, they offer little discussion of the possibilities for building social trust across asymmetrical lines of power, including when parents are in a position of authority (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This discussion has been

taken up by the literature on community organizing for school reform, which, in the words of Dennis Shirley (1997), distinguishes between "*accommodationist* forms of parental involvement and *transformational* forms of parental engagement" (p. 73; emphasis in original). Community organizing serves two purposes that stand in productive tension: to challenge school power structures that exclude parents and community *and* to develop the social trust between school professionals and parents that is so crucial for long-term school improvement.

#### Parent Involvement Versus Parent Engagement

Despite the challenges involved in building bridges between schools and communities, many educators have come to embrace the value of parental involvement in schools. Henderson and Mapp (2002) provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on connections between schools and communities, highlighting evidence that parental involvement not only improves the school climate but also is linked to higher student achievement (see also Marcon, 1999; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). While indicators such as family income and educational level are associated strongly with children's educational outcomes, studies now acknowledge that despite the challenges of poverty and lack of formal education, families of all backgrounds have the potential to encourage high achievement for their children and will become involved in education if schools reach out to engage them (Clark, 1993; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). If parents are to feel welcome in the school environment, at a minimum, schools must become more culturally responsive to families and communities. Researchers who have examined the role of culture in schooling have shown that local knowledge can also enrich curriculum and pedagogy (Au, 1980; Delgado-Gaitan, 1987;

Erickson & Mohatt, 1987; Heath, 1983; McConnell, 1989; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Valdés, 1996).

Too many studies of parent involvement show how the professional paradigm limits the role of parents to serving the priorities of professionals. In this sense, parents contribute by reinforcing teachers' work through activities such as reading to children at home, showing an interest in children's school achievement, providing enrichment activities, and volunteering in school (Chall & Snow, 1982; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Snow, 1998). Nancy Chavkin (1993) highlights the ways that parental involvement might particularly benefit minority students, who lag behind majority students in educational achievement and whose families are often excluded from traditional parent-involvement programs directed at middle-class, educated parents (see also Lareau, 1989). Nonetheless, Chavkin also notes that educators have a somewhat limited vision of the role that parents might play in schools. Chavkin reports that educational professionals participating in a study in the southwestern United States were overwhelmingly interested "in parents performing roles of school-program supporter, home tutor, and audience" (p. 3; see also Williams & Chavkin, 1985). Although such studies provide examples of an expanded role for parents as active partners in their children's education, they focus on parents as listeners and supporters, rather than as advocates for equity or decision-makers.

The community organizers and parent leaders discussed in this chapter acknowledge the importance of parental involvement for individual student success; in fact, these parent leaders are deeply involved in their own children's education. As community leaders, however, their concerns for quality education extend beyond the needs of their own children to the needs of all children in their community. This commitment to equity in education helps to combat what Lareau

and Shumar (1996) call the "individualist approach to family-school relationships," which keeps parents isolated from one another and inhibits them from taking collective action on behalf of their community's children (see also Giles, 1998).

Novella Keith (1999) describes these conceptions of the role of parents as the difference between a "partners for improvement" discourse, as in Chavkin (1993), and a "new citizenship" discourse of decision making and advocacy. The "partners for improvement" discourse is reflected in late 1990s federal education policy, which placed a renewed emphasis on community partnerships and family involvement. However, as Keith points out, this discourse "cast[s] schools and educators in the role of agents, while families are left largely to respond to their initiatives" (p. 228).<sup>4</sup> The "new citizenship" discourse stems from community organizing and the work of researchers such as Harry Boyte (Boyte & Kari, 1996) and Dennis Shirley (1997). These organizations and scholars critique the "partners for improvement" model in part because its service orientation reinforces a deficit approach to parents (for an explanation of the deficit approach, see Delpit, 1995; Hidalgo, 1992; Lightfoot, 1978). As Keith (1999) notes, the problem with the "partners for improvement" discourse is "that schools, by treating parents, students, and community members as clients and consumers, are renegeing on their historic responsibility as sites for education in democracy and thus further contribute to the erosion of public life" (p. 230). Community organizing is consonant with the work of scholars who advocate the democratization of both the governance structures and the curriculum of schools (Apple & Beane, 1995; Bastian, Fruchter, Gittel, Greer, & Haskins, 1986; Wood, 1988). Whereas educators focus on the internal functioning of schools, community organizations believe that democratizing a school also means building the capacity of the

community to inform and participate in the work of schooling.

### Extending Social Trust

Literature on school reform and school change has taught us that one source of schools' resistance to reform is their insularity, the ingrained nature of their culture and power structure (Fullan, 1999; Sarason, 1982, 1990). This entrenchment of school power structures means that educational reform designed to make schools more inclusive of parents is often ineffective, serving instead as "a form of public relations to create greater institutional legitimacy for current educational practices" (Anderson, 1998, p. 571; see also Malen & Ogawa, 1988, on local school councils). Nonetheless, school districts have undertaken systemwide attempts to alter their governance structures, most fundamentally in Chicago, where the 1988 school reform act authorized the creation of local school councils, composed of parents, teachers, and community representatives with the power to hire and fire principals (Hess, 1999; Katz, 1992; Rollow & Bryk, 1993). Research on this model of democratic localism demonstrated the contribution of parent and community participation to curriculum and instruction and to raising student achievement (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Moore, 1998). But some of these researchers also found that decentralization efforts of this kind sometimes fail if they do not take into account the importance of social trust within the school environment. They suggest that the human resources of schools—culture, climate, and interpersonal relationships—may be more critical to school success than the structural arrangements under which the school operates (Bryk & Schneider, 1996; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995; Useem, Christman, Gold, & Simon, 1997).

Payne and Kaba (2001) have written convincingly that school-driven strategies of

parent involvement, which are believed to create better parent-teacher relations, often result in the converse. In their observations of Chicago schools operating under the Comer model, they found that the Comer staff worked hard to combat teacher stereotypes of parents by actively involving parents in the life of the school (for an explanation of the Comer model, see Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996). Contrary to the findings of other researchers (Epstein & Sanders, 2000), however, Payne and Kaba (2001) found that the increased parental involvement actually *raised* the tension between parents and teachers: "Merely interacting more didn't change the deeply-ingrained tendency of one group to interpret the behavior of the other group in the most negative way possible" (p. 5; see also Payne, 2003). Social trust was absent, and without it, parents remained outside the accepted professional culture of the school.

Payne and Kaba's (2001) observations of the "social impediments to reform" remind us that social trust cannot be based only on increased visibility of parents or a school's declaration that it is "welcoming" to the community. Instead, social trust requires the development of what community organizers call accountable relationships, where trust is established through parties' mutual agreement about their obligations to one another. In this conception, no single institution or individual holds unilateral power over another; nor is power a zero-sum game. Parent leaders who seek a role in school governance, for example, are not seeking "power over" school professionals but "power to" create school change in relationship with teachers and administrators.<sup>5</sup> At times, achieving this power shift might require confrontational tactics. Community organizing groups, however, aim not simply to provoke confrontation but to develop new "sites of power" at the school level, including parents, community, teachers, and administrators (Bowles & Gintis, 1987, as cited in Rollow & Bryk, 1993).<sup>6</sup>

Social trust is one indicator of what sociologists and political scientists are today calling social capital, the “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 67; see also Coleman, 1988). As Sandefur and Lauman (1998) point out, however, accounts of the consolidation of social capital do not always explain “the mechanisms through which social capital has its effects” (p. 483, as cited in Goddard, 2003). In this chapter, we contribute to a growing body of scholarship showing the ways that community organizing helps develop both bonding social capital—within existing social or cultural groups—and bridging social capital—across-group relationships (Shirley, 2002; Warren, 2001; Wood, 2002). We found that bridging social capital is especially important in moving organizing campaigns forward because it builds accountable relationships that generate the political will to override individual and private interests.

#### UNDERSTANDING STORIES OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM: AN INDICATORS FRAMEWORK

In the 4 years that we followed the five case study groups, we gathered many stories of education organizing.<sup>7</sup> We came to understand, from many different perspectives—those of parents, organizers, teachers, administrators, elected officials, and school board members—the impacts the groups were having and the challenges they face. As we gathered and reviewed stories of community organizing, we categorized their work into eight areas. These categories of work, which we call indicator areas, are leadership development, social capital, community power, public accountability, equity, school/community connections,

curriculum and instruction, and school climate. (See Box 11.3 for definitions of the eight indicator areas.) We show the work of community organizing by specifying the primary strategies groups use and their results within each of the indicator areas. In each area, we suggest a set of possible measures or indicators of the group’s accomplishments. We developed what we call an *indicators framework for education organizing* as a tool for understanding the contributions and accomplishments of community organizing for education reform.<sup>8</sup> The framework consists of a set of charts that detail the strategies and results for each indicator area, as well as data sources for documenting the results. These charts are included in two reports, *Successful Community Organizing for School Reform* (Gold & Simon with Brown, 2002c) and *The Education Organizing Indicators Framework: A User’s Guide* (Gold & Simon with Brown, 2002a).<sup>9</sup>

The work of community organizing groups in each of the eight indicator areas is important, but the outcomes that are most important to everyone from parents to politicians are those related to students and their school achievement. Stories of community organizing for school reform should create confidence that ultimately student learning will improve. To investigate the relationship between the indicator areas and improving student learning, we returned to each of the five case study sites to follow up selected education organizing campaigns. By looking across the many organizing stories we gathered, we were able to see the ways in which the eight indicator areas work together in a change process that underlies education organizing, illustrated in a theory of change model (Figure 11.1 on page 247). The theory of change model shows how community organizing builds community capacity, which leads to improving schools and higher student achievement.

On the far right of the model are the indicator areas: *curriculum and instruction* and

**Box 11.3 Definitions of the Eight Indicator Areas**

---

**Leadership Development**

- Builds the knowledge and skills of parents and community members (and sometimes teachers, principals, and students) to create agendas for school improvement
- Empowers parents and community members to take on public roles
- Heightens leaders' civic participation and sharpens their skills in leading meetings, interviewing public officials, representing the community at public events and with the media, and negotiating with those in power

**Community Power**

- Helps residents of low-income neighborhoods gain influence to win the resources and policy changes needed to improve their schools and neighborhoods
- Emerges when groups act strategically and collectively to build a large base of constituents and form partnerships for legitimacy and expertise
- Uses its clout to draw the attention of political leaders and the media to the community's agenda

**Social Capital**

- Activates networks of mutual obligation and trust, both interpersonal and intergroup, to leverage resources to address community concerns
- Means bringing together people—beginning with relationships among neighborhood residents and within local institutions—who might not otherwise associate with each other, either because of cultural and language barriers (e.g., Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans) or because of their different roles and positions, such as teachers, school board members, and parents
- Requires community organizing groups to create settings for these “bridging relationships” in which issues are publicly discussed, as the key to moving a change agenda forward

**Public Accountability**

- Seen in a broad acknowledgement of and commitment to solving the problems of public education
- Built on the assumption that public education is a collective responsibility
- Requires community organizing groups to create public settings for differently positioned school stakeholders—educators, parents, community members, elected and other public officials, the private and nonprofit sectors, and students themselves—to identify problems and develop solutions for improving schools in low- to moderate-income communities
- Holds officials accountable to respond to the needs of low- to moderate-income communities

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*(Continued)*

## Box 11.3 (Continued)

**Equity**

- Guarantees that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity, have the resources and opportunities they need to become strong learners, to achieve in school, and to succeed in the work world
- Aims to provide equitable opportunities, which may require more than equalizing the distribution of resources
- Requires community organizing groups to push for resource allocation that takes into account poverty and neglect, so that schools in low-income areas receive priority
- Also means groups must work to increase the access of students from these schools to strong academic programs

**School/Community Connection**

- Requires that schools become institutions that work with parents and the community to educate children
- Means institutional change in which professionals come to value the skills and knowledge of community members
- Envisions parents and local residents serving as resources for schools, and schools extending their missions to become community centers offering the educational, social service, and recreational programs local residents need and desire

**Positive School Climate**

- Lays a basic foundation for teaching and learning, in which teachers feel they know their students and families well and in which there is mutual respect and pride in the school
- May begin when community organizing groups move for school improvement by addressing safety in and around the school and the need for improved facilities
- May include reducing school and class size

**High-Quality Instruction and Curriculum**

- Exists when classroom practices provide challenging learning opportunities that also reflect the values and goals of parents and the community
- Requires community organizing groups to create high expectations for all children and to provide professional development for teachers to explore new ideas, which may include drawing on the local community's culture and involving parents as active partners in their children's education

*school climate*, both strongly associated with school improvement. High-quality instruction and curriculum connote classrooms where teaching is content rich and academically rigorous and students are engaged (Newmann,

Secada, & Wehlage, 1995). Positive school climate is evidenced through well-maintained facilities and a social environment characterized by orderliness, safety, low incidence of discipline problems, and good teacher/student



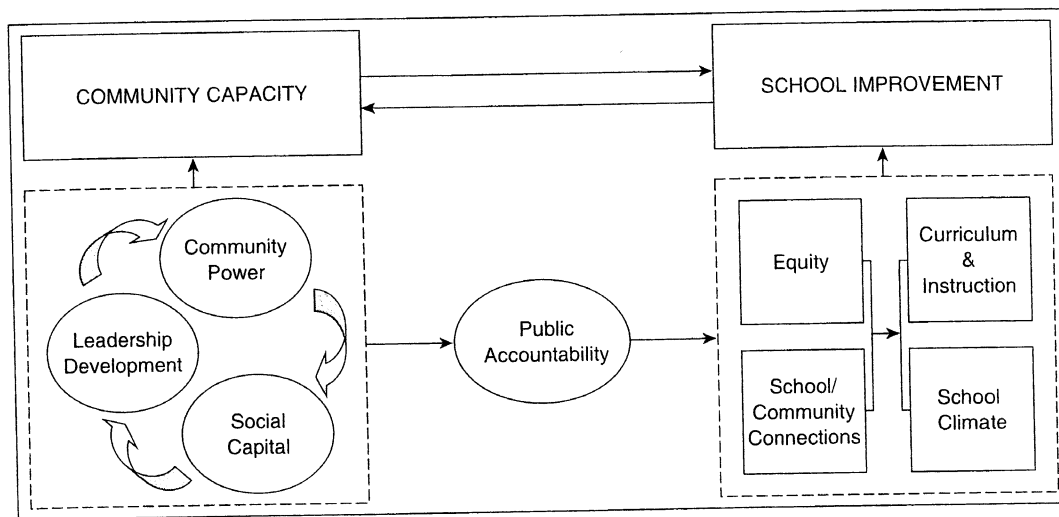


Figure 11.1 Theory of Change: Relationship of Community Capacity and School Improvement

rapport and respect (Cash, 1993; Corcoran, Walker, & White, 1988; Emmons, 1996). Both of these indicator areas are directly associated in the research literature with raising student achievement.

The work of community organizing groups represented on the far left of the model under community capacity—*leadership development*, *community power*, and *social capital*—work interactively to build *public accountability*. Through leadership development, community members learn the skills of civic participation and gain education expertise. They augment social capital by building new relationships and networks among people within a community as well as across differently positioned stakeholders around shared educational concerns. Through the power of numbers and strategic alliances and actions, community residents are able to bring public officials into accountable relationships for improving schools (Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2001; Wood, 2002.)

The change process hinges on public accountability. This kind of accountability is the result of commitments made in public settings that obligate a wide range of stakeholders—parents, educators, community

members, officials, and others—to follow through on their promises to improve schools (Gold & Simon, 2004; Gold & Simon with Brown, 2003).<sup>10</sup> By broadening accountability for public education, community organizing advances issues of *equity* and *school/community connection* and brings new influences to bear on curriculum and instruction and on school climate. With broad acknowledgement that equity and school/community connection are important goals, resources for schools in low-income areas become more plentiful; schools often turn into centers of the community. Respectful relationships among parents and teachers and students expand ownership for the educational experience of children. Teachers' expectations for children's academic achievement rise as they come to understand community concerns, including parents' interest in their children's education. Curriculum and instruction that are both more rigorous and culturally responsive can result (Comer, 1984; Hatch, 1998; Shirley, 1997).

As noted earlier, some researchers and educators acknowledge the importance of the connection between schools and communities. The theory of change presented here fills in the

story of how what happens outside the school connects to what happens inside the school, showing the pathway that connects the community and school domains and that ultimately leads to students' academic success. To make the indicators framework presented above come alive, and to illustrate the underlying structure of change in the education organizing process, in the next section we recount a story about education organizing in Oakland, California.

### EDUCATION ORGANIZING IN ACTION: OAKLAND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS' SMALL SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN<sup>11</sup>

Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), an affiliate of the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), is a federation of 31 congregations and 40,000 members. It has been working in Oakland neighborhoods for 30 years, the first 20 on neighborhood issues such as housing, drugs, and crime prevention. OCO began working on education in the early 1990s because of its members' concern with school overcrowding and their children's low scores on standardized tests. By the time OCO began its education organizing, it already had established its reputation in Oakland as a political player representing the interests of low- to moderate-income neighborhoods. OCO's early efforts in the school reform arena, which included afterschool programs, a school-to-career curriculum, charter schools, support for reduced classroom size, and the attempt to establish a small school within a larger Oakland elementary school, introduced the organization to the possibilities and barriers to improving schools. These experiences led OCO to conclude that for low- to moderate-income families to have good school choices, the organization needed to find a systemwide approach, rather than continue with programs or individual school change initiatives. Tying together members' concern about

school overcrowding with a growing awareness of the benefits of small schools, OCO began a campaign for small autonomous schools that addressed overcrowding in neighborhood schools and the need to improve public education in Oakland.

We divide the story of the OCO small schools campaign into three parts corresponding to the change process illustrated in our theory of change model. Boxes 11.4, 11.5, and 11.6, below, highlight the strategies that community organizing groups employ in each of the indicator areas in which they work.

#### **Building Community Capacity: Leadership Development, Community Power, and Social Capital**

In 1986, Montgomery Ward abandoned its mail order warehouse in Oakland, and the building began to deteriorate with disuse.<sup>12</sup> By 1993, OCO leaders who had been conducting individual and house meetings with residents in the immediate neighborhood began hearing complaints about the building. The empty building was a neighborhood eyesore. The windows were broken. People who lived near the building reported that they heard gunshots coming from the building at night. One leader explained, "There was graffiti inside and out and . . . certain gangs were there. . . . It was very scary."

During the same time period, leaders in all the neighborhoods where OCO was working were learning about parents' concerns with school overcrowding. As a result, the OCO board decided that school overcrowding would be a focus for the whole organization, and leaders began research into the issue. Their research revealed a huge difference in student achievement between crowded schools in their neighborhoods and smaller schools in more affluent areas of Oakland. They began to study the effect of school size on student learning, and this led them to develop a small-schools campaign. The campaign for small

Box 11.4 **The Building Blocks of Community Capacity: Leadership Development, Community Power, and Social Capital**

**Leadership Development**

- Identify and train parents and community members (and sometimes teachers, principals, and students) to take on leadership roles
- Develop parents and community members (teachers, principals, and students) as politically engaged citizens
- Promote individual, family, and community empowerment

**Community Power**

- Create a mass-based constituency within communities that results in deep membership commitment and large turnout
- Form partnerships for legitimacy and expertise
- Create a strong organizational identity
- Draw political attention to the organization's agenda

**Social Capital**

- Build networks
- Build relationships of mutual trust and reciprocity
- Increase participation in civic life

schools brought them back to the Montgomery Ward site. One leader told us, "All these research meetings . . . and the work and training they necessitated became a veritable leadership 'classroom' for new and emerging leaders, as well as for experienced leaders."

Gentrification had increased the value of the Montgomery Ward site, and residents found themselves in the middle of competing interests regarding how the site should be used. Residents wanted the land for two small schools and a neighborhood playground. Whenever OCO leaders thought they were close to having the building torn down to make way for small schools, they would meet new obstacles, often in the form of lawsuits launched by developers who wanted to use the property for commercial purposes or for new middle-class housing.

To increase their clout, OCO leaders continuously met with neighborhood residents

to build and replenish the ranks and keep the effort going. They needed to create a strong base for action. One leader commented, "We kept pulling together hundreds and thousands of people." OCO sent 1,500 petitions to Montgomery Ward's Chicago headquarters. Leaders made regular phone calls to mobilize people to accompany the city inspector into the building or keep track of the proceedings of lawsuits in courtrooms. They held citywide and neighborhood public actions in which thousands of residents turned out.

Leadership development, community power, and social capital are the building blocks of community capacity. Through work in these areas, community organizing groups increase civic participation and build relationships and partnerships within and across communities as well as with those in positions of authority.

**Box 11.5 The Bridge to School Change: Public Accountability**


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**Public Accountability**

- Create a public conversation about public education and student achievement
- Monitor programs and policies
- Participate in the political arena
- Create joint ownership/relational culture

**Box 11.6 The Pressure for Equity and School/Community Connection Enhances School Climate and Instruction and Curriculum**


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**Equity**

- Increase funding and resources to underresourced schools
- Maximize access of low-income children to educational opportunities
- Match teaching and learning conditions with those in the best schools

**School/Community Connection**

- Create multiuse school buildings
- Position the community as a resource
- Create multiple roles for parents in schools
- Create joint ownership of schools and school decision making

**Climate**

- Improve safety in and around the school
- Create respectful school environments
- Build intimate settings for teacher/student relations

**High-Quality Instruction and Curriculum**

- Identify learning needs, carry out research, and implement new teaching initiatives and structures
- Enhance staff professionalism
- Make parents and community partners in children's education
- Hold high expectations

Through neighborhood meetings, OCO organizers and leaders helped residents see their shared concerns about blight and overcrowded schools. Through research, reflection, and participation in civic life, community

residents developed the knowledge, expertise, strategic thinking, and sense of empowerment that leaders need to move their agendas forward. The countless individual and group meetings built and strengthened networks,

forming the basis for collective action. The large turnout of parents and community members at public actions contributed to OCO's reputation as a powerful voice of the community and drew political attention to the organization's agenda.

### **The Bridge to School Change: Public Accountability**

To succeed in demolishing the Montgomery Ward building and acquiring the space for small schools, it was necessary for leaders to meet with elected and nonelected officials at city, school district, and state levels to make their concerns known and enlist their support. As one leader commented,

At our annual meeting in May 1997, we publicly talked for the first time to city representatives and the school district and got their support for three badly needed schools in Oakland, including one at the Montgomery Ward site. So it was out there publicly that this is what we were working towards.

In the following years, OCO and its community partners turned out members to several large citywide and neighborhood actions where they publicly asked officials for their commitment to tear down Montgomery Ward and put small schools at the site. "An important piece of our organizing was making sure the school district, the city, and the community were on the same page constantly and trying to keep that number one priority." OCO leaders also met with Montgomery Ward's corporate leaders to confront the claim that the department store chain, which was buying up new stores throughout the Northeast, lacked the financial resources to tear down the building.

Finally, in February 2001, despite a last-ditch effort by developers to get the court to grant a stay on demolition, the city tore down the Montgomery Ward building and put temporary classrooms in place while plans

moved ahead for new small schools. An OCO leader commented,

[We were] armed with all the facts, willing to do the work and to testify on our own behalf, and strengthened with the knowledge that none of us stands alone. Through our organized efforts we know we can win many victories.

Public accountability is the bridge that connects community capacity with school improvement. Community organizing groups seek to broaden accountability to include an array of public school stakeholders who assume responsibility for public education. Public accountability generates the political will necessary for public officials to take action on behalf of children from low- to moderate-income families.

By bringing their agenda into the public arena, OCO challenged the bureaucratic culture, in which decision makers often pass responsibility off one to the other, and took a first step in holding public officials accountable. OCO leaders were laying the groundwork for making decisions regarding the public schools through a public process, rather than one that takes place behind closed doors. This public discourse about issues of concern to low-income community residents influenced elected officials to take up the interests of the community over those of powerful economic players.

### **School Improvement: The Pressure for Equity and School/Community Connections Enhances School Climate and Instruction and Curriculum**

During the 8 years it took to have the Montgomery Ward building torn down and the land designated for new small schools, OCO recorded a number of significant accomplishments furthering its overall small-schools initiative. In 1999, OCO and the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools (BayCES), a

local school reform group, joined together in a powerful partnership. Together, they hired an organizer to work directly with teachers around the idea of small schools. As a result of the partnership, the support of hundreds of teachers, and the systematic one-on-one meetings OCO leaders had with school board members and other elected leaders, in Spring 2001, the district adopted a policy supporting small autonomous schools. That summer, a new superintendent created a school reform office charged to implement the small-schools policy. OCO also helped to win passage of a \$300 million bond issue for school facilities targeted to low- to moderate-income neighborhoods, facilitating the construction of new small schools. The Gates Foundation awarded a grant for nearly \$16 million to BayCES to implement small schools, stating that Oakland had been selected as the first small-schools grantee. At a public event where the Gates Foundation awarded the grant, a Gates representative noted, "because of the great leadership in the school, city, the non-profits and the community, the necessary groundwork [for success] has been laid." Finally, OCO and BayCES, along with the school district and the teachers union, sat at the table where successful designs for new small schools were selected. With these accomplishments, OCO turned its attention to the central office, pressuring it to develop the capacity to support small schools. The group continued to work with parents and teachers to develop the capacity to work collaboratively in the design and implementation of small schools.

Although school autonomy is a part of the plan for small schools, so is accountability. An evaluation of the effectiveness of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) policy supporting small autonomous schools, completed in 2003, showed that the schools are meeting the policy's goals in five key areas: equity, teacher quality, parent involvement, student achievement, and school climate (Little & Wing, 2003). The new small schools are serving students

from the most overcrowded and lowest performing schools, are more successful in attracting and retaining credentialed teachers than comparison schools, are involving parents in ways that go "well beyond having mandated parent representation on the official School Site Council" and other school bodies (Little & Wing, 2003, p. 2), are maintaining parent involvement even at the middle and high school levels, and are lowering incidences of graffiti and vandalism. The new small schools are exceeding expectations for academic achievement. New small schools are more likely than comparison schools to increase their academic performance index (API). Students in the new small schools who were at the lowest performance levels when they entered are more likely to increase their performance to the middle range. For the past 2 years, attendance in the new small schools ranks them at the top of the district. Finally, 100% of the seniors in the new small high school that opened in 2001-2002 graduated, "far surpassing district averages" (Little & Wing, 2003, p. 3).

The effort to maintain the partnership with the OUSD, however, took a critical turn in Spring 2003. As the result of a fiscal crisis, the state took over the OUSD and assigned a state-appointed administrator as a condition of additional funding. Despite the loss of a superintendent who had backed its efforts, the OCO/BayCES partnership was intent on sustaining the small-schools reform initiative through the turbulence of state takeover. OCO leaders, along with BayCES, immediately organized meetings with the new district administrator to inform him about the small-schools reform and the support the initiative had garnered from the local community and from foundations.

At the state level, the 17 affiliates of the California project of the national PICO network organized support for a Small Schools Incentive for Construction bill forwarded by a state legislator representing Oakland. That bill, which has passed the House and is now in the Senate, sets aside \$20 million for the construction

of small high schools. It provides targeted incentives for school districts to construct small high schools by adding a provision to the construction bond that would lower the local match when the construction is for a small high school. Success of such a state-level measure could further ensure the sustainability of the Oakland small-schools reform initiative, as well as give a boost to PICO organizing for small schools throughout the state and nationwide.

The campaign for new small autonomous schools finally addressed the significant and long-standing inequities in school size and resource allocation across the Oakland district. The targeted funding for new small schools in low-income neighborhoods of Oakland, which OCO helped to obtain, is beginning to relieve overcrowding in some of the OUSD's largest elementary and high schools. At both the elementary and high school levels, parents' and community members' engagement with school staff in planning the new small schools has created the basis for strong school-community connections. Since the new small schools opened, parents have continued to play a role in their evolution.

From their research, OCO members had learned that the relationship between students, families, and their teachers was closer and more supportive in small schools, positively shaping school climate. The evidence from research on small schools is that stronger relationships can also result in fewer discipline problems and higher academic motivation (Fine & Somerville, 1998). Evaluation results of the new small schools in Oakland show that school climate has improved, resulting in higher academic motivation as evidenced by safer schools and increases in attendance and retention rates. At the same time, OCO's small-schools campaign intended to influence curriculum and instruction to improve academic performance. Although test scores are only one measure of student learning, early results indicate that the small schools are having an impact on student achievement.

The story of the small-schools campaign in Oakland illustrates the theory of action and how work in each of the indicator areas can contribute to improving the conditions for teaching and learning, which is likely to increase student performance. The next two sections of this chapter discuss variation across organizing sites and the unique contribution of community organizing to school reform.

### MAKING SENSE OF VARIATION AMONG GROUPS

We have used the story of one community organizing group, OCO, to explain the areas in which community organizing groups work and to illustrate the change process and the theory of change. Yet, no two organizing efforts look exactly alike. Here we identify the influences on organizing activity that make sense of the variation among groups and that explain how a snapshot of activities taking place at a particular moment relates to a larger effort. (Using the 19 groups we interviewed, we show some of the variation among community organizing groups in Figure 11.2.) There are four important influences to consider: local context, organizational characteristics, the phase of an organizing campaign at a particular moment in time, and the scale at which the group is aiming its effort.

#### Local Context

The overall region, state, city, and district context in which a community organizing group is working shapes how it defines the problem, the strategies it adopts, and, to some extent, its outcomes. Factors such as school district size, dominant educational policies, local and state politics, demographics, economic and social conditions, and the local area's history of civic engagement are factors to consider in understanding the priorities that a community organizing group sets, the targets of its work, and the particular strategies it chooses. The importance of context is further

Organization Name and State	Location		Affiliation			Constituency				Focus	
	Urban	Rural	National	Network	Independent University	African American	Latino	Caucasian	Other	Multi Issue	Single Issue
All Congregations Together, LA	•		PICO			•		•		•	
Alliance Organizing Project, PA	•			•		•	•			•	
Austin Interfaith, TX	•		IAF			•	•	•	•	•	
Blocks Together, IL	•		NPA				•			•	
Bronx ACORN, NY	•		ACORN				•	•		•	
Challenge West Virginia, WV		•		•				•			•
Logan Square Neighborhood Association, IL	•			•			•			•	
Lowell Alliance for Families and Neighborhoods, MA	•			•		•	•		•		
Metro New York, NY	•		IAF			•	•			•	
Milwaukee Inner City Congregation Allied for Hope (MICAH), WI	•		Gamaliel			•	•	•		•	



Organization Name and State	Location		Affiliation			Constituency			Focus		
	Urban	Rural	National	Network	Independent University	African American	Latino	Caucasian	Other	Multi Issue	Single Issue
Mothers on the move (MOM), NY	•			•		•				•	
Oakland ACORN, CA	•		ACORN			•	•			•	
Oakland Community Organizations, CA	•		PICO			•	•			•	
People Acting for Community Together, FL	•		DART			•	•	•		•	
Powerful Schools, WA	•			•		•	•			•	
Programs for Academy and Cultural Enhancement of rural schools (PACERS), AL		•			•	•	•			•	
San Diego Organizing Project, CA	•		PICO				•	•	•	•	
Southeast Education Task Force, MD	•				•	•		•			•
Southern Echo, MS		•		•		•				•	
Summary	16	3	10	7	2	14	13	13	5	14	5

Figure 11.2 Theory of Change: Relationship of Community Capacity Building and School Improvement

underscored by the fact that members' concerns, forged in neighborhood settings within particular city and regional environments, define the problems that community organizing groups take on. The outcomes that are possible and worthwhile also vary depending on factors in the local environment. Furthermore, local environments can influence the course of events and the progress of a group toward its goals.

### Organizational Characteristics

Although the case study groups share a common organizing heritage, there is a range of organizational characteristics among community organizing groups, from how they recruit members to their role in implementing programs, with implications for the size of their constituent base and the kinds of training and expertise needed for their education work. These characteristics influence a group's capacity to carry out its work as well as its strategy and the resources available to it. One critical way in which groups differ is in terms of whether they work on several issues at the same time, such as housing, economic development, or public health, or whether they work only in education. Most of the groups that we studied were multiple-issue groups, and they benefited from a strong and dense set of relationships with politicians, government officials, and other key community players whom they could then call on for support in their education work.

Another organizational characteristic that distinguishes groups is whether they are independent or part of a larger network. Several national and regional organizing networks, as well as intermediary organizations, work with organizing groups. Being part of a national network affords access to resources such as training, guidance from the experiences of others, and a broad base of members across the state or region that can be mobilized for larger scale policy efforts.

A third organizational characteristic that differentiates how groups carry out their work is whether they use an institution-based or individual-member strategy of recruitment. In an institution-based recruitment strategy, members of congregations, schools, and other nonprofits are the members of the organizing group because their institution is a member. An individual recruitment strategy is carried out by going door to door or seeking individual members in a neighborhood or school catchment area. Building a base of members through individual recruitment appears to require great effort when compared to building a base through recruiting institutional members.

### Phase of an Organizing Campaign

There are multiple phases of an organizing campaign, and recognizing where an activity fits into a campaign is critical for seeing its relevance to a wider effort with larger goals. Organizing campaigns take place over a long period of time, and generally, organizing groups work on more than one campaign at a time. As a result, it is important to see how different campaigns at different periods in an organization's history or concurrent campaigns relate to each other. A current campaign may have emerged from an earlier one or may represent a new approach based on past experience.

The organizing group also takes on different roles in its relationship to political officials, educators, and others at different points in an organizing process. The group may work in partnership with its allies during one phase of a campaign and act independently during another phase, for example, in obtaining commitments. As an organizing group moves closer to its goals, such as policy change or alliances with schools, it may move into a collaborative relationship with educators to see these efforts through. Relationships change over time as an organizing group balances the increasingly "insider status" that comes with collaboration

with an "outsider" position that allows them to continue to hold schools and school systems accountable for following through on their commitments. The tensions in this insider/outside role echo our earlier discussion of the constructive tension that community organizing groups bring to relationships in the school community.

The phase of organizing should be considered when setting expectations for the nature and scale of impact of a group's work. Over time, some initiatives endure and continue to mature. The efforts of several of the groups that we studied had reached a mature phase and were beginning to have an impact on student achievement. Other campaigns may be at an earlier phase, and the accomplishments are more appropriately measured by indicators of community capacity or public accountability. Organizing is not a quick fix. Problems created over decades require a long-term commitment to correct.

### Scale

Community organizing groups usually work on multiple levels, from the local neighborhood or individual school to citywide or even statewide efforts. Furthermore, working at multiple levels is critical to their success. Gains at the local level are important for building and sustaining the base of constituents, but accomplishments at the local level often require having an impact on policies at the city, district, or state levels. Therefore, groups must work at multiple levels at once, with some efforts geared to building and maintaining the local base through concrete wins and others aimed at working through networks or in coalitions to reach larger policy levels. The local level is also the stage for building leadership and community power, which contributes to the capacity of parents, teachers, and administrators to effectively carry out reform efforts and programs.

### THE ADDED VALUE OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING TO SCHOOL REFORM

We have explained that education organizing is distinct from the forms of parent involvement most familiar to educators, such as efforts by the school to recruit parent volunteers, get parent assistance in raising funds, increase parent attendance at school events, and boost parental guidance over homework. Education organizing is also different from efforts of nonprofits and legal services to bring needed supports for families into schools or to advocate for students and families. How does the work of community organizing groups complement the work of educators, and what difference does community organizing make for schools and students?

Community organizing is not a prescription for a particular educational program or a restructuring approach. Education research and its application in the development of effective practices are essential to improve classroom instruction and curriculum and school climate, as are the technical assistance, family services, and advocacy offered by many external groups. Community organizing plays a unique role in education reform by building community capacity and linking that to school improvement through public accountability. The work of community organizing associated with building community capacity and public accountability, however, is almost totally absent in the work of school reform as it is usually defined. Even where there is overlap between the work of community organizing and the work of educators and reform experts—in the areas of equity, school/community connections, school climate, and curriculum and instruction—community organizing adds a critical dimension.

Community organizing for school reform adds value in four ways: (a) sustaining the vision and momentum for change over time, (b) persisting in working toward change despite obstacles and setbacks, (c) building

political capital and creating the political will that motivates officials to take action, and (d) producing authentic change in policies and programs that reflect the concerns of parents and community members.

### Sustaining the Work Over Time

School reform is a long-term enterprise, yet many factors in the larger context, such as short-term funding patterns and turnover of politicians and school and city administrations, mean that reforms often come and go without taking hold (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Hess, 1999). Community organizing groups are committed to the neighborhoods where their members live and serve as an antidote to the political churn that often undercuts school reform. They are an external force that can keep up the momentum for improvement over time and with a changing cast of players. Key to the ability of community organizing groups to sustain reform efforts over time are their practices of holding one-on-ones and house meetings for maintaining a strong base of members ready to act collectively around shared interests. These members monitor the progress of reform to be sure efforts stay on track.

Bringing in new members is a critical part of the work of community organizers and leaders. A common argument is that schools cannot depend on parents because they are only interested and involved during the time their children are attending a school. Organizing practice, however, involves continually renewing the base of members. Almost any organizing campaign extends over several years, and although some neighborhood residents or parents are part of an effort for the entire time, newer constituents or those who had been working in other issue areas are able to replenish the group of participants.

Community organizing also contributes to sustainability by nurturing education professionals who come to share concerns and beliefs about the central role of parents and

community in improving schools. In several of the sites we studied, teachers who were working with community organizing groups became principals in other schools and were instrumental in developing the next generation of reform educators. Even when they remained as teachers in the school setting, they would often play an important role in keeping up strong school/community connections by socializing incoming principals and teachers. In both cases, the assumptions and practice of these teachers and administrators changed as they began to value the community/school connection. In one instance, professionals who considered themselves part of the community organizing effort moved up to central office positions, bringing a community-oriented perspective to the district level.

### Persistence

Without persistent champions, the strong counterforces of entrenched bureaucracy and competing political and economic interests can derail reforms. The high level of passion and commitment of community residents most directly affected by failing neighborhood schools motivates them to find ways around obstacles. Education organizing adds value to school reform because of the unique and important vantage point that community members and organizers bring to their efforts. Community organizing groups are rooted in a neighborhood and have a long-term commitment and a deep understanding of what it takes to support local families. For example, in our study, four of the groups have been organizing in their settings for 20 years or more. They see schools as tied to other community concerns that need attention. Their members are deeply affected and angry when public institutions are ineffective or corrupt. Organizers tap constituents' anger and motivation and help them build the skills and power to become formidable and uncompromising in working for institutional change. Every

school district we studied had a turnover of superintendent at least once during the 4 years of this project. Community organizing groups, because of their commitment to neighborhoods, are a force external to the schools and school system that can sustain the vision and momentum for change over time and with a changing cast of school district players.

Another way that education organizing adds persistence to school reform efforts is through its tradition of research and reflection, which enables community members to circumvent bureaucracy's often-used subterfuge of misinformation. Education organizers publicize their research so it can be used as the basis for community-wide problem identification and problem solving, thereby counteracting excuses by public figures for inaction. Organizers' research and reflection also lead to learning from past experience, thereby helping them avoid previous mistakes.

A third aspect of education organizing that generates persistence in school reform is the organizing group's reputation through its strong base of members and strategic alliances. Having a strong base of constituents can discourage officials from raising obstacles in the first place. Strategic alliances add expertise and strengthen the organization's reputation and legitimacy to work in the education arena. In several cities, education reform groups sought out community organizing groups as partners because of their reputations as powerful organizations with strong community bases that could be counted on to persist in their efforts to improve the local schools.

### **Political Will**

Bureaucracies, such as city government and urban school systems, are known for inaction, corruption, and resistance to change or conversely for reform overload, which virtually guarantees that efforts will have "shallow roots" (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Hess, 1999). In addition, school and public officials manage

competing interests, and they often act in their own best interest—avoiding the risk of losing power. Three features of education organizing mitigate these impediments to action. Through community organizing, which builds bridging social capital, community members establish relationships of trust with school and elected officials. Through these relationships, all parties become aware of each other's concerns and agendas and make commitments for follow-through.

Second, powerful community organizations can counter competing economic and political interests, for example, by providing political cover that allows officials to act in the interests of low-income communities. Making discussions public is a third way that education organizing creates the political will that can bring public officials to take action. Without back-door deals, it is more difficult for officials to dodge responsibility.

### **Authentic Change That Represents the Perspectives of Parents and Community Members**

By adding the perspectives of families and communities to the school reform equation, education organizing reflects the essence of the new generation of work in engaging parents, which values local knowledge and takes into account the dynamic between schools and their external environments. Parent and community voices can strengthen school reform efforts by making curriculum more challenging and congruent with community life, raising issues that otherwise would not come up, revealing how schools and the community can be resources for each other, and creating joint ownership of schools and reform.

The bottom line for parents, regardless of their circumstances, is making sure their children get what they need to be successful at the next level of school or in life. When low-income parents and community members gain sophistication with education issues and

politics, they are more likely to make the kinds of demands on schools that their middle-class, suburban counterparts do. They demand that their children are challenged and that the curriculum reflects their values and culture. As a result, school reforms with strong community engagement are likely to result in more challenging teaching that addresses students' learning needs, as well as curriculum that taps into student and community knowledge. Such a curriculum is more connected to community values and can better support student achievement.

A second way in which the addition of community voices contributes to reform is by raising issues that would not have come up otherwise and then developing initiatives to address them. Issues that are important from the vantage point of parents or community members are often invisible from inside the school walls—for example, the need for a health clinic in a school to improve attendance—and can reveal taken-for-granted assumptions about school practices and policies, such as the absence of Spanish-language books in a school library where Spanish is the home language of many students.

Third, community voices add value to reform in making the walls between schools and communities more permeable. In some cities, schools have become a resource to the community by remaining open after school hours for child care or adult education courses. The community also becomes a resource to the schools, offering cultural, experiential learning opportunities and other experiences that can enrich the curriculum.

Finally, the addition of parent and community voices to school reform creates joint ownership of programs, providing needed support for their continuity and effectiveness. When schools value parents' and community members' knowledge and traditions, the continuity between students' homes and school is stronger. Continuity between home and school strengthens parents' ability to support their children and children's ability to make positive choices about their own commitment to their academic pursuits

(Coleman, 1988; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Responsiveness to community interests shapes reform in ways that make the school program more effective in motivating and challenging students, as well as in activating external support systems to work for children's school success.

#### CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES AND BUILD CITIZEN PARTICIPATION FOR SCHOOL REFORM

This chapter contributes to the "new citizenship" (Keith, 1999) discourse on the role of parents and community members in public schools. This new citizenship discourse challenges the predominant discourse of parent involvement, which narrowly defines parents' role as supporting the work of school professionals. Our research shows the process by which parents, taking action as citizens, can contribute to school improvement. The methodology of community organizing specifically focuses on democratic participation through its commitment to build community capacity and use it as the basis for improving schools. Community capacity promotes citizenship as parents gain the skills for civic participation, engage in the political arena, and form networks that enable them to gain power both through numbers and through relationships with powerful allies.

Community capacity defined in this way influences schools by creating accountability for public institutions. In publicly accountable relationships, whether they are at the school level or at the policy level, commitments and obligations serve wide community interests. Several authors have described the contours of a new paradigm of parents' roles in schools, and our use of an indicators framework and theory of change shows how this new paradigm actually links to school improvement. We have shown how the methods of community

organizing build community capacity, which in turn creates the public accountability necessary to advance school improvement. For example, the work of these groups to address equity issues by bringing new and necessary resources to low- to moderate-income neighborhood schools and their efforts to forge deeper connections between schools and their communities to create joint ownership and greater communication and understanding are linked to factors that ultimately affect student

achievement: high-quality curriculum and instruction and positive school climate.

The vignette about LSNA that we used to open this chapter and the OCO story that we tell at length both illustrate the process by which community organizing contributes to an interrelated series of outcomes that together lead to students performing better in school. Box 11.7 illustrates the range of accomplishments of the five case study groups in our study.

**Box 11.7 Major Accomplishments of the Five Case Study Groups**

*Financing*

Austin Interfaith and Oakland Community Organizations

Redirected city bonds to benefit schools in low-income neighborhoods, e.g., Oakland Community Organizations obtained a \$300 million bond issue that is now contributing to construction of new small schools

*Improved Facilities and Program*

Alliance Organizing Project, Austin Interfaith, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, New York ACORN, and Oakland Community Organizations

Obtained district and/or city allocations for facility improvements and/or afterschool programs that provide academic enrichment, e.g., Austin Interfaith was instrumental in gaining funds to establish afterschool programs in 28 schools

*New Schools*

New York ACORN, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, and Oakland Community Organizations

Leveraged funding to build new schools and facilities in overcrowded districts, e.g., Logan Square Neighborhood Association won five new annexes at elementary schools and two new middle schools, and New York ACORN opened three new high schools

*School Environment and Safety*

Alliance Organizing Project and Austin Interfaith

Increased school safety by obtaining more crossing guards, better lighting, and improved traffic patterns in school areas, e.g., Alliance Organizing Project won an increase in funding for 37 additional traffic guards

*(Continued)*

## Box 11.7 (Continued)

*Quality Education*

Alliance Organizing Project,  
New York ACORN, and Oakland  
Community Organizations

Worked for smaller class sizes and/or smaller schools that create more intimate settings for teaching and learning and closer relationships between students and teachers

Austin Interfaith

Negotiated district policies that open access for low-income students to challenging academic programs and bilingual instruction

Austin Interfaith, Logan Square  
Neighborhood Association,  
New York ACORN, and Oakland  
Community Organizations

Sponsored new kinds of professional development for teachers and principals, including visits to other schools with parents to observe innovative programs, in-service training driven by the needs of teachers and principals, home-visit training, and workshops with parents to design schools and/or curriculum

*Parent Engagement*

Alliance Organizing Project, Austin  
Interfaith, New York ACORN,  
Logan Square Neighborhood  
Association, and Oakland  
Community Organizations

Increased the presence of parents in schools and the roles parents are playing, making parent-professional exchange and collaboration a reality

The research on community organizing (see Box 11.8 for some recommended reading) is particularly relevant in light of the growing recognition among policymakers that parent involvement is an important element of school reform, as evidenced by the parent involvement provision in the federal No Child Left Behind legislation and by the investment that funders and school districts are willing to make in the name of school-community relationship building. The reform effort under way in the New York City schools offers a case in point. As part of a sweeping reform of schools in New York City, Chancellor Joel I. Klein launched a program intended to hire a parent coordinator for every New York City school with the purpose of encouraging parents to "participate in their children's education." With 1,200 schools in the city and a salary range of \$30,000 to \$39,000, the cost represents the

largest investment in parent involvement to date—\$43 million. The 1,200 new parent coordinators are receiving training from several nonprofit organizations in New York City on cultural sensitivity and avoiding conflict (Gootman, 2003a, 2003b). The desire is to make schools more welcoming, or to move away from the idea of "school as walled fortress . . . and break open the walls of those fortresses" (Gootman, 2003b, p. B6). But to do this without repeating past models requires a new conceptualization of parents' roles, and it is not clear whether such an effort can be achieved as a school-driven program. At the very least, without a good deal of thought, it is likely that the strategies to involve parents in the school-driven effort will reflect the "partners for improvement" discourse rather than the "new citizenship" discourse discussed above. It is not clear that power relations will



**Box 11.8 Recommended Reading on Education Organizing**

Although this field is still new, several important accounts of the work of education organizing exist. To explore the development of the work of community organizing groups for school reform, the issues they face as well as their struggles and successes, we recommend the following:

Hollyce Giles (1998), "Parent Engagement as a School Reform Strategy"

Eva Gold and Elaine Simon with Chris Brown (2002c), *Successful Community Organizing for School Reform*

Kavitha Mediratta, Norm Fruchter, and Anne C. Lewis (2002), *Organizing for School Reform: How Communities are Finding their Voices and Reclaiming their Public Schools*

Dennis Shirley (1997), *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*

Dennis Shirley (2002), *Valley Interfaith and School Reform: Organizing for Power in South Texas*

Mark Warren (2001), *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*

Richard I. Wood (2002), *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America*

Eric Zachary and Shola Olatoye (2001), *A Case Study: Community Organizing for School Improvement in the South Bronx*

change in any way while efforts concentrate on making schools more welcoming. Without a dimension that builds the capacity of parents to be education leaders in their schools and communities, these school-driven efforts, regardless of how sincere they are, are likely to replicate previous unsuccessful parent involvement efforts (Fine, 1993).

What can educators learn from community organizing that would follow a "new citizenship" approach and make these efforts to engage parents more successful? First, it is important for school professionals to recognize that a power difference between parents and school staff shapes the opportunities and interactions that parents have in the school and potentially can discourage parent engagement. For parents to feel their engagement is worthwhile, opportunities and structures for parent and community participation must balance power asymmetries and permit the

building of joint ownership and two-way communication.

Second, school professionals can acknowledge and value parents' and community members' expertise and knowledge. When teachers are aware of and appreciate the neighborhoods and social environments in which their students live and are willing to bring into their classrooms the complexity and contradictions of students' daily lives, they can be more effective educators and supporters (Fine, 1991). When parents and community members are admitted to domains that professionals traditionally have controlled—for example, the classroom and curriculum—students benefit from extra attention; with more adult eyes on them—especially community eyes—they often are more orderly. Students can be more academically motivated when they are learning from a curriculum that reflects their interests and

backgrounds as well as the tensions of their social situations.

Finally, it is important for educators to be aware that the institution of schooling privileges the perspectives and priorities of professionals over those of parents and community members. As a result, educators may fail to understand the underlying problems affecting schools, bypass factors that affect students' academic performance, and fail to procure needed programs or new resources because they do not have the external support necessary to persuade officials to provide required funding. It can be a challenge for school professionals to recognize the validity of parents' and community members' concerns when these include issues that seem to them to have only indirect influence on the classroom, for example, safety, overcrowded schools, or culturally appropriate learning materials. Recognition of the parent perspective and the centrality of issues such as these from the vantage point of community members can be potentially rewarding to the entire school community.

The "new citizenship" model of parent engagement is best achieved by efforts that are driven by schools and communities together. The indicators framework and theory of change we provide shows the link between building capacity in local communities and improving schools. In this paradigm for school reform, strengthening community capacity is directly related to improving schools (Mathews, 1996). We suggest a way of seeing parents and community members, not as the source of urban school failure but rather as part of the solution to improving urban public schools.

## NOTES

1. Information on student achievement for 1997 to 2003 is available on the Chicago Public Schools database, [www.research.cps.k12.il.us](http://www.research.cps.k12.il.us).

2. We use *parents* in this chapter to refer to all child caregivers including biological parents, foster parents, grandparents, and others.

3. Case studies that illustrate the accomplishments of the groups include Gold and Pickron-Davis with Brown (2002); Simon and Gold with Brown (2002); Blanc, Brown, and Nevarez-LaTorre with Brown (2002); Simon and Pickron-Davis with Brown (2002); and Gold and Simon with Brown (2002b). The case studies are available from [www.crosscity.org](http://www.crosscity.org).

4. Keith locates the partners for improvement discourse in two U.S. Department of Education policy documents in particular: *Strong Families, Strong Schools* (Ballen & Moles, 1994) and *New Skills for New Schools* (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997).

5. These terms are common in community organizing groups' discussions of relational power. A fuller discussion of relational power is found in Cortés (1993).

6. Rollow and Bryk (1993) explain that Chicago school reform's "democratic localism" created such sites of power, balancing the relations among parents, teachers, and administrators. Nonetheless, they conclude that in communities that lack social resources, the new decentralized governance structure has been much less successful. They suggest that outside assistance may be needed to empower parents and community members as full participants in school reform. We recommend that community organizations such as those discussed in this chapter are perfectly positioned to play such a role.

7. In referring to education organizing *stories*, we are adopting the language used by community organizing groups for the narratives that describe their campaigns, leadership development, and successes. Stories are the way community organizing groups create a record of their history. They serve as the memory of the role of organizing in bringing about change, which too often is lost as the accomplishments of the groups are absorbed within the system. This institutional memory is important for both inspiring and instructing future leaders and organizing efforts.

8. Our charge from the sponsors of this research was to develop indicators of the contributions of community organizing to school reform; the sponsors saw this approach as helping several audiences—funders, educators, and organizing groups themselves—to understand and be able to assess the value of education organizing as a strategy for school improvement. Indicators are generally categorized within a set of conceptual areas authenticated by both research and popular consensus. Indicators studies use three types of

approaches, often in concert: convening stakeholders, conducting empirical research, and drawing on existing studies in the literature. We used all three strategies to develop an indicators framework applicable to community organizing for school reform.

(1) *Convening stakeholders*: We asked staff members at each site to set up an advisory group that would include not only organizational members but also key players in the community. We met with the advisory group during each site visit to gain a variety of local perspectives on what counted as significant accomplishments of the group's work. In addition, the Cross City Campaign convened a national advisory group of funders, academics, and community organizers that met twice annually during the 4 years of the study.

(2) *Empirical research*: Both in the 19 sites where we conducted telephone interviews and in the case study research, we used a variety of field research techniques to understand education organizing and the outcomes that could be associated with it.

(3) *Using existing research*: We conducted a literature review that included research on school reform and community development. We looked for empirical research that connected school improvement to parent and community participation in school reform, and as we developed the indicator areas, we continued to look for literature that would link each to community capacity, school improvement, and student achievement.

9. Both of these reports are available from the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform Website, [www.crosscity.org](http://www.crosscity.org).

10. Mediratta and Fruchter (2003) and Zachary and olatoye (2001) also address the ways in which community organizing contributes to accountability that has a community focus.

11. Some of the material in this section is adapted from Gold, E., and Simon, E., with Brown, C. (2002b), *Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools: Case Study: Oakland Community Organizations*, pp. 18–22. © by Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. Reprinted by permission of Cross City Campaign.

12. See Gold and Simon with Brown (2002b) and Wood (2002) for a more complete rendition of the story to have the Montgomery Ward warehouse torn down.

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