MEMORANDUM

TO: The Alliance Organizing Project
FROM: Research for Action, Eva Gold and Nikki Edgecombe
SUBJECT: Evaluation, 1998-1999

DATE: August 3, 1999

Background

In 1997-98, Research for Action (RFA) examined the Alliance Organizing

Project's (AOP) community organizing initiative at three levels: parent, team and city-

wide. RFA's 1997-98 report to AOP focused primarily on the ways in which the AOP

community organizing process transformed parents' ideas about their roles and

responsibilities in schools and on the obstacles to bringing parents together into school-

based parent leadership teams. AOP's executive director requested that RFA conduct a

follow up study in 1998-99 focusing more closely at the work of teams, particularly on

the position of teams in local schools and the impact of that position on the formation of

parent-community-educator partnerships.

An examination of the position of teams in schools and the partnerships teams are

forming is important at this moment for two reasons. First, the AOP has now been in

existence for four years and the teams which were brought together early on can yield

important lessons for future efforts. Specifically, in our 1997-98 report, we noted that

there are a range of ways in which teams are positioned/get positioned in schools. The position of a team has implications for its effectiveness as a change agent. Second, the work of the initial teams points toward the potential outcomes of the community organizing initiative for schools and communities. The community organizing process is aimed at catalyzing team-community-educator "partnerships." The 1997-98 report indicated that the AOP's theory of action is "grounded in conceptions of mutual accountability for children's achievement," that is, that the purpose of forming parent-community-educator partnerships is to bring school stakeholders into a complementary relationship in which all parties accept responsibility to each other for children's school success. The first set of teams foreshadows the potential of such partnership for school improvement.

The major questions guiding this investigation , and related subquestions were:

- How do AOP Parent Leadership Teams position themselves/get positioned in schools?

   What is the range in the position of AOP Parent Leadership Teams, e.g. what is the relationship of AOP Teams to Home and School Associations, the Local School Council and /or other school leadership teams (e.g., the Principal's Cabinet)?

- How does the position of a Parent Leadership Team in a school influence its work?

   How does its position contribute to the Team being a change agent in the school?

- How do "partnerships" the team forms with educators and community leaders aim to support school reform?

   What do partnerships look like? Who do they include? What issues do they address?

   How do partnership activities contribute to improving children's school experience?

In selecting sites for study for research, we had two criteria. First, we wanted sites mature enough that it would be possible to "see" the trajectory of a team in a school, that is the process a team went through to establish and maintain itself in a school, and the nature of the partnerships the team was forming. Second, we wanted to work with organizers who would be willing to join us in a participatory process that would bring our observations as evaluation researchers together with their experience doing the organizing to form a fuller picture of what was happening in the organizing process. Using this critieria, and his own knowledge of the organizing and organizers, the AOP executive director selected three sites for study: We refer to these three sites as the Young, Evans and Kline Elementary Schools. (See the section below on the three sites for a fuller description of each.)

RFA conducted research at these three sites from November 1998 through March 1999. We began with extended interviews with the organizers to develop a research plan for his/her specific site. At each site we conducted two rounds of research, one in late fall and the other in early winter. The research included interviews with parents and the principal, and where appropriate with community leaders, teachers, cluster leaders and others. We observed key activities including team meetings, meetings with the principal and public actions at each site as well. On three occasions the organizers joined us to look at the data we were collecting and to compare and contrast across their sites.[1] At these

sessions, we could ask questions of each other about what was happening at a particular site, build shared understandings as well as acknowledge differing interpretations of what was happening, and we also could explore the differing circumstances for organizing and approaches to the organizing. Importantly, the analytic process of looking across sites often made clearer what was happening at any one particular site.

The remainder of this memorandum is organized to present key themes and findings generated by the research. First, we describe the three sites at a particular moment in time, comparing and contrasting them across four key dimensions: student and staff demographics, school leadership style, school environment and community environment. Second, we analyze the position of teams in schools, looking at the differences and similarities across the three sites for the capacity of a team to build "partnerships" for the purpose of leveraging change to improve children's school experience. Last, we raise questions and challenges we believe the AOP community organizing initiative faces as organizers, Board and parents move forward in their effort to participate in school reform.

The Three Sites

The tables below contrasts the three sites across four dimensions: student and staff demographics; school leadership, school environment and community environment. We also look at size and composition of the Teams. We have chosen to highlight these dimensions because they are the contextual forces which have emerged as the most

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[1] Conflicts with scheduling made it impossible for all the organizers to attend all the sessions, however, RFA circulated the work of each session afterwards in order to keep the entire group informed about the

salient for the community organizing. We present the descriptions of these forces in a

simplified form, in order to bring attention to differences and similarities among them.

Examining the ways in which the sites compare and contrast is important for

understanding the influence contextual forces have on the implementation of the AOP

community organizing initiative. Community organizers and Parent Leadership Teams

are constantly in the process of adapting to and affecting these forces in order to create

new possibilities at their local schools. The study also reveals one situation in which

these forces proved to be

intractable obstacles to change processes.

Key Demographic Characteristics of Students and Staff

School	Features
Young Elementary	- K-4 1,100 students: 99% Black; 91% low income 81 staff: 54% Black, 44% white, 1% native American - Principal: male, white, middle age
Evans Elementary	- K-4 870 students: 60% Latino, 38% Black; 95% low-income 58 staff: 55% white, 27% Black, 16% Latino, 2% Asian - designated bilingual school - Principal: female, white, middle age
Kline Elementary	- K-5 441students: 70% Latino, 28% Black; 98% low income 42 staff: 44% white, 39% Black; 17% Latino - designated bilingual school - Principal: female, white, middle age

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research.

All three schools are elementary schools serving low-income populations. Nonetheless, the schools contrast in size and demographics. Young Elementary, for example, is 2.5 times as large as Kline which is approximately half the size of Evans. The student body at Evans and Kline includes African American and Latino youngsters, with a majority being Latino, while at Young the student body is all African American. Staff at Young is African American and white; at Evans and Kline a small percentage of Latinos are on staff as well as whites and Blacks.[2] Evans and Kline are designated bilingual schools. The principals at all three are white and and veteran Philadelphia School District (PSD) employees, two females and one male. The principals of Young and Kline were in their current positions before the AOP organizing initiative began at their schools; the principal of Evans was hired after the organizing was already in process.

Key Contextual Features: Leadership Style, School and Community Environment

School	Leadership Style	School Environment	Community Environment
Young	Principal runs a tight ship; established protocols and processes for interactions must be respected	- strong union presence - teacher-centered - an accepted canon of knowledge - acknowledgement of African American community and culture	- history of community activism - many community groups - mixed middle and low income African American neighborhood
Evans	Principal tolerant of autonomy but must be in the loop	- open, welcoming - student-centered - focus on literacy	- mixed Latino and Black area with strong Latino culture - many community groups, most of which are cultural or social

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[2] We do not know the racial/ethnic breakdown of teaching and non-teaching staff. In other words, we do not know if Latino and Black staff are distributed through professional staff or concentrated in non-teaching positions.

			service
Kline	Principal exerts tight control over all that happens in the building	• widespread belief that children from the area do not have the social and academic preparation necessary for school • school focus on reading • sense of isolation	• mixed Latino and Black area with strong Latino culture • many community organizations, but fragmented

These brief descriptions highlight important contextual contrasts among the sites. The sites illustrate the variability among principal leadership styles. For example, the principal of Young is primarily concerned with maintenance of established processes and practices; any new initiative must adhere to the established protocols that the professional community has accepted and with which it is already comfortable. In contrast, the principal of Evans appears to have less rules and regulations for interactions. Although she wants her position respected through her inclusion in what is happening (i.e. she does not want any surprises), she accepts that she is negotiating interests and priorities among a diverse group of stakeholders—parents and professionals--in children's education. The principal of Kline has yet another leadership style. As a leader she manages closely all that happens. She perceives the AOP organizing initiative as challenging her personal and professional authority.

The environment within each school also offers sharp contrasts. At Young, for example, adherence to the Philadelphia School District (PSD) and union protocols shapes interactions, making professional considerations prominent in the dynamics of the school and critical in the implementation of new ideas. The Evans principal's broader view of the "school community," exemplified through her daily morning "assembly" of parents,

students and teachers, has contributed to a child centered literacy initiative inclusive of both school and parents. At Kline there is attention to reading through numerous school based programs. The hope is that these programs can accelerate the learning of youngsters whom teachers believe come to school lacking the social and academic preparation necessary for school success.

The communities also offer contrasts. The Young School is situated in a community with a long history of activism and where low-income Black families are mixed with middle income Black families. In contrast, the Evans and Kline schools are in homogenously low-income areas. They are both situated within racially/ethnically diverse neighborhoods where the Puerto Rican population has grown dramatically over the past 20 years. Although there are many community groups in these school neighborhoods they appear to be primarily directed toward the provision of social services.

Team Features

Teams	Organizer(s)	Longevity	Size and Composition
Young	2 African American males	2.5 years	7-10 parents—African American, male and female (not all have children in the school)
Evans	White male	4 years	8-12 parents—Latinas and African American
Kline	Latina	2 years	8-10 parents and grandparents—Latinas and African American (not all have children in the school)

All three teams are approximately the same size and each reflects student/community demographics. Team size is similar across schools regardless of school size, number of years of organizing, or the number of organizers at a site.

The Position of the Teams and their Partnerships

In this section we provide examples of the work of the organizers and Parent Leadership Teams in order to illustrate how the community organizing process has worked at the three sites to build partnerships and improve children's school experience. We do not attempt to create a comprehensive list of all that Parent Leadership Teams at each school has accomplished.

Young School: When the organizers first began to form a Parent Leadership Team at the Young School, the principal initially rebuffed the AOP because it did not conform to his understandings of what the established school based group for parent involvement should be, specifically, the Home and School Association. He resisted having more than one venue for parent involvement.   He also perceived the AOP as potentially "confrontational."

In response to this cool reception, the organizers turned their attention to building a Team within the local community, a hospitable climate because of the many active community and church groups. The AOP was distinct, however, among the community groups, because of its focus on the local school. Through meetings held at two local churches the organizers gathered parents, established a Team, and began working on community issues relevant to the school. Parents and community members joined to establish a Safe Corridors program, to make improvements to the school playground, and to arrange for a classroom in a community center for the overflow of students at Young. The Team's first initiative aimed directly at improving children's academic achievement was to build connections between an afterschool program based in a local church and teachers at the school. The program now provides homework assistance and tutoring as

well as recreational activities to help youngsters achieve in school and has a waiting list of students from area schools. Simultaneously, the Team ran candidates for the Young Home and School Association; the Team now holds several officer positions including president, and from this position has been able to enter the school.

The Young Team's legitimacy at the school was enhanced by its endorsement by other community leaders and the concrete improvements their actions resulted in for the school. By entering the school through the Home and School Association channel, team members avoided appearing confrontational. The Team began meeting inside the school and the Home and School president began participating on the principal's cabinet. With access to the school, as well as through their activities with the afterschool program, Leadership Team members have begun to build relationships with teachers. The Team, through its participation on the principal's cabinet has initiated the 100 Book Challenge, with the intent of focusing its work more on instructional issues.

The 100 Book Challenge has the potential to deepen working relations with school staff and provides a mechanism—workshops for parents—for greater outreach to the parent body. The principal concurs with the thrust of this intitiative.

> At [Young], the 100 Book Challenge is a symbol of the goal of AOP, that is a partnership with administrators and teachers. Planning the 100 Book Challenge has been a learning process—a 'seed that's going to grow.' For this project, the AOP parent team chose to identify with an instructional issue. … This is about working together and trust. … This project could change the lives of children.

The principal is gratified that the 100 Book Challenge is being implemented in such a way that the established organization of the school is being respected, i.e. that the Parent Team is working both through the Home and School Association and with the principal's cabinet to implement the effort.

The trajectory of the Young team is one which took advantage of a strong community base in order to initiate positive changes in the community and school environments in order to gain legitimacy with school professionals. This has taken the better part of 2.5 years. The initial effort to address children's achievement by linking the school and an afterschool program contributed to both the visibility and legitimacy of the Team, and encouraged both educators and community to publicly acknowledge shared areas of interest. The organizing around the 100 Book Challenge is at an early stage, but focuses the efforts of the Parent Team more on bringing the broader parent body into activities directly related to children's school achievement. The AOP city-wide has been able to leverage the Team's position in the school through a small grant to the parent-school partnership in support of implementation of the 100 Book Challenge. In an iterative cycle, working together on the 100 Book Challenge has the potential to deepen the working relationship of the Leadership Team with the principal and school staff.

Evans School: The AOP organizing was already established at the Evans School prior to the hiring of the current principal. A local community organization, in conjunction with the AOP, is the sponsor of the organizing effort at this site. Previous to the principal's arrival, the Team had established its priorities--to improve safety in the school area and students' reading levels. One Team member was part of the group that interviewed the current principal, and was able to articulate the Team's concerns. The principal selected concurred with the importance of the dual focii of the Team, creating the groundwork for a partnership at the school. These shared concerns, along with the principal's orientation to make the school welcoming to parents, has facilitated overlap in

membership among the Parent Team, the Home and School Association leadership and the Local School Council, which spreads Team members through the various spheres of influence within the school. Co-membership of some parents in the community organization that sponsors the organizing effort has provided links to the local community as well as provided other opportunities for parents to be leaders.

From the principal's point of view this overlap in membership is desirable, enhancing effectiveness by reducing competing pulls.

> If you are going to be a Home and School parent, you are also a [community group] parent at this point. There is no separation…. It's almost like one organization. I think you need to be together, unified to do this kind of thing. Rather than a scattered thing. I think that's what they're trying to do here.

Through classroom representatives, Team members are trying to build stronger connections with teachers as well as experimenting with a system for keeping closer contact with the broader parent body.

The strength of the working relationship with the principal is reflected in two ways. First, she has participated in community meetings (sponsored by the community organization in which the parents participate) to bring increased police attention to the school area and she has opened the school to community meetings with local police officers about the need for the same. These steps have positioned the school as an advocate *with* parents for attention to a neighborhood and school which historically have been overlooked.

Second, evidence of a school-wide focus on literacy is apparent through notices and banners posted at the school and in the principal's monthly newsletter, which regularly reports accomplishments in reading. Beginning in 1998, in order to advance this priority, the Parent Team directed itself toward the revitalization of the school

library. This was the result of parent research which indicated that strong school libraries which follow models like Library Power can be a catalyst for school change supporting a focus on literacy and improved student achievement. Using Library Power as its model, the Parent Team began discussions with the principal for steps to revitalize the library. Making revitalization of the library a priority needed to be negotiated with the principal and at first proceeded haltingly.

The project accelerated when the school library aide retired at the end of the 1997-98 school year. The Parent Team petitioned for a full-time, fully credentialed librarian and with the principal identified and interviewed candidates for the position. At a public action held in the school library, the AOP city-wide contributed to the effort with a grant for new books, which was matched by a grant from the principal and supplemented with funds from the Home and School Association, giving momentum to the drive. The district pledged to have a librarian in place by the end of January. In the interim, parent volunteers weeded out old books and ran the library. The pace of implementation slowed, however, when the desired candidate could not transfer immediately from the position he was then holding.

In the meantime, the Team and the Evans' principal, along with other AOP Parent teams, participated in the AOP city-wide campaign urging that the city and PSD take extraordinary measures to address teacher shortages across Philadelphia schools. At Evans, this meant a commitment from the district to assigning the selected librarian to the school. The PSD's Human Resources department has committed itself to this by September 1999. Progress in transforming the library has been a multi-year effort and still is on-going.

The congruence of interests between the principal and parents contributed to a working partnership, and the work around the library has provided an opportunity for the Parent Team and principal to learn to negotiate together on behalf of the school. The Evans Team is probably an example of one of the most highly evolved Team-principal partnerships, albeit one in which differing priorities sometimes still need to be worked through. The Team, however, is fully embedded within the school through its co-membership with the Home and School Association leadership and Local School Council. From these vantage points, as well as through the continuing organizing of the Parent Team around the library and safety in the community, the Team contributes to school reform, maintaining and augmenting the focii on literacy and building a school-community initiative to bring attention to the need for greater safety measures in the neighborhood.

Kline School: From the start, the principal of Kline Elementary was uneasy with having an AOP organizing drive at the school. She had heard rumors that AOP was anti-principal and thought they would work against her. In an interview she admitted that "I have some animosity based on what other people have told me …." Two years into the organizing effort her suspicions remain and the Team and she have not formed a working relationship. She perceives her interactions with Team members as largely about parent "complaints" and times when "they're just dumping on me."

The Team has tried several approaches to overcome the reluctance of the principal, including trying to endorse candidates for the Home and School Association in order to legitimate themselves and gain a base within the school; meeting with the cluster leader and principal together; and reaching out to the SLC Coordinators to co-design a

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long-term plan focusing on literacy, to which all parties might agree. None of these tactics has changed the principal's disposition and their efforts continue to be met with resistance. As a result, the Team's efforts have fragmented as they have tried one approach and then another. Creating a coherent initiative has eluded them.

In the past year, however, AOP organizing has started in several of the other elementary schools in the immediate neighborhood of Kline. Safety has emerged as a major concern among parents in these schools. Despite its difficulties moving initiatives inside the school, the Kline Parent Team is joining with the parents from the other schools in a neighborhood-wide effort to increase police patrolling and the number of crossing guards in the area of the four schools. By working on issues outside the school, but still important to children's school experience, the Team is continuing to focus on school improvement, but in a less contentious arena.

The fact that the principal was opposed to the AOP organizing initiative and has rebuffed it from the start has meant that the organizing process has been largely stalled at Kline. Furthermore, the organizing initiative did not have an organized community structure to fall back on to leverage its position within the school the way that the Young Team had. In the short term, the AOP neighborhood initiative around safety can help focus the efforts of the Kline parents. It is unclear, however, whether their participation in this neighborhood campaign can leverage any space for it at the school.

Themes

Several themes emerge from the description of the position of teams and team-community-educator partnerships. First is the critical nature of the relationship between

organizer and Parent Team with the school principal. This was discussed in the 1997-98

report and is revisited in this memorandum. Second, is the hybrid nature of AOP. AOP

is a part of the *Children Achieving* reform plan, but not part of the Philadelphia School

District. The hybrid nature of AOP presents it with both challenges and advantages to

leveraging parent teams at local schools. Third, is the challenge of building and

sustaining the momentum of organizing when the process of making change is uneven

and often extends over several years. Fourth, is the identification of the contextual forces

which impact upon the organizing and create possibilities for and obstacles to the

organizing process and its desired effect: making parents and other community adults

partners with educators in school change.

Building relationships with the principal

The AOP organizing model is a relational one, that is, it centers around organizers

building relationships with parents, parents with each other and organizer and parents

with educators. The ability to build relationships is a central feature to the organizing

process taking hold and progressing.

As indicated in the AOP's theory of action, building relationships across

stakeholders in children's education is key to building mutual accountability to improve

children's school experience. The principal is often the first and key relationship for

organizers and parents at a school site: as educational and administrative leader, the

principal is the gateway to the rest of the school staff. Without a working relationship

with the principal of a local school a parent leadership team may fail to gain a position at

a school from which to build relationships with the other stakeholders in children's

education in order to create mutual accountability. The examples of these sites indicate variability in the ability of parent teams to build relationships with principals.

At *Evans* the task of building a relationship with the principal was facilitated by the role parents played in interviewing her. Their inclusion in the interviewing process made the principal aware of the Parent Team and its priorities.   The parents, for their part, were able to help select a principal amenable to their involvement and aligned with their priority concerns. The fact that the hiring process both acquainted the principal and parents with each other, and that they elected to work with the other, created the groundwork for their relationship around the priorities of safety and literacy.   Initiatives in these areas are the vehicles through which the AOP Parent Leadership Team has proceeded to work to build mutual parent/educator responsibility for children's school success.

The initiative around the library is an example of an effort that might have languished had it not been for the insistent voices of parents. The parents have been able to sustain a focus on achieving a high quality library for their children over several years as they have navigated through the district process. They have also learned to negotiate with the principal for a budget to accommodate this reform.   The library revitalization presents, however, a challenge to the community organizing as well. Momentum is difficult to build when accomplishments are so slow in coming.

Although many educators are concerned about safety issues in the neighborhoods nearby their schools, few have considered it within the parameters of their professional responsibilities to work to improve the situation. Invited by parents to be part of a community initiative to address safety, however, the example of Evans Elementary

School illustrates the potential for a school-community partnership aimed at forming a broad-based social and institutional force to bring resources into an area that is often overlooked. Working with parents on community issues such as safety can also make visible to school-based people the often invisible strengths of a low-income neighborhood, including seeing parents as local leaders.

At *Young* the principal was in place before the organizing initiative got its start. The principal was initially hesitant to open the school to a force he was unfamiliar with and which might not conform to the established protocols for interaction in the school. The strength of the community around Young school was able to offset the initial cool reception of the principal; the activist history of the area was fertile ground in which the AOP could root itself, distinguishing its contribution from the plethora of existing groups through its focus on the local schools. Association with community leaders, as well as the concrete improvements the organizing initiative contributed toward increasing safety in the school area, improving the playground, finding community space to relieve overcrowding at the school, and augmenting an after school program, facilitated its entry into the school.

The organizer and Team's strategy for entry, becoming the leadership of the Home and School Association, positioned the organizing initiative as part of the school and the principal then included Team members in his cabinet. Being part of the principal's cabinet has provided the Parent Team with a position from which to focus its efforts on improving instruction, through initiation of the 100 Book Challenge. The case of Young indicates the importance a strong community and concrete accomplishments

can play in establishing the climate for the organizing initiative at a school, even when a principal is not initially receptive.

Kline offers a different kind of example. Similar to Young, the principal predated the beginning of the organizing initiative there. The principal's leadership style made her suspicious of the challenge the organizing presented to her control and she had heard negative reports about the intentions of the organizing from colleagues which further raised her suspicions. In contrast to Young the school is not surrounded by an activist community, but is in an isolated location; there was little community base to nourish the organizing initiative and leverage it at the school. The continued resistance of the principal to building a working relationship with the organizer and parent team undercut the ability of the organizing initiative to gain a position in the school from which to work.

The ability of AOP to leverage local organizing

Although local contextual forces, e.g. the leadership style of a principal and the strength or weakness of a local community as a base for organizing, are critical to the ability of a parent team to position itself to build mutual accountability for children's school success, the position of the AOP within the Philadelphia School District is also significant. Although the AOP is part of the *Children Achieving* reform design, it is not part of the Philadelphia School District. As the examples of Young and Kline indicate, the "outsider" status of the community organizing initiative means participants are often challenged to legitimate their effort with the principal.

At all three sites in this study parent teams perceive the traditional venue for parent involvement, the Home and School Association, as the means to gaining a position within the school. Being a part of Home and School guarantees access to space,

resources and lists of parents as well as inclusion on school leadership teams, e.g. the

local school council and/or the principal's cabinet. On the one hand, parent teams that

successfully overlap membership with this traditional venue for parent involvement can

enhance their legitimacy. On the other hand, as the boundaries between teams and these

school-based and -driven venues for parent involvement blur, there is a danger that the

parent Leadership Team can be absorbed into the school, losing its distinct identity and

purpose.

The AOP city-wide plays a role in mediating against this happening. At Evans

and Young, for example, the AOP awarded grants to the Parent Teams which contributed

to maintaining their identity even as they were being integrated into established school

venues for parent involvement. Similarly, participation by some of the Team members in

city-wide activities serves the same function. The connection of these Teams to

community based groups also helps them maintain a distinct identity.   Individual teams

need to constantly assess the tensions of moving toward being a part of a school while at

the same time maintaining distinctiveness from the school.

For Kline parents, the city-wide AOP and the AOP work going on at other

schools in their neighborhood provide them with an identity and focus at a time when it

has been impossible to establish themselves at their school. The case of Kline illustrates

how, ironically, the AOP can assist in leveraging a team that is in a working relationship

with principals (such as at Young or Evans), but has little influence to leverage a Team

when it is being resisted by a principal.

Sustaining the organizing momentum when accomplishments take so long

Building partnerships and making change can be a long, slow process; progress is not linear, but can often feel more like two step forwards, one step backwards. The revitalization of the Evans library is an excellent example. The Parent Team has now been at work on this project for nearly two years. There have been many unanticipated delays along the way to creating a full Library Power library, such as when having a librarian in place was postponed from January 1999 to September 1999. The organizer and parent team have been faced with the need to sustain mobilization around library revitalization over multi-years, even as children and parents come and go. Similarly, the Kline parent Team has searched for ways to gain access to the school over multi-years, which has made the job of building and sustaining momentum and focus a difficult if not impossible one. It has taken the Young team several years to establish itself in the community, gain legitimacy at the school, and begin to focus on instructional issues.

To repeat a finding from the 1997-98 report, the organizing process is not a "quick fix." It is an initiative that to have effect must be sustained over years, despite often slow progress in making visible gains. It takes time, patience and willingness on all parts to create a dynamic where multiple school stakeholders can speak with one voice for the purpose of making changes in children's school experience. Even when this happens at a the local level, larger forces can frustrate efforts, delaying progress and dissipating energy.

Contextual forces

We have proposed that the principal's leadership style, the school climate and the community context are the most salient contextual forces impacting on the community organizing at a local school. We have found that these forces are dynamic, not static, that

is that they are interactive, and can configure to create possibilities for and obstacles to

the community organizing. The community organizing initiative faces the challenge of

assessing external forces which mediate the organizing process. The effect of these

forces, however, is not uni-directional. The organizing process itself can shape external

forces. For example, at the Young School, where the principal was initially hesitant,

beginning the organizing in the community and associating with community leadership

contributed to the organizing initiative being accepted by the principal and getting

situated within the school. Changes, within a school or at the community level, can also

alter the climate for organizing. At Evans school, where the school neighborhood has

been threatened by the drug trade for the past decade, the development over the past

several years of a neighborhood organizing initiative around safety created a context for

the principal joining with parents in a campaign to make the area around the school a

safer one. In contrast to Young and Evans, the absence of a strong community base

coupled with the fears of the principal of the organizing drive have created a climate in

which it has been difficult for the organizing to take root. The AOP needs to create

opportunities to assess and reflect on contextual forces and the ways in which the

organizing effort is affecting them (or not) and how contextual factors reconfigure over

time to create a more hospitable climate for organizing parents or one which is

inhospitable.

Challenges, Lessons, Questions

How does the work of AOP at Young, Evans and Kline inform AOP's theory of

change, ie. how is a mutual sense of accountability for children's education being

created? Are partnerships based on mutual accountability a catalyst for school change that increases the possibilities for all children's school achievement?

The evidence from the three sites examined in this study indicate that the process of creating a mutual sense of accountability among school stakeholders is a slow and often uncertain process, dependent on the interplay of the organizing initiative with contextual forces. The evidence also is that creating a sense of mutual accountability might not be possible in all situations. Mutual accountability demands the creation of new kinds of relations which often means unlearning ways of interacting that have made schools professional domains that marginalize parents and community adults as "outsiders."

Evans and Young illustrate that the (re)building of relations is a process grounded in activities in which trust and confidence are cultivated. Trust building, in both cases, has evolved over several years and has been linked in one case with a strong community, and in the other with a willing principal. They also show the beginning of the transformation of relations of power and authority into more complementary relations among school stakeholders, with the return being the stimulation of initiatives to benefit all the children at each of the schools. In both of the schools, however, it took several years for the primary relationship between the Parent Leadership Team and the principal to form. Although teachers at both schools have been open to the organizing effort, several years in both sites still face major challenges involving teachers and the broader parent body in their efforts in substantive ways. The task of broadening and deepening mutual accountability, difficult in and of itself, is made even more so by the slow pace of visible accomplishments.

In contrast to Young and Evans, Kline is a site in which activities to build trust and confidence remained frustrated and issues of power and authority contested with relations between the principal and the Parent Team a constant source of conflict. At Kline there has been diminishing returns for the organizing effort: Although a parent team exists and they have successfully leveraged the expansion of bilingual education and the maintainance of the special education program, they have not been able to establish a sustained initiative at the school and to begin the work of transforming relations to complementary ones.

The examples of Young and Evans have indicated the importance of contextual forces in shaping opportunities for the organizing. Both point to the fact that school leadership style and school and community environment are critical to assess and that organizers and teams constantly need to be examining these and how they are reshaping themselves in order to understand the potential for leveraging school change. The example of Kline, however, perhaps raises the most provocative questions. Despite a committed organizer and parent team, the effort at Kline was stultified. The team was unable to find a position in the school from which to build partnerships around the issues that most concerned the parents. Through the lessons of the experience at Kline, the AOP might be able to understand more clearly the most difficult kinds of situations the community organizing initiative faces, in order to develop alternatives for what to do when such situations present themselves.

The exercise of this participatory evaluation, in which RFA researchers and organizers looked together across these three sites might be construed as a preliminary exercise or practice run in how organizers can look critically at their work and that of the

organization as a whole. The process was an imperfect one. As might be expected, the pressures of the daily demands of being an organizer often displaced full participation in the evaluation process. Yet, on the occasions when some or all of us looked together across sites, we learned from the perspectives the others brought about the organizing both at particular sites as well as about the AOP initiative more generally. Regardless of how it comes about, in depth, cross site reflection which brings multiple perspectives together appears critical to fully understanding the variability in schools and communities and the opportunities differing situations present for parent-community-educator partnerships and the mutual accountability for children's school achievement such partnerships aim to catalyze and sustain.