

Indicators Project On Education Organizing

Case Study Report: Preliminary Cross-Site Observations
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Introduction

The Indicators Project on Education Organizing is a project of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. Cross City invited Research for Action (RFA) to be its research partner in this project. The goal of the project is to document the work of community organizing for school reform in order to better understand the contribution community organizing makes to the revitalization of public education and low-income communities.

The research for the Indicators Project involves three phases of data collection. In the first phase RFA carried out an inventory of groups doing community organizing² for school reform. We found 150 urban and rural community organizing groups working on school reform nationwide. Although the list we created is not comprehensive of all the groups doing this work, it included the range and variety of groups in the field.

¹ Data collection and analysis involved, in addition to Eva Gold and Elaine Simon, Rob Ballenger, Sukey Blanc, Aida Navarez-La Torre, Rachel Martin and Marcine Pickerson-Davis from Research for Action. Chris Brown from Cross City Campaign accompanied RFA on all site visits and participated in the cross site analysis. Anne Hallett and Lupe Prieto from Cross City accompanied research teams on one site visit each.

² Our working definition of community organizing groups (which can be independent, associated with a national network and/or have a university connection) includes groups that share the following characteristics: Active in urban or rural areas with a concentration of low-income, often racially, ethnically and linguistically minority families; target schools/districts that are under-performing; use social processes of relationship building with parents and community members to identify shared concerns about children's schooling; take collective action that challenges inequity; develop a powerful membership base and local leadership for the purpose of leveraging change. The relationships building promoted, both within and across communities, schools and school districts is geared toward transformation at individual, community and institutional levels. The data base of community organizing groups is available on-line at www.crosscity.org.

The second phase of research involved a telephone survey of a subset of 19 groups of the 150. The 19 groups represented both geographic and demographic variation. The telephone interviews deepened our understanding of the range of work going on in the field and clarified areas in which community organizing is making a distinct contribution to school reform. We also identified important contextual factors that contribute or present barriers to groups being successful in making a difference in children's school experience.³

From the 19 groups, we selected five urban groups for intensive case studies: Austin Interfaith, Austin, TX; ACORN NY, Brooklyn and the Bronx; Alliance Organizing Project (AOP), Philadelphia PA; Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), Chicago, IL; and Oakland Community Organization (OCO), Oakland, CA. The case studies include both independent groups and groups that are associated with national networks. The groups work with diverse populations including African American, Asian/Asian American, Caucasian and Latino. They are all groups mature enough to be able to show evidence of their effect. Phase 3 of the research involves three rounds of visits to each group of 2-4 days duration, during which we conduct individual and group interviews, observe activities, review organizational documents and collect relevant quantitative data. The interviews involve group staff and members and school and district personnel as well as others (e.g. funders, politicians, journalists, academics and representatives of other groups) who work in and/or are knowledgeable about the context in which the community organizing is happening.

This cross-site report is based on analysis of data collected from the first round of site visits. Looking across sites highlights commonalities among the groups as well as differences in their approaches and emphasis. We are mindful that the groups represent a range in terms of their organizational development and maturity and that we only observed them at one phase of their organizing process.

The next section of this report is organized by theme. Within each theme we first present elements shared among all the groups and then the ways in which the groups vary across theme. Following the themes we provide a list illustrative of the accomplishments of these groups. We then present some of the barriers the groups face and their most urgent needs. We conclude with some overall observations and brief comments on next steps for deepening our knowledge about the work of these groups.

³ The report on the analysis of the telephone surveys is available from the Cross City Campaign.

Themes

Scale and Scope

I. Shared elements

- With the exception of AOP, a group solely dedicated to organizing for school reform and only 4 years old, the groups are multi-issue and have been organizing (though not necessarily in education) for 15 years or more.
- In their education organizing, all of the groups work on a number of different levels either simultaneously or over time (from individual school to district and even state levels) although with different degrees of emphasis and intensity.
- The organizing initiatives are overwhelmingly aimed at the elementary school level and in a few cases at middle schools, with the exception of ACORN, which is working at the high school level. LSNA is giving some thought to developing a high school focus.

II. Variation among groups

- AOP, ACORN and OCO have been organizing for school reform less than 5 years. Austin Interfaith and LSNA have been doing education organizing for more than 10 years each.
- In the current phase of their organizing efforts, ACORN and OCO are aiming mainly at district level policy change; AOP, AUSTIN and LSNA are working school by school and engage in policy level work as issues demand. However, as stated above, each group has worked at various levels.
- Even though all urban schools districts in this study operate within tight budget constraints, the expanding economies of some of the case study cities and the energy of their non-profit and philanthropic communities are important context factors affecting the targets of organizing and possibilities for change. For example, the Chicago school district has funds earmarked for new facilities and summer school programs and a philanthropic community with a long-standing commitment to encouraging community-school collaboration. Austin's economy is growing, bringing in new resources that potentially could benefit all of its schools. Oakland too is experiencing economic growth. Philadelphia is still experiencing population loss and consequently its tax base continues to grow weaker. Philadelphia is severely hampered by the financial constraints of the

district in the past 5 years and is in a struggle to increase state spending for Philadelphia's public schools.

Organizational Features

I. Shared elements

- The groups generally have small staffs of organizers and even fewer dedicated education organizers. AOP, ACORN, LSNA and OCO all had 3-5 organizers dedicated to education organizing. Austin had 4 organizers, but none focused only on education organizing.
- The groups share a commitment to building parent/community leaders, and parents and community members represent the organizations publicly and serve as leadership in their governing bodies. In OCO, AOP and LSNA some parent/community leaders are paid to organize as professional organizers.

II. Variation among groups

- The budgets of the groups varied, although overall the portion for education organizing was modest. LSNA had a significantly larger budget that reflects the significant funds it raises for program implementation in the schools. AOP's budget fluctuated across years (highest in 1997) because of its connection to the Philadelphia School District's plan for reform.
- Although all the groups value partnership with school administrators and teachers, they are at different stages in making such relationships a reality. The two organizations engaged in education organizing the longest, AUSTIN and LSNA, are at one end of a continuum. In these cases, relations with principals and teachers are, for the most part, long-term and become the basis for transforming the culture of schools. Although AOP, OCO and ACORN fall at different points on the continuum, in general their school relationships are still more instrumental, aimed at accomplishing specific goals.

Strategies

I. Shared elements

- All the groups have a repertoire of strategies, and employ different ones at different phases of the organizing. They all begin with parents and their concerns for their children's educational experience. They all work with parents and other community members to translate concerns into issues around which the group can take collective action. Among the criteria that determine which issues the group should address is an assessment of whether the issue is "winnable." They all work

to create a parent and community power base from which group members can negotiate with other power players in the school arena.

- Building lasting collaborative relations is a strategy of all the groups. For example, at this phase in their development, LSNA's parent mentor program, which brings parents into classrooms, is its primary strategy. (LSNA also runs candidates for local school councils and a number of principals are members of the group.) AUSTIN's Alliance School strategy starts with collaborative relationship building, building towards a school-based core team of parents, teachers and administrator. After bringing together a parent team from a school site, AOP works to establish a strong relationship with the principal. Its goal is to establish parent-educator partnerships around the implementation of programs and initiatives that address parent concerns.
- All of the organizations used confrontation, campaigns, or direct action around particular issues. For example ACORN is waging a campaign in the Bronx to bring attention to poor performing schools. LSNA used a campaign to fight for a new middle school. AOP launched a reading campaign that awarded schools mini-grants for proposals around reading that encouraged parent-teacher-administrator partnerships.
- All the groups were very sophisticated in analyzing power relations and politics within their settings. They positioned themselves or cultivated allies in order to be able to complement their expertise and/or make long-term gains sustainable. For example, OCO cultivated a partnership with the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools in order to further its small schools campaign. It also was working on making inroads within the union. In a previous campaign around class size reduction, they worked together with the union. LSNA developed extensive relationships with the Chicago Board of Education through its campaign against school overcrowding and have involved state representatives in establishing and funding their school-based community centers.
- Creating alternative histories/stories was important across the groups. Stories of successful efforts were an organizing and motivation tool. Stories circulate in the community and reinforce the organization's image. For example, in Oakland, we heard from a variety of people we talked to that OCO was formidable because it could get 2,000 people (an impressive number there) to a rally. Austin abounds with success stories where Austin Interfaith is working, which inspired participants and kept up momentum. ACORN's *Secret Apartheid* reports undergirded their reputation and ability to command attention in the city. Throughout their campaign on overcrowding, LSNA repeatedly brought together hundreds of parents from across schools. The knowledge of LSNA's ability to turn-out parents held the district accountable in multiple instances where they attempted to back off from their promises to build new facilities.

Stories are also important to preserving the memory of contributions of community organizing to school reform: Too often, community organizing results in programs, initiatives or changes that are the institutional responsibility of other entities. The catalyzing role of organizing in making a program or initiative a reality is muted during the course of implementation.

II. Variation among groups

- There is some variation with how each of the groups begins their organizing and how they gain entry to schools. For example, AOP begins with an organizer at a school site, identifying parents who will make up a parent leadership team. The Parent Leadership Team then conducts listening campaigns with other parents from the school in order to identify concerns. The Team, with the support of the organizer, negotiates entry to the school through the principal. With LSNA, its work in schools gained momentum through legislation mandating local school councils (LSCs) and its subsequent recruiting and training of parents to run as candidates for LSCs. LSCs have the power to hire principals and LSNA was able to participate in bringing in principals who were committed to working with the local community. Austin Interfaith begins with the concerns of its institutional members in churches and other religious congregations and from there negotiated entry to schools by identifying principals open to working with them.
- Given their differing stages of maturity and phases in the organizing process there is variation among the groups in the degree to which they experience, and the ways in which they manage, the tension between their dual goals of being change catalysts and working in partnership with schools and districts.

Beliefs about Strong Schools

I. Shared elements:

- Small schools and small class size create environments where students are well known and where relationships with students and families are strong, thus contributing to safe school climates and student learning.
- When parents participate collectively to identify their concerns, articulate their perspectives, become knowledgeable about what goes on in schools, and organize for what they think is important, teachers gain respect for students, families and communities and greater understanding of who the students are. This respect is fundamental to building trust that is the foundation for collaborative relations with parents and community. The better teachers understand students, the more responsibility they will take for student learning.

- Schools are important community and social institutions and therefore critical to strengthening civil society, which builds and supports strong schools.
- Schools are public institutions and therefore should be accountable to the public.

II. Variation among groups:

ACORN

- They believe in building community power and strengthening low-income communities to confront decision-makers for the purpose of getting what low-income neighborhoods need, including new schools and/or revised/new school programs. They aim their efforts at all levels of administration.

AUSTIN

- They believe in forging a connection between schools and communities through finding common concerns. In the process, both schools and communities change and they begin to work together. They believe that forming a collaborative culture among parents, community, teachers and administrators displaces bureaucratic ways of relating and working. The more people know each other, the more they will serve each other's best interests and be most effective in their work. The leadership of the principal is key in transforming the culture of the school. As schools become institutional members of Austin Interfaith and part of the Alliance Schools network, they will have support in their transformation.

AOP

- They believe that parents' voices must be heard at both local schools and across schools in order to make schools responsive to the students. Partnerships among parents, teachers and principals, where parents are included in decision-making and implementation of instructional initiatives are critical to altering the culture of schools. Principals can be important facilitators of parent-educator partnerships.

LSNA

- In order to have real relationships with principals and teachers, parents need to be organized as a group and come to the school from a position of power. Then, bringing parents into the schools in roles such as parent mentors in classrooms and on LSCs can be a meaningful mechanism for sensitizing teachers and principals to community values and assets. They also believe that the school should be a resource for the community, a place where adults as well as children engage in learning. The principal is a collaborator in making schools strong community institutions and many local principals are members of LSNA.

OCO

- They believe that schools need to be intimate environments where teachers are leaders in education reform and through contact with parents and community organizing, responsive to the diverse cultures and needs of the families in the schools. They are working to strengthen the participation of parents and teachers in bringing about small schools.

Theory of Change

I. Shared elements

- Community organizing needs to build strong relationships among parents and/or community residents in order to create a power base that can demand attention and resources for schools in low-income neighborhoods. This power base also works to alter the power equation between parents and schools that has worked to the disadvantage of parents. When more equitable and respectful relations between school personnel and an organized community/families is achieved, educators often come to hold higher expectations for students and that can contribute to improved student learning.

II. Variation among groups

ACORN

- If the organizing brings low-income people in a neighborhood/community together and through research-based direct action brings pressure to bear on people in power in the school district, resources will be redirected to address overcrowding, teacher quality, and low achievement levels in low-income schools. Students will then have more of the opportunities that more economically advantaged students have.

AOP

- If the organizing builds strong parent teams at local schools and these teams get situated inside a school so that parents have a voice in decisions and implementation of instruction, then, overtime, the culture of the school will be transformed. With the deepening of parent-educator relations, teachers are likely to develop respect for and expectations of students and their families that can lead to improved learning for all the students.

AUSTIN

- If the organizing motivates principals and teachers to work with parents and to appreciate what parents believe is important for their children, then educators will come to appreciate the students, their families and the communities they come from. This process alters the interaction between parents and educators. The school culture changes from hierarchical to collaborative. With a collaborative school culture, there is greater possibility for high academic achievement. Communities, in turn, begin to strengthen their capacity to support their youngsters' school experience, e.g. by building political sophistication to press for policy changes that support the schools.

LSNA

- If the organizing nurtures mutually respectful relations among educators and community members, then classrooms will value the resources students and their families bring to the educational setting and student outcomes will improve. Building these connections often creates community leadership, especially among women, which can transform their life goals as well as the institution of schools.

OCO

- If the organizing can build alliances among critical power players, including teachers and parents, then a viable movement for small schools can result. In such small settings, students will be well-known and understood. The OCO partnership with the Bay Area Coalition for Essential Schools creates the potential for teachers to engage with the professional and pedagogical development they need to run autonomous schools and feel professionally respected. In such a climate, it is anticipated that children will achieve as well as those in Oakland's advantaged schools.

Accomplishments of the Groups

We have organized accomplishments along the lines identified in the telephone interview analysis as "indicator areas." These areas include:

- 1) Equity
- 2) Accountability to parents and community
- 3) Positive school climate
- 4) High quality instruction and curriculum
- 5) Social capital
- 6) Tight-knit community school relations
- 7) Community power
- 8) High Capacity Organizations

While we have presented these areas, and the accomplishments related to these areas, as distinct, in practice they overlap and are interactive.

Many of the accomplishments are similar across groups, or across several groups. The examples below are illustrative, not comprehensive. A preliminary finding is that community organizing is especially important in four areas: increasing equity, building social capital, expanding accountability and altering power relations. These are areas that are often weak or overlooked in the school reform literature.

1. Equity

- new facilities and schools
- renovations to existing facilities
- new programs
- access to magnet and other special programs
- qualified teachers

2. Accountability

- awareness and responsive of politicians and school district decision-makers to organizing initiatives/campaigns
- participation in LSCs and/or other decision-making bodies eg., hiring decisions, budget decisions, etc.
- increase in reporting on student achievement, e.g. mid-term notification on student progress, etc.

3. School climate

- safety in and around the school improved, e.g. speed bumps, traffic lights, improved street lighting, crossing guards
- collaborative school culture

4. Instruction and Curriculum

- Community and school based campaigns: e.g. Home/school reading campaigns
- Implementation of research-based instructional programs: Success for All, Links to Literacy, Young Scientists, Library Power, bilingual ed., etc.
- Extended hours of instruction through after school programs
- Parent mentors in classrooms

5. Social Capital

- adult education classes
- building alliances between parents and politicians, between parents and teachers, parents and principals (referred to as “bridging” capital in the research literature,)
- parents assume leadership positions in the community group, other community organizations and/or the schools
- Schools in a neighborhood relate to each other around shared interests.

6. School-community relations

- community centers at schools established
- educators join parents and community members on neighborhood walks
- links between community after school program and teachers at the school
- parents are “everywhere” assisting in the school

7. Power Relations

- Politicians and media respond to community organizing
- partnerships with unions
- establish voting blocks
- partnership with district in piloting new curriculum

8. High Capacity Organizations

- members provide organizational leadership
- capable of forming strategic alliances
- contribution acknowledged by the community-at-large: funders, politicians, other community groups
- capable of strong membership turn-out

Barriers/Needs

Across the groups there was a shared set of barriers and needs.

- Overall, the organizing efforts were small for the size of the effort needed to change schools and school systems.
- With more funding it would be possible to hire more organizers to broaden and/or deepen the work of the groups. Additional funding would also allow groups to pay organizers better, acknowledging them as professionals and keeping them at this work. There was also a shared sense that expansion of their work needed to be incremental and carefully and thoughtfully done because of its complexity.
- The instability in schools (changing personnel, student transiency and the fact that students and parents move on) and communities (transience and displacement due to gentrification) was a challenge to organizing.
- The deep entrenchment of bureaucratic practices and relations in schools resist the organizing.
- Collaboration, while it is an agreed upon ideal state of relations, holds the danger of cooptation inherent in collaborative approaches. It is also difficult to sustain over time.

- Moving into issues that touch on making change in classrooms is difficult given the professionalization of education.
- Conservative state-level politics often were strong forces countering the thrust of community organizing.
- Too many schools lack strong school leadership and/or a staff group that will lead in working with the organizing effort.

Concluding Comments

As we noted in the introduction to this report, these observations are based on the first round of site visits in Spring 2000, and they are preliminary. In subsequent visits we will add to and refine these observations as we learn more about the groups and engage in deeper dialogue with them and others connected to and/or knowledgeable about their efforts.

One of the goals of this research is to provide a detailed description of what community organizing for education reform looks like, as well as to identify the context factors that shape the strategies and influence what groups accomplish. In this presentation, we have suggested a number of ways in which the work varies across sites and we are beginning to understand some of the factors that account for the variation. Among these factors are the length of time the organizing effort has been underway; the structure and size of a school district; what opportunities exist in the setting, such as available funding; how local problems are defined; what are the existing reforms, themselves often layered on even earlier ones; the denseness and character of the local organizational infrastructure, etc. These important context features need to be understood along with the dynamics of how groups operate.

Another aspect of context is the history of a group's work. In our field research, we are observing groups at single moment in a longer-range enterprise; each group is in a different phase of its work. We have come to recognize the importance of understanding the particular phase of the work represented by the activities we are seeing, and how a particular phase of work can affect decisions about the strategies employed or the scale and scope at which the group is working.

The purpose of looking across the groups is not so much to compare and contrast, but as a lens through which to understand the work of each of the groups more clearly as well as for understanding the collective contribution the work of community organizing is making to school reform. Particularly, we hope to be able to articulate the critical linkages that community organizing builds between schools and their external environments and the ways in which these linkages strengthen schools and communities, help to ensure student learning, and preserve public education as a democratic institution.