

CROSS CITY CAMPAIGN FOR URBAN SCHOOL REFORM

PREPARED BY RESEARCH FOR ACTION

Successful Community Organizing
for School Reform: Executive Summary



Strong Neighborhoods

Strong Schools

The Indicators Project on Education Organizing

Executive Summary

Across the country, community organizing groups are turning their attention to public education. Urban public schools in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods nationwide face similar problems—overcrowding, deteriorating facilities, inadequate funding, high staff turnover, lack of up-to-date textbooks, and children performing below grade level. Students attending these schools are shut out of high quality programs, discouraged from going to college, and shortchanged in their employment opportunities. Community organizing groups have begun to address these issues, and in the decade that community organizing for school reform has taken hold and spread, the groups' efforts are beginning to pay off.



The prevailing belief is that transforming schools and improving student performance is beyond the scope of community organizations. In fact, urban educators frequently see communities as the problem. Operating in the professional paradigm of schools, those who make policy for and run public schools often discount the insights of parents and community members, especially when it comes to what goes on in the classroom, because they believe that parents lack education credentials. Even when the efforts of community organizing groups have contributed to school change, their accomplishments remain invisible because the credit goes to the politicians and/or educators whose responsibility it is to carry out the hard won improvements.

This study, like those of a few other researchers, advances a new paradigm of school reform. The new paradigm departs from models of school reform that look simply at what is happening inside schools and school systems, to look at work that creates a positive dynamic between communities and schools.

The charge of this study was to identify indicators of the impact of community organizing for school reform, in order to make the contributions of organized parents and communities visible to wider audiences. For over two years we documented the education organizing of five groups: the Alliance Organizing Project (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Austin Interfaith (Austin, Texas), Logan Square Neighborhood Association (Chicago, Illinois), New York ACORN (New York, New York), and Oakland Community Organizations (Oakland, California). In the Indicators Project series, *Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools*, we provide a methodology for understanding the contributions of community organizing to school reform and a set of illustrative case studies. In the report, *Successful Community Organizing for School Reform*, we present an Education Organizing Indicators Framework that highlights strategies and accomplishments of education organizing. We also describe a Theory of Change that shows how the work of community organizing groups creates a process that leads from increased community capacity to improved student learning.

The studies show that when school reform goes hand-in-hand with building strong communities, schooling itself changes fundamentally, increasing the chances that reform will be carried out and sustained.

The Indicator Areas

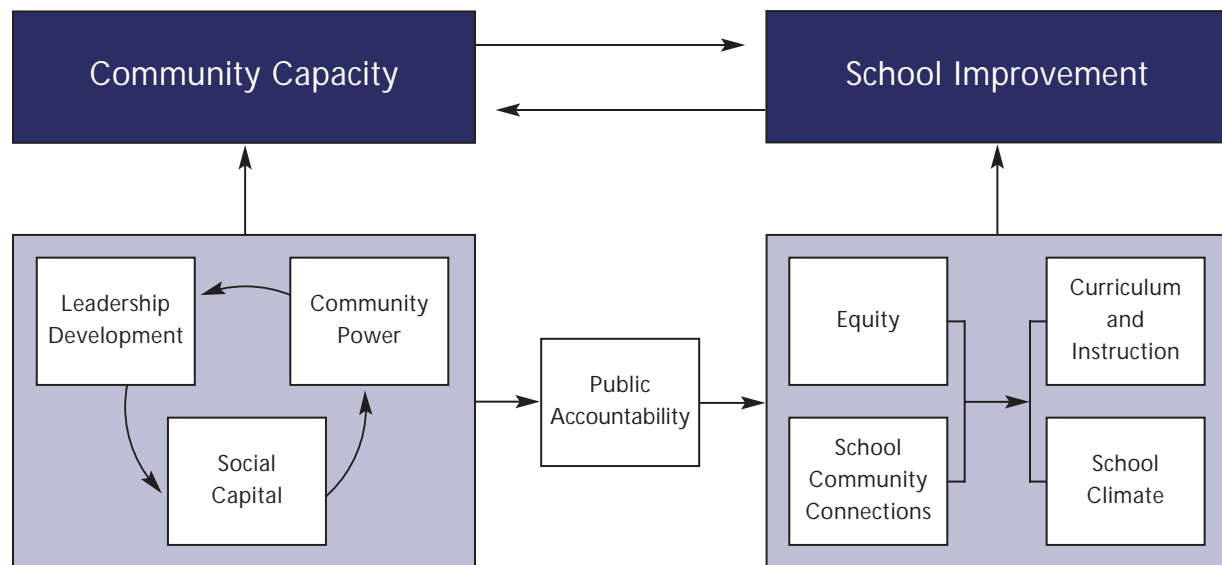
We identified eight indicator areas—broad categories that describe the work of education organizing—in which accomplishments can be identified. The eight indicator areas are: *leadership development, community power, social capital, public accountability, equity, school/community connection, positive school climate and high quality curriculum and instruction.* We refer to this set of eight indicator areas as the Education Organizing Indicators

Framework to emphasize the importance of seeing the indicator areas as interrelated and interconnected areas of work that together contribute to a change process.

The Theory of Change

Based on an analysis of education organizing in the five case study sites, we developed a theory of change that explains how accomplishments in the indicator areas leads to improved schools and stronger student achievement.

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



The theory of change model shows the pathway of influence between building community capacity and school improvement. Work in three indicator areas—leadership development, community power, and social capital—increases civic participation and leverages power through partnerships and relationships within and across communities, as well as with school district, civic, and elected officials. Public accountability is the hinge that connects community capacity with school improvement. Increased community participation and strong relationships together broaden accountability for improving public education for children of low- to moderate-income families. Public accountability creates the political will to forward equity and school/community connection, thereby improving school climate, curriculum, and instruction making them more responsive to communities, laying the basis for improved student learning and achievement. Stronger schools, in turn, contribute to strengthening community capacity.

Community organizing groups develop parent and community leadership and build community power. These achievements produce social capital. The dynamic of leadership, power and social capital results in broadened accountability for children's school success. When educators, parents, community members, and politicians feel mutually accountable, finding solutions to the problems of urban schools becomes a collective responsibility, lessening the tendency of parents and educators to blame each other for school failure and those within school and political bureaucracies to dodge their responsibilities. This process creates the political will that enables community organizing groups to forward issues of equity and school/community connection and bring new influences to bear on school climate and curriculum and instruction. When there is broad public acknowledgement that equity and school/community connection are important goals, resources for schools in low-income areas become more plentiful and schools often turn into centers of the community. Respectful relationships among parents and teachers and students can develop, expanding ownership for the educational experience of children. Expectations for children are raised as teachers see that parents care about their children's education. The potential increases as well for curriculum and instruction that is both rigorous and culturally responsive.

Influences on Community Organizing

No two organizing efforts look alike. Understanding the influences on organizing activity helps to make sense of how it plays out across settings and how

activities taking place at particular moments relate to larger efforts. It also helps to create appropriate expectations for outcomes. By looking across the five case study groups we identified four areas that need to be considered to make sense of any particular community organizing effort.

- The overall region, state, city, and district context in which a community organizing group is working shapes its strategies and to some extent, its outcomes.
- 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 available for their education work.
- There are many phases of an organizing campaign, and recognizing the phase of a campaign in which a group is working or where an activity fits into a campaign is critical for seeing its relevance to a wider effort with larger goals.
- Community organizing groups are always balancing work at multiple system levels. Work at the local level is important for building the base of constituents and the capacity to implement change efforts. Local changes however, also require supportive policies at the city, district or state levels.

The Added Value to School Reform

Community organizing does not provide a prescription for a particular educational program or restructuring approach, and it does not take the place of these kinds of ideas. Nor are community organizing groups alone in the field of external groups exerting influence on school reform. The unique role of community organizing in education reform is to build community capacity and link that to school improvement through public accountability. The indicator areas we have identified as associated with community capacity (leadership development, community power, and social capital) and public accountability are almost totally absent in the work of school reform as it is usually defined.

Even where there is overlap with the work of educators and reform experts—in the areas of equity, school/community connections, curriculum and instruction, and school climate—community organizing adds a critical dimension that otherwise would be missing. Community organizing groups are rooted in neighborhoods and have a long-term commitment to the support of local families. They see schools as tied to other issues that need attention and improvement, and their constituents are deeply affected and angry when public institutions are ineffective in meeting their needs. As a result, community organizing groups add value to school reform efforts by:

- Sustaining the vision and momentum for change over time
- Persisting despite obstacles and setbacks
- Building political capital and creating the political will that motivates officials to take action
- Producing authentic change in policies and programs that reflects the concerns of parents and community members

Challenges and Recommendations for Extending and Supporting Education Organizing

Education organizing holds much promise for reframing school reform in the new paradigm that connects communities and schools. Nonetheless, there are a host of reasons why work in the education field is challenging, including the scale necessary to make a difference, resistance to change, the highly charged political environment, and the difficulty of identifying measures of impact that everyone can agree upon. With these challenges in mind, we make the following recommendations to support and extend the work of education organizing:

- 1. Build Organizational Capacity and Infrastructure:** Community organizing needs funding to be able to attract and retain experienced organizers by being able to offer adequate salary and benefits. They need multi-year funding to conserve their resources and assure continuity of effort over time. They need to be able to purchase the services of technical assistance groups, pay for conference attendance, and access other opportunities for learning.
- 2. Supporting School/Community Connections-Reframing the Paradigm:** Community organizing needs the active support of funders and others who believe in the critical role of parents and community in transforming schools. Funders can: bring together the foundation “wings” of community building and school reform; use both measures of community capacity as well as measures of school improvement in assessing community organizing efforts; and initiate dialogue about the value added by community organizing groups to school reform through convening conferences and linking differently positioned groups.
- 3. Expand Expertise and Legitimacy:** Community organizing groups need to develop education expertise in order to become “players” in the education sphere. Funders can: support strategic assistance to community organizing groups by facilitating networking with technical assistance groups; support the growth of technical assistance groups to meet the needs of community organizing groups; and sponsor training for organizers and community constituents, including how to work with the media.



4. **Document Success:** The Indicators Project started with a small group of funders and school reform activists who believed that if community organizing for school reform was to be credible, then a methodology needed to be developed to document its accomplishments and show how these accomplishments lead to improved student learning. Funders can play an important role in supporting and developing strategies to take the learnings from this study to broader audiences, including other funders, educators and the academic community. Funders can also continue support for further investigation and refinement of measures of the accomplishments of the groups.

The Power of Ordinary People

Writing about a 1989 trip to Chicago, the historian Michael B. Katz described his amazement upon hearing that state law had radically decentralized the city's school system, giving parents and community members a significant hand in running their local schools. His previous studies of the history of

American education had led him to understand that the dominant form in public schooling—professionalized and bureaucratic—was not inevitable. Before bureaucratized forms came to dominate American education, they had once vied with a more democratic approach. From his historian's perspective, Katz wondered if he was witnessing a momentous turn of events. *"I wanted to know if the course of school reform would sustain my faith in the capacity of ordinary people to manage their schools and in the liberating effects of shedding bureaucratic weight."*¹

We are in agreement with those who say schools cannot do it alone. The discourse on school reform needs to go beyond what happens inside schools to include the dynamic between schools and communities.

NOTES

1. Michael B. Katz, *Improving Poor People: The welfare state, the "underclass," and urban schools as history*, p. 100. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

In this study, we have shown that when ordinary people enter into the education arena their efforts result in meaningful gains for students who have not been well-served by the public schools. Ordinary people can indeed begin to transform the institution of public education to make it more equitable and responsive.



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Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools

Successful Community Organizing for School Reform
Appendix: Case Studies

The Education Organizing Indicators Framework

- **Executive Summary**

- Case Studies

- Alliance Organizing Project

- Austin Interfaith

- Logan Square Neighborhood Association

- New York ACORN

- Oakland Community Organizations