

**A Report to the Alliance Organizing Project
on its Work with Parents**

PREPARED BY RESEARCH FOR ACTION

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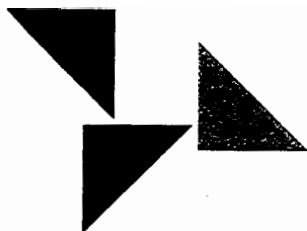
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Research for Action (RFA) is a non-profit organization engaged in educational research and reform. The group's primary methodology is qualitative, case-study research and cross-case data analysis. RFA uses collaborative inquiry processes with educators, students, parents and community members to fulfill its mission of promoting social justice and educational opportunities and outcomes for all students.



Research for Action

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Background

The mission of AOP is to build the capacity of parents¹ and communities for new roles in their local schools for the purpose of supporting and sustaining education reform. The AOP employs principles of adult education with its “curriculum” being the concerns parents have about their children’s education. Using a participatory androgogy, the AOP works with parents to identify shared concerns, to collect relevant data about these concerns and with this knowledge move into “partnerships” with administrators, teachers and other school staff to create educational environments in which there is an increased possibility for all children to achieve at high levels.

AOP organizing occurs at two levels: the local school level and city-wide level. Community organizers recruit parents to be members of AOP teams at local schools. The parent teams are the primary unit of the organizing and consist of 6-20 parents whom the community organizers train as parent leaders. The parent teams and organizers formally meet between once a week to once every two weeks, depending on the level of organizing activity at any particular time. In between formal meetings organizers and parents and parents and other parents meet individually and/or stay in contact through phone calling, creating a self-reinforcing dynamic within the group. The parents leaders are intended to

¹ *Parents* is used generically to describe adults caring for children, including biological parents, foster parents, grandparents or other relatives or friends who are caring for a child or children.

be the core of a network of community adults who are prepared to act on behalf of the education of youngsters at the local school.

City-wide meetings occur monthly. A city-wide meeting might range from 10-50 participants and brings together parents from school teams, AOP organizers and Board members. The city-wide meetings are an opportunity for parents from different teams to share their concerns and their stories about their organizing experiences. In addition, cross-site activities are organized at the city-wide level.

Driving the AOP strategy for change is a theory of action grounded in conceptions of mutual accountability among parents, administration and teachers for children's achievement. The AOP organizing is directed at working with parents to make them knowledgeable about schools and school reform in order to be informed and full participants in decisions about their children's education. Parent-school partnerships (sometimes involving other community adults as well) create settings for shared decision-making and negotiation of parent and school and community commitments to improve children's school outcomes. Broadly, the organizing is intended to contribute to creating a strong civic culture which can sustain school reform.

As we conducted interviews, however, other explanations for the importance of revised parent, community, and school relations emerged. In many cases these explanations extended or nuanced the AOP theory of action.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The Parent Experience

Parents who become active with the AOP have had a range of previous parent involvement experiences. Some described themselves as very actively involved while others characterized themselves as "low level involved." Their school involvements included being members or officers of Home and School, classroom aides, volunteering regularly or being a sporadic "trip" parent or bake sale donator. Despite these activities at their local school, they believed that their children's schools did not consistently provide a welcoming environment, did not keep them informed of their children's progress nor actively solicit their input. Many of them expressed a desire for frequent, clear and on-going communication with school staff:

- Parents who become involved with AOP perceived education as the major way for their children to reach their dreams and goals. They had high expectations for their children and believed that their children could achieve. Many were eager to support their children by promoting school safety, self-esteem and academic success, especially when they felt part of a group where they were respected and what they had to say was being listened to.

- The AOP provides training to parents which is intended to assist them in changing perceived patterns in parent-school relations. The training emphasizes group processes to help parents collectively identify the issues which concern them and to conduct “research” into those issues. Learning to ask questions and supporting parents’ learning about the multiple factors—budgets, standards, school climate, curriculum and instruction—that impact on the quality of public education were central aspects of the training.
- AOP organizing provides parents with an expanded view of their roles in schools and helps them to redefine their responsibilities to their children’s education. AOP activities put parents in new roles: interviewing key school district personnel as part of their “research”; writing grant proposals; speaking out at public actions city-wide and at their schools; attending workshops on school budgets and how to search the web to get their school’s performance index. As parents take on new roles a fresh sense of responsibility is emerging. One parent, who is also a community activist, put it this way. “AOP trains and empowers parents. It is a learning process. Sometimes parents think if they say or do something that the teacher will take it out on their child. Well, this trains and empowers parents to take control of their child’s education.”
- Parents often feel isolated and express appreciation for the connections the AOP has helped them make with others who share similar concerns. Parents express appreciation for the commitment they’ve made to help each other. A paradox, however, is that the individual growth experienced by a core group of parents and their increased commitment to AOP does not always translate into being able to recruit others to their school teams. Parents draw on their experience of finding shared concerns as a group to try to attract other parents to the organizing, but bringing in others is a challenge.
- Parents express pleasure in the partnerships *they* are constructing with others. Parent leaders who have had the benefits of AOP training are reaching out to teachers, administrators and others to create new ways of working together to support the education of children in the areas of school safety, discipline school budgets and literacy. Working to create partnerships, however, takes a lot of time and commitment on the part of individual parents. The balance between working to improve schools for all children, attending to the needs of one’s own child, and the demands of work and family challenges many parents active in the AOP—as well as possibly being a barrier to joining for others.

The Formation of Parent Teams

Team formation is a critical early step in the organizing process. The team is the unit which formulates ideas for change from a parent perspective. The team, through its

research and action, can also be a catalyst for change at a school site. If a team fails to establish and/or sustain itself the organizing is truncated.

- Organizing an AOP parent team at a school site is a staged process which happens over the course of a year or more. During this time parents on the team begin to identify themselves as a group in support of all the children in the school.
- The work of sustaining AOP teams over time has brought parent leaders face to face with the difficult work of reaching out to new parents and involving them in school change.
- The position of AOP teams in relation to other parent involvement efforts at the local schools appears to be similar across school sites in their initial phase. At this stage the AOP team is a distinct entity. After this initial phase, however, there is a diversity of ways in which Teams position themselves. For example, in some schools AOP team membership partially overlaps with that of Home and School and the Local School Council, in others the team might merge with the Home and School and/or the Local School Council, and yet in others these parent involvement entities might remain distinct from one another. Contextual factors such as prior affiliations of parent members and whether the principal's preference is for the team to combine with other parent involvement settings can influence the later position of the teams. The position of the team is not static, it may shift again over time with changes in local circumstances.
- A few incipient partnerships among parents, community and schools now exist. These partnerships, around the areas of school safety, discipline and literacy, vary in their stages of development, but begin to provide measures for the depth and influence of the organizing.

Relationships with Administrators

Although the Children Achieving design plan indicated that community organizing for the purpose of increasing parent and community involvement in local schools was a component of the reform, none of the principals we interviewed indicated that the district had oriented them to the purpose for the organizing previous to an organizer coming to their school. Despite this lack of orientation, we heard from principals (or other administrators) in four of the schools in this study that they were strongly encouraged by the cluster leader or other cluster staff² to open their school to the organizers whether they were fully comfortable with the initiative or not. The climate at the schools during the

² The Philadelphia School District is organized into 22 "clusters," geographic areas which consist of a neighborhood high school and the elementary and middle schools that feed into it. Each cluster is staffed by a cluster leader and others who support the local schools.

initial stages of the organizing was inevitably influenced by whether the principal perceived top-down pressure.

- Relationships between AOP organizers and teams with principals and teachers often begin in a climate of uneasiness. In many instances, however, over time these relationships become more nuanced and distrust begins to play a less prominent role in shaping the relationship.
- Principals have differing conceptualizations of their role as school leaders and different leadership styles. These differences influenced how they received the organizing at their school.
- Principals frequently do not have ready access to the communities their schools serve. In a number of instances, the organizing connected principals with the local community. These principals appreciated the linkage the organizing was creating for them. It also provided opportunities for them to see parents in different roles-- as community members and leaders.

ISSUES RAISED BY THE FINDINGS

The AOP organizing, although small in scale to date, shows much promise. The data indicate that in a range of school settings, AOP teams have been able to establish themselves, identify concerns parents have about their children's school experience, and bring issues emanating from these concerns to the school community-at-large with proposals for how to work "in partnership" on these issues. The data also indicate that even though the relationship between AOP and school administrators often begins with distrust and uneasiness, where both persevere the relationship begins to show results in areas of mutual concern such as safety in the school area, discipline and early literacy. In a few instances, connections which the organizing has facilitated between schools and their local communities have been especially helpful in positioning families and the local neighborhood as resources to schools. The process of organizing and forming partnerships, however, is not a "quick fix"; it takes time and patience for parents and school staffs to grapple with the effort to revise parent, community, school relationships to make schools better able to help all children achieve.

The following ten points explore issues raised by the major findings.

1. Examination of AOP's theory of action revealed that the assumptions behind organizing with parents for school change and mutual accountability were not necessarily shared ones or the only ones among the actors involved with or affected by the AOP organizing. It is important that AOP revisit its theory of action continuously, and the assumptions undergirding it, in light of ongoing experience. Although differently positioned school stakeholders are likely to hold varying theories and assumptions, it is also important that all parties—parents, organizers,

administrators, teachers and other school staff as well as other interested community members--have opportunities to engage with each other across their roles on the topic of organizing, parent involvement, and parent-school partnerships, what they mean by it and why they think it is important to school reform.

2. AOP organizing involves parents in identifying their concerns and making connections between these concerns and a range of issues important to school reform, from budgets, school improvement plans, discipline to literacy. Coupling organizing with experiential models of adult education, the AOP organizers work with parents to identify their questions about these issues and to conduct “research” –going out and investigating alternative approaches to what exists. Learning to systematically research an issue and bring alternative approaches to the attention of the school community recasts parents from being passive observers of or chronically disaffected with their children’s education to being active agents working on behalf of their children. Systematic inquiries, however, require planning, practice, reflection and time as well as organizers-as-facilitators who themselves are familiar and comfortable with experiential approaches to teaching and learning. It is important that as the work of AOP proceeds, the pressure of expansion and quick results does not displace this critical component of the organizing and the training for both organizers and parents that it demands.
3. Parents are attracted to the AOP because of their concerns about their youngster’s education. Involvement with AOP encourages them to see their concerns in the light of the needs of all children. Participation with AOP often means that parents must find a balance between their activity on behalf of their own child and their activity for all the children. As parents are associated with AOP over longer and longer periods of time it is important to keep this tension in mind and to investigate how parents are managing what might feel like competing pulls, and what might lead to some parents discontinuing participation in the organizing.
4. Formation of AOP parent teams and sustaining participation are critical to the AOP model for change. In enumerating the qualities that were important about teams, for example, one organizer stated, “[What is important in a team is] a consistent group over 2-3 years which is what you need to make a change at a school.” Recruitment is a time-intensive and ongoing activity. AOP organizers and parents find themselves challenged in the task of reaching beyond the original core of parent leaders and recruiting new members to join them in their efforts. Systematic investigation into what inhibits participation by those parents whom team members and organizers might have hoped to see getting involved but have failed to do so was beyond the scope of this evaluation but might help inform the difficulties of outreach. The challenges of sustaining teams suggested here and in the previous point also suggest that organizing is an ongoing task and that the commitment to it needs to be a long-term one.
5. The position of teams in relation to schools varies with the context at the local school. The differences in positioning raise questions about the strengths and drawbacks of each. Given a year of experience with an array of differently positioned teams, AOP

now has the opportunity to assess how the different positions of teams within schools influence the ability of a team to maintain its identity and mission *and* be connected enough to the school to influence it.

6. AOP teams in schools and AOP city-wide have successfully organized public actions, creating a space for parents to dialogue with school staffs. The next stage of the organizing, however, establishing partnerships between parents and schools around mutually agreed upon initiatives, is still very young. Monitoring the development of the first set of partnerships is critical because the partnerships represent settings for the institutionalization of parents' participation in decision-making with schools and potential for mutual accountability. Partnerships—numbers, scope, focus and the assessment of their impact by participants—might well represent one of the clearest measures of AOP's effect on strengthening schools as institutions for teaching and learning.
7. The responses of principals to AOP was very variable along a continuum from receptive to rejecting the organizing altogether. The principals' response to the organizing appeared to reflect different conceptualizations of the relationship of schools and communities as well as a range of leadership styles. Principals need professional development for the kinds of changes new relationships with parents demand of them in their role as school leaders. Opportunities to reflect with colleagues on parent-school relations and the implications of different conceptualizations for the revision of parent, community, school relationships is critically important. Additionally, AOP organizers and school teams need to be responsive to the varying styles of school leadership and the implications of these styles for building relationships with individual principals and school staffs.
8. Principals may perceive the organizing effort at their school as a burden, not a resource. It involves them with a group external to the system which is the creation of the reform, yet not part of the district. Furthermore, the AOP team initially might appear like a competitive setting with other parent involvement settings, such as Home and School and the Local School Council, despite the fact that the schools in this study showed relations among these parent involvement settings to be complementary. The AOP faces the challenge of engaging principals so they see the organizing as an asset. In a few of the schools, the connection the AOP made between the principal and the local community was valued by the principal and helped to move the relationship between the AOP organizer, team and principal along the continuum from uneasy to being more positive.
9. Even though the AOP methodology stresses the importance of building a relationship with the principal, its efforts are driven by its commitment to parents. Issues which parents identify as critical to the education of their youngsters might not always be the same as the priorities principals believe they must address. The AOP approach has within it competing elements: relationship building with principals and school staffs alongside fidelity to an agenda emanating from parent concerns. The consequence is, as one organizer aptly put it, relationships which are "fragile, often turning on an event." The very existence of the organizing raises tensions that previously were

suppressed; the challenge of learning to channel this tension to productive ends is one facing administrators, school staffs, parents and organizers alike.

10. The Children Achieving reform asks administrators, teachers and other school staff as well as parents to reexamine the home, community, school relationship. The existence of the organizing brings conflicts inherent in changing these relationships to the foreground. While the AOP is working from the parent end, school leadership, teachers and other school staff need opportunities and time to consider changes in this arena as well in order to be “ready” for parents in new roles. In order to make new roles and relationships a reality, chances to discuss promising endeavors as well as dilemmas is needed throughout the various layers of the system—small learning community, school, cluster and district.

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INTRODUCTION

An Overview

A major thrust of the recent wave of public school reform nationally and locally is reexamination of the relationship among parents, communities and schools. Philadelphia's school reform, Children Achieving, embraces the necessity for revising these relationships in its action design plan (February 6, 1995) which states that "fundamental change [in the education of children] will not occur without a transformation of the relationship between every school and the parents and communities that surround it" (p.VIII-1).¹ The action design plan articulates the need for a community organizing effort to deepen the participation of parents and community in the change process at the local schools. The document identifies the Alliance Organizing Project (AOP) as a primary vehicle of the community organizing for this goal.²

The mission of AOP is to build the capacity of parents³ and communities for new roles in their local schools for the purpose of supporting and sustaining education reform. The AOP employs principles of adult education with its "curriculum" being the concerns parents have about their children's education. Using a participatory androgogy, the AOP works with parents to identify shared concerns, to collect relevant data about these concerns and with this knowledge move into "partnerships" with administrators, teachers and other school staff to create educational environments in which there is an increased possibility for all children to achieve at high levels. A year and a half into its effort the AOP Executive Director and Board requested an evaluation which would investigate its work with parents. The following research questions have guided the investigation:

- How does participation in the AOP at the local and city-wide levels influence parents' involvement in their children's schools? What are parents' concerns about their children's education and their goals for participation in AOP? How are parents' judgments about their roles in their children's education evolving over time with their participation in AOP? How is their sense of efficacy in influencing their children's educational experience changing (or not)?

¹ The thrust of the Philadelphia action design is congruent with the goals of the Annenberg Challenge. Over half of the Challenge grants have gone to eight of the nation's largest school districts, including Philadelphia.

² In early 1993, a group of education advocates representing several organizations saw the need for increased parent and community organizing aimed at issues of instructional support and change. Although the Alliance Organizing Project was identified to do this work, it coexists alongside a number of other established parent advocacy groups including the Home and School Council, the Parents' Union for Public Schools, the Citizens' Committee on Public Education in Philadelphia, Parents United for Better Schools, Inc., ASPIRA, Inc., and others.

³ *Parents* is used generically in this document to describe adults caring for children, including biological parents, foster parents, grandparents or other relatives or friends who are caring for a child or children.

- How do AOP parent teams and schools interact over time? Where is there overlap and where is there divergence in perspectives of the “partnership” between parents and schools? Where do conflicts emerge?
- How do revised parent/community/school relations strengthen schools as institutions for teaching and learning?

This report is a formative document with AOP Board of Directors, Executive Director and organizers its primary audience.⁴ The hope is that the evaluation can assist the AOP in reflecting on its work with parents to build collaborative parent-school relations for the purpose of supporting children’s school success. Because other interested audiences will read this report, we have included background on the AOP’s structure and organizing model, as well other context about AOP and reform in Philadelphia where we thought it was needed. When reading the findings, however, it is important to recall the primary audience and the parameters of the evaluation; the study was guided by AOP’s interest at this stage of its development in learning more about the experience of parents with the organizing.

Organization of the Report

The report begins with an overview of the structure of AOP, the organizing model which guides AOP’s work with parents and its theory of action. Next, we look at how the evaluation approach and methods sought to reveal the meanings parents gave to their experience with AOP. The major findings are then presented. We start with the **Experience of Parents** because parents are the heart of the AOP change process. The AOP model is directed at building the capacity of parents - both skills and knowledge-to act effectively on behalf of their youngsters’ education. Second, we look at the **Formation of Parent Teams** because school-based parent teams are the intended catalyst of school change. Although a parent team might begin as a distinct group, the way teams position themselves within the school varies after the initial period, with implications for their connection to and influence on the school. Last, we examine the **Relationship with School Administrators** because building a relationship with school administrators, particularly the principal, is critical to the eventual ability of a parent team to effectively situate itself within a school and to act as a change agent. These relationships, however, were problematic, as both administrators and parents sought to make sense of new roles for parents in schools. The report concludes with a brief discussion of issues raised by the findings. The appendix includes a calendar of fieldwork, sample research protocols, a description of the parent co-researchers and a chart of the seven case study schools.

⁴ A broader assessment of reform and parent involvement in Philadelphia is being considered which would include data from this study as well as data gathered from surveys of parents and teachers, interviews with other parent involvement groups, and data collected by the Philadelphia Writing Project’s Teachers and Parents and Students (TAPAS) inquiry project.

AOP: Structure, Model and Theory of Action

AOP, a non-profit group, has several nested organizational layers. A Board of Directors meets bi-monthly and manages the overall direction of the organization.⁵ An Executive Director/Lead Organizer guides the work of a cadre of community organizers. The community organizers work at the local school level. At the end of the year of this study there were ten community organizers working across ten (of the district's 22) clusters (geographic areas which consist of a neighborhood high school and the elementary and middle schools that feed into it), each in one to three schools.⁶ Four of the ten were hired by AOP in collaboration with local community-based organizations and five AOP hired directly. The tenth organizer is from a partner organization that has provided staff support to the organizing.⁷ The organizers are a diverse group: four men and six women of whom five are African American, two Latina, two Anglo and one Asian American. The organizers meet weekly as a group for training and to share what is happening across their sites.⁸ (See Chart 1, Figure 1: Nested Organizational Layers, p.5)

AOP organizing occurs at two levels: the local school level and city-wide level. Community organizers recruit parents to be members of AOP teams at local schools. The parent teams are the primary unit of the organizing and consist of 6-20 parents whom the community organizers train as parent leaders. The parent teams and organizers formally meet between once a week to once every two weeks, depending on the level of organizing activity at any particular time. In between formal meetings organizers and parents and parents and other parents meet individually and/or stay in contact through phone calling, creating a self-reinforcing dynamic within the group. The parents leaders are intended to be the core of a network of community adults who are prepared to act on behalf of the education of youngsters at the local school.

Team activities reflect the stages of the AOP organizing model: (1) a "listening campaign" where the team brings together the broader parent community to discuss issues and concerns; (2) prioritizing issues; (3) conducting research into the parent concerns, and (4) bringing these concerns and what was learned through research to the entire school

⁵ The Board of Directors consists of representatives from community-based and advocacy groups and parents from schools in which AOP is currently active.

⁶ The number of schools in which the AOP is organizing is still a relatively small number within the district as a whole. This evaluation looked at a sample of the schools where AOP was active; we do not attempt to assess its impact across the system as a whole.

⁷ AOP collaborated in hiring with the following community groups: Asian Americans United (AAU), Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project (EPOP), Norris Square Civic Association, and The Community/Cluster Collaborative for the Edison Schools. The partner organization which has provided staff support to the organizing effort is the North Philadelphia Compact, a program of the Philadelphia Education Fund.

⁸ The Executive Director reviews the annual workplan for each organizer and the organizers submit regular reports on their work to the Executive Director.

Chart 1

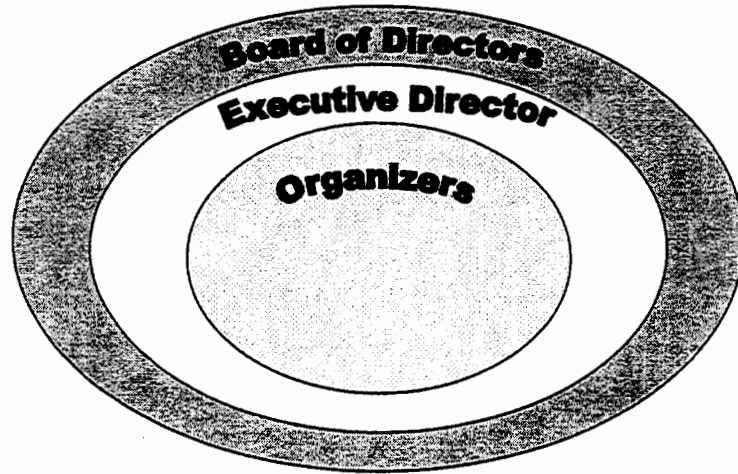


FIGURE 1: NESTED ORGANIZATIONAL LAYERS

LOCAL LEVELS OF AOP

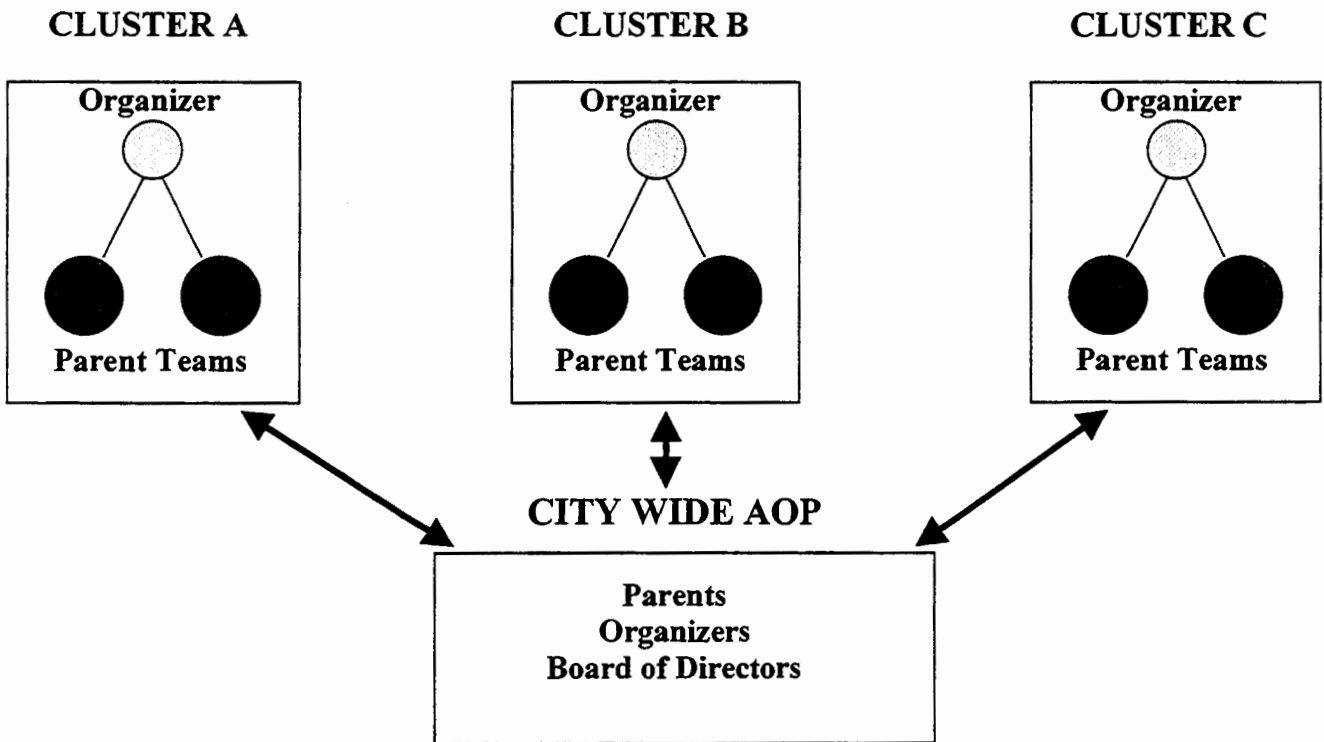


FIGURE 2: INTERACTIVE LEVELS OF ORGANIZING

community through a public action. Public actions, events where parent leaders present the issues which concern parents to school and community audiences and other interested school stakeholders, and the activities that follow public actions are intended to produce partnerships with administrators, teachers and other school staff to implement programs that address the stated concerns of the parents.

City-wide meetings occur monthly. A city-wide meeting might range from 10-50 participants and brings together parents from school teams, organizers and Board members. The city-wide meetings are an opportunity for parents from different teams to share their concerns and their stories about their organizing experiences. As one parent put it:

... we are part of a larger organization and it's not just funding issues but, [getting] together with other people from other parts of the city because it's cross culturally, you know, we have a large Latino population up here where as the representatives from West Philadelphia tend to be, depending on how far west, Caucasians or African Americans, but, the issues reflect that in different clusters we all had the same problem.

Like this parent, an observer of a city-wide meeting commented in an interview that the opportunities parents had to share their organizing stories helped to reduce the isolation many parents feel at the local school level. "What's interesting at those [city-wide] meetings is the telling of the stories that bolsters those parents and schools that are struggling. When they hear the successes of others, it helps others know that it is a struggle, but possible." A researcher also noted that parents telling their stories at city-wide meetings can be a source of positive images for other parents. Parents were observed signaling with "high fives" and "elbow knocking" when a parent spoke particularly eloquently or knowledgeably.

Although the shifting attendance pattern at the city-wide meetings⁹ indicated that the two levels of organizing sometimes overstretched the time commitment AOP parents could make to the organizing effort, there is also evidence that the two levels are interactive. An early city-wide effort, The Effective Instructional Campaign, which provided opportunities for organizers and parents to visit successful schools in Philadelphia and other cities with similar demographics as the local neighborhoods in which AOP is working, created images for parents of the characteristics of successful schools. In the past year, in response to pervasive concerns about low reading levels, AOP made a reading campaign a city-wide focus. The AOP Executive Director facilitated a cross-team parent research group which investigated approaches to reading. A city-wide public action announced a reading campaign, highlighting three potential

⁹ During the year of this study attendance at city-wide meetings was sparse in the early fall, building steadily to the city-wide public action in December which over 200 attended. Attendance began falling off in the late winter and early spring when many local teams were planning local public actions. At the end of the school year attendance again was sparse.

parent-school partnerships focused on reading as a mechanism for improving children's reading. The AOP Board solicited proposals for mini-grants of \$5,000 from school-based parent teams working in partnership with administrators and teachers around programs to support literacy. By summer 1998, four parent teams had applied for and received grants and others were planning to do so in the fall. The city-wide Reading Campaign created a supportive dynamic with local teams that were beginning the difficult work of investigating reading at their local schools and creating parent-school partnerships around specific reading initiatives.¹⁰ (See Chart 1, Figure 2: Interactive Levels of Organizing, p.5)

Driving the AOP strategy of creating partnerships among parents, administrators, teachers, and other school staff, such as the ones encouraged around reading, was a theory of action grounded in conceptions of mutual accountability for children's achievement. The AOP organizing was directed at working with parents to make them knowledgeable about schools and school reform in order to be informed and full participants in decisions about their children's education. Parent-school partnerships (sometimes involving other community adults as well) created settings for shared decision-making and negotiation of parent and school and community commitments to improve children's school outcomes. Broadly, the organizing was intended to contribute to creating a strong civic culture which could sustain the process of school reform.

As we conducted interviews, other explanations for the importance of revised parent, community, and school relations emerged. In many cases these explanations extended or nuanced the AOP theory of action. These alternatives complicate notions of accountability with multiple understandings of why altering home-school relations is important.

Both parents and administrators subscribed to notions of reciprocity in the parent/teacher relationship: when parents care then teachers care and vice versa; if it looks like parents don't care then teachers stop caring. Underlying the importance of this reciprocal relationship is the belief that children need caring adults in order to thrive. One parent provided a very cogent description of the importance of reciprocal parent-teacher relationships.

But, if you have that parent that just sends their child off to school from 9 to 3 and don't come in, don't ask questions, and don't really care, then you are going to get a teacher who don't care, either. Because, it's a two way street. If you get a parent who cares, and you get that teacher that cares and once that child understands that someone cares, he or she is going to do a lot better. And he knows that he got somebody in his corner that's going to root for him. That's going to help him graduate, or who is going to help him read a little bit better, or who is going to help

¹⁰ AOP city-wide, during the 1997-98 year, also participated in a coalition with other groups and organizations around the district's fiscal crisis. The activities of the coalition and AOP's activities related to it were not observed.

him or her do that math a little bit better. Because he is not in that corner by himself. He's got some help.

A principal nearly echoed this parent when he said:

The parents ... Latino and Black parents want the very same thing that any other parent in this city wants, and that is the best education for their children. And also, it will show the staff they're interested in the educational program. That they have a perspective that needs to be looked at, understood and addressed in the right manner. And the other thing is that it will then, hopefully, make those people who are on the staff that have that approach and perceptions about parents think that, "Hey, I need to deal with these parents a little differently. They are not what I thought they were. They are interested. I need to respect these parents. And I need to address these students differently."

In a focus group discussion, several parents gave a slightly different twist to the notion of reciprocity between parents and teachers. They saw the relationship as complementary, each having a distinct contribution to make to the education of the child, which together created a holistic approach stronger than either a parent or teacher alone.

Parent 1. Getting teachers to teach us how to go in the classroom and work with the kids. We can learn from the teacher, and the teacher can learn from, you know, us.

Parent 2. Yeah, that's exactly it.

Parent 1. Because we know our kids, and the teachers, they know...

Parent 3. They know the work.

Parent 1. When we're together, we do a better job.

Parent 3. You accomplish a lot. When you work as a team, you get a lot done.

A related notion was that when youngsters see their parents—or other parents from the local community- in school they begin to do better because the value community adults place on schooling becomes more tangible.

Another elaboration on the reciprocal relationship came from a principal who imagined eventual collaborative relationships between school staff and parents.

I would like to start by just having a room, a place, where parents can just come in. ...it's just a connecting approach. ... Staff [might then say] "there's a parent room. There are parents here. Let me go and check and see." And there a teacher gets to know a parent and vice versa. Ideas are mentioned. Suggestions are made. And then collaborations begin to take place. And, you begin to establish a solid, permanent relationship between parents and staff and school. ... And then it becomes natural for the parents to be part of the school.

In contrast to these explanations of the potential of reciprocal home-school relations, was another set based more on adversarial relations. For example, from some parents we heard that it was only because they had become persistent in pursuing their concerns that local school staff were taking notice.

Parent 1: Sometimes you have to be a pain in order for you to get what you want.

Parent 2: Because we were quiet for a long time.

A principal espoused a related idea stating that it was persistent parents who could most easily gain the attention of district administrators and elected officials when he stated bluntly, "...when parents speak, people listen."

The various explanations for the importance of the home-school relationship co-exist across parents, principals and other school staff. Even though there is general acknowledgment of the importance of this relationship, there is variation in beliefs about why it is important. The variation inevitably has implications for organizing, as organizers, parents, administrators and other school staff struggle to make sense of their relationship to each other.

The Evaluation Approach and Methods¹¹

Research for Action conducted the evaluation of the Alliance Organizing Project beginning October 1, 1997 through June 30, 1998. The qualitative research methods of observing, asking questions, and reviewing documents provided the best approach to understanding the meaning perspectives of parent participants, the organizers and those in schools with whom they had contact. In order to examine the experience of parents over time, we constructed a sample including parents new to the AOP organizing, those who had been active with AOP for a year and those active for two years or more.

During the first phase of research we observed parent teams and interviewed parents from our three sample groups, new, one year old and two year old (or more), as well as attended city-wide meetings. We also interviewed three others familiar with the organizing, one from inside the district and two from outside but who work closely with the district; each had distinct points of view of and experiences with the organizing as well as with the reaction of local school staff, primarily principals, to the organizing. This initial phase of research provided an overview of the AOP as well as knowledge about the kinds of concerns and issues parent participants brought to the AOP. In order to deepen our understanding of the experience parents were having with the AOP over time, toward the end of the first phase of research we invited a group of parents to join us as co-researchers. During the second phase of research these parents kept journals of their AOP activities and through their journal entries and regular interviewing they provided insight into the ways in which their activities with the AOP were shaping relations with other parents and at their school sites.

¹¹ See the Appendix for a detailed Calendar of Fieldwork and description of the parent co-researcher group.

The first phase of research clarified that in order to understand the experience parents were having in connection to the AOP we needed to broaden the inquiry to the school context in which the organizing of parents is situated. For the second phase of research we selected, in consultation with the AOP Executive Director and the Children Achieving Challenge staff, seven case study schools (See Appendix.) These schools were ones both receptive to the organizing and schools where there were tensions. We interviewed parents, organizers and principals (or other administrators) from these schools, as well as teachers at two of the schools. These case study schools helped to illuminate the issues and dilemmas that were emerging as parent teams moved into relationships with school staffs.

During the year we provided ongoing feedback to the Executive Director. Mid-way through the study we presented preliminary findings to the AOP Board of Directors and to the Children Achieving Challenge staff. Mid-way we also discussed some of the major issues that the study was surfacing with the organizers, who then helped us plan a cross-site focus group of parents. At the end of the study we presented the major findings to the organizers, who had an opportunity to comment on them.

The next section presents the major findings of the study. The findings are illustrated through excerpts from the interviews, vignettes from observations and illustrations from the case study schools.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The Parent Experience

Parents who become active with the AOP have had a range of previous parent involvement experiences. Some described themselves as very actively involved while others characterized themselves as “low level involved.” Their school involvements included being members or officers of Home and School, classroom aides, volunteering regularly or being a sporadic “trip” parent or bake sale donator. Despite these activities at their local school, many of them expressed a desire for frequent, clear and on-going communication with school staff. They believed that their children’s schools did not consistently provide a welcoming environment, did not keep them informed of their children’s progress nor actively solicit their input.

The AOP provided training to parents which was intended to assist them in changing these perceived patterns in parent-school relations. The training emphasized group processes to help parents collectively identify the issues which concerned them and to conduct “research” into those issues. Learning to ask questions and supporting parents’ learning about the multiple factors—budgets, standards, school climate, curriculum and instruction—that impact on the quality of public education were central aspects of the training. One active AOP parent who was also a Home and School president reflected that “they [the AOP organizers] don’t tell you what to do, they say you

should go here and here and ask.” Parents who participated in the AOP often referred to the training as a new kind of learning opportunity. One parent said for her it was like getting “a college education.”

The following vignette is of a Team meeting which included a training. It provides a window into the way in which AOP organizers worked with parents.

Six parents have come to an evening Team meeting. An agenda identifies three main items: review of ongoing and upcoming activities; a training on “positive anger;” and an opportunity for one parent to share with the group a particular problem she is having at the school. There are sandwiches and soda out on a table which parents help themselves to during the first part of the meeting. The meeting starts a few minutes after I arrive.

A parent is facilitating the first part of the meeting, with the organizer helping her, especially around making sure that the agenda items flow roughly according to designated time limits. The parent-facilitator begins with a go-around of introductions since one of the parents is new to the group. There is then reporting of their ongoing work around a number of school-related safety issues. Next, a parent reports on an LSC meeting she attended, reporting that all parents can attend, “I want to say that parents need to be there [at the LSC] even if we are sitting on the side. They need to know we are a force. ... We can’t all vote, but we can see if we can voice an opinion.” She has the dates of the meetings and the organizer puts them on the blackboard. Several parents copy them down. There is also a report of a meeting several of the parents had with the principal where they discussed the reading levels at the school and the fact that a number of parents would like to see the day care center at the school, which currently is not for the students, opened to students with children. Several parents comment that if there had been day care for their children when they were in high school they would have graduated. Another parent raises a concern about the difficulty her son and other disabled youngsters have in the school cafeteria. The organizer hands out paper to the group so each member can record issues like this one that they might want to discuss with the principal next time they meet. Two of the group have been to the city-wide meeting and they report on that and plans for a December public action around the AOP Reading Campaign. This provokes a discussion of the reading levels at the school. The organizer explains that “reading is going to be like the safety issue [an issue they worked on the previous year]. We will need to do research to find out what we can do. They need us as much as we need them.” She then explains there are 1,100 9th graders this year and 400 are new and 700 are repeating. She writes the figures on the blackboard. She tells how her own son had trouble in the 9th grade so she knows personally that youngsters can get stuck there unless they get help.

The organizer then takes over the meeting and says that they will begin the training on positive anger. She is standing at the blackboard. She begins by describing her

own anger that evening at her neighbor who has a house full of kids and is drunk most of the time. She was over here because she is the block captain and says what she felt was negative anger. She asks the group, "Negative anger. What is it?" As they respond she writes on the board.

Parent (P)1—Fighting

P2—Arguing, cursing

Organizer (O).—I know I felt angry, helpless, powerless.

P3—Is stress a negative anger?

O —It is a result. (Then calls on a parent who hasn't spoken.)

P4—Frustrated

P5—Refuse to listen

P6—Speechless

P1—Sometimes start crying.

The organizer changes these to a list.

Negative Anger

1. Fight
2. Arguing/cursing
3. Powerless
4. Frustrated
5. Refuse to listen, speechless, crying

She then asks for positive anger and makes a list on the board as the parents supply words.

Positive Anger

1. P1—Communication
2. P1—Sing (group laughs)
3. P2—All communication
4. P6—Stop and think
5. O —Power

The organizer summarizes, "Focus on communication, stop and think, and then you have power." She circles the word power.

P1—"I don't agree. I have to walk away first and then can stop and think." She describes how she needed to do this when her son told her about an incident that happened to him at school, because it made her so angry.

The organizer talks how parents often come to the school angry about something. Their child is suspended and the parent is powerless. She says that in addition to using positive instead of negative anger if the parents would come as a group they would have even more power. As an example she talks about a shortage of books in one of the classes where there are 30 children and only 18 books. If all the parents come together about this, they will have more power than if the parents come individually.

Parents share some stories of when there have been issues at school that have made them angry and what has happened. As they talk through how they could have changed their anger to be “positive” anger all but one parent is copying from the Board.

When 10 minutes are left, the organizer turns to one of the parents who has a story to share about a problem she is having. The parent believes one of her daughter’s teachers is making fun of her. She describes what is happening and says that her daughter no longer wants to go that class. She is to meet the next day with the teacher and the counselor, but is very angry. Two parents agree to accompany her to this meeting to be her support.

The organizer reminds the group of their commitment not to run over time and that the meeting has run one and-a-half hours and it is time to end. The group breaks up and as they are leaving the organizer reminds them of a Christmas party for the Team.

(reconstructed from a researcher’s fieldnotes)

The vignette exemplifies several elements we saw repeated at the AOP meetings and trainings: opportunities for parents to share personal stories; leadership opportunities for parents such as facilitating meetings; organizers sharing with parents their own experiences when relevant; organizers utilizing questions in order to engage parents and to build on the experience and knowledge parents bring with them; reinforcement of both oral and written communication using blackboards and by making available pencil and paper for notetaking; techniques to help alter unproductive home-school relations; emphasis on the power of parents acting together as a group; willingness of parents to help each other with individual problems; opportunities for informal time together (such as the Christmas party) as well as formal times. At other meetings we saw techniques such as role play, parents working collectively to generate questions to ask school officials and/or to create meeting agendas, team notebooks for recording minutes of meetings, and discussion of topics such as School Improvement Plans, budgets, etc.

1. Parents come to the AOP process with a range of issues and concerns that reflect shared apprehensions, expectations and desire for the opportunity to have a voice in shaping their children's school experience.

Our interviews indicated that the parents who became involved with AOP perceived education as the major way for their children to reach their dreams and goals. The following from a focus group strongly expresses this sentiment.

Parent (P)1: Well, my kids always knew that I was concerned about their education. ... I talk everyday about, you need your education. ...

P. 2: ... He [son] knows that I'm more concerned about his education. His brother's education and his sister's education. ...If they don't have that education, you can't get that particular job that you want in the future. If you don't have that education, you are lost. And you got to instill it in their heads that education is a goal. There is no more getting up in the morning, going to school, come home, do your homework, go outside. No more of that. You have got to study, you got to study,

P. 3: and study.

We found that the parents had high expectations for their children and believed that their children could achieve. Many were eager to support their children by promoting school safety, self-esteem and academic success, especially when they felt respected and that what they had to say was being listened to.

A key organizing strategy of AOP is holding "one-on-ones." One-on-ones are intensive meetings between an organizer and a parent (or parent and parent). The purpose of one-on-ones is to build relationships. Building relationships around shared interests in children's education is central to the AOP's organizing process. During the one-on-one the organizer and parent can get to know each other, share some of their background, and explore the parent's concerns about her/his child's education. According to parents and organizers one-on-ones can run an hour or more. A number of parents reported that the experience of an organizer having a one-on-one with them was what attracted them to the team and bonded them to the AOP. For example one parent explained of her own experience in a one-on-one, "It was a great encouragement." AOP meetings, at both the city-wide and team level also provide opportunities where parents share their stories and can be heard. One young mother recalled, "I remember getting a flyer and going to my first AOP city-wide. [The organizer] was always there to listen. My daughter was behind in her reading and I was interested in how I could help her." Another reflected on how the AOP training had helped her to make herself heard.

...AOP makes me think to go back and see how did I really become involved. Someone coaxed me in the beginning, so it's basically learning how to deal with all people, even administrators. Like I used to say, I'm her parent and I want to be heard, but they weren't hearing me. So now it's like coming up with different ideas through

the organizer how to take certain approaches to be heard, and to stick with it, and be consistent in what you do.

As illustrated in the section on the formation of teams below, public action—a time when parent teams bring their issues and concerns as well as their findings from their research before the broader school community—is valued for similar reasons.

2. AOP organizing provides parents with an expanded view of their roles in schools and helps them to redefine their responsibilities to their children's education.

Parents often are unclear about how to gain entry to school discussions where important instructional, curricular, budgetary or other decisions are being made. Even settings which are supposed to include parents in decision-making do not always do so. For example, one organizer recounted the following about parents' experience at one school with their Local School Council.

That is one of the issues on the school council—parents being able to speak up. Getting time to read something and report it to a larger group of parents. And see what they want to do. That is an issue with the parents sitting on the LCS. They're not really satisfied with their role. A lot of decisions are made before they get to the table.¹²

AOP training (see vignette above) is geared to helping parents ask important questions about school reform and specific programs and practices at their schools. One parent reported, for example, that “When I first got involved I was embarrassed because I did not understand so many things, but I'm learning to ask questions and I'm getting more confidence in myself.” Feelings of confidence are fueled by activities that put parents in new roles: interviewing key school district personnel as part of their “research”; writing grant proposals to the AOP Board for support for reading partnerships at their local schools; speaking out at public actions city-wide and at their schools; attending workshops on school budgets and how to search the web to get their school's performance index.

At training sessions parents have opportunities to practice asking questions and taking on new roles. For example, we observed a session in which parents learned how to read a School Improvement Plan; a principal was invited to help the group role-play how to hold a conversation with an administrator about his/her educational vision for their

¹² Local School Councils (LSCs) are part of the Children Achieving Reform plan. They are majority school personnel. During the year of this study many schools were conducting elections and establishing them for the first time. This report by an organizer is consistent with the findings on the implementation of Local School Councils in the evaluation report to the Children Achieving Challenge, “Guidance for School Improvement in a Decentralizing System: How Much, What Kind, and From Where?” (February 1998) by Jolley Bruce Christman with Ellen Foley and Claire Passantino.

school. The role play was followed by a question and answer session. At another training parents learned how to be “critical friends” to each other—ask hard questions in a constructive way—as a means to learning how to raise issues at their schools.

The role of being a parent co-researcher in the evaluation provided another opportunity for question formulation and new stances. All the parent co-researchers were initially asked to identify a question they would like to pursue. One parent co-researcher began with a question about how AOP was supporting parents of special needs students. She found that as a co-researcher she became more aware of the power of her observations. She reported that she saw a poor match between agencies that provide service to parents of special needs students and the parents who needed their information. In her journal she wrote, “Before, I thought that people were getting the information, because, we have so many agencies out there. There are so many support groups out here. Are they just sitting there waiting for parents to come to them?” Drawing on this observation made her want to be a resource for other parents of special needs students. At a meeting of co-researchers she explained, “...when I went there [to visit another school] I asked certain questions like, ‘Do you have workshops on special needs, and is anybody coming in and talking to you about things you could get, you know, for your child?’” As a result of learning how little information parents have, she shared names and numbers and counseled individual parents as she attended AOP events across the city. Another parent co-researcher wanted to investigate charter schools. She overcame her disdain for politics and interviewed local elected officials on the issue. She then attended community meetings to observe what parents were being told about charter schools. She developed a determination to help other parents explore what she believed were “their misconceptions that charter schools would solve the problems and frustrations they felt.”

As parents ask questions and take on new roles a fresh sense of responsibility is emerging. One parent, who is also a community activist, put it this way. “AOP trains and empowers parents. It is a learning process. Sometimes parents think if they say or do something that the teacher will take it out on their child. Well, this trains and empowers parents to take control of their child’s education.”

3. AOP parent leaders believe the AOP organizing fosters a mutual commitment and teaches the power of being a member of a team.

Parents often feel isolated and express appreciation for the connections the AOP has helped them make with others who share similar concerns. The following statement by a parent reflected what we heard from a number of parents.

I’ve been with AOP one year and before I came to AOP I had to address issues at the school alone. And that was rough! But most of the time I accomplished what I wanted. And then after I got involved with AOP, I found out that they consist of a group of parents that had some of the same problems, and some of them had

problems more difficult than mine, and I thought mine was the worst. With AOP the parents work together, and we all help each other face their issues at school.

A grandmother who volunteers daily at her grandchild's middle school explained how being part of a group has helped her to understand the need to work together for all children. "You can only see your child when you are working by yourself, but when you get in a group you see all the children. When you get in with a group of parents, you see all the children, so all the children can achieve."

Parents express appreciation for the commitment they've made to help each other. For example, at a public action at a local school, a mother of four elementary-aged children reported on several months of research by the school team on best practices in reading instruction. She had visited private and other public schools and interviewed national experts on reading. As she passed out her findings she gave abundant praise to her parent partners in the research. Parents also support one another by attending each other's public actions and by helping each other with individual problems. An example is in the vignette of the team meeting above where two parents accompanied a third who was having a dispute with a teacher to a meeting with the teacher and counselor. Afterwards, one of the parents told us how she and the other parent (who was not the child's parent) did not say anything, but their presence, she believed, helped give the parent (of the child) confidence.

An apparent paradox is that the individual growth experienced by a core group of parents and their increased commitment to AOP does not always translate into being able to recruit others to their teams. Parents try to draw on their experience of finding shared concerns as a group to try to attract other parents to the organizing, but bringing in others remains a challenge. "Trying to get parents to organize was kind of hard, getting to know parents, other parents ... but AOP teaches you to wheel them in by trying the things that we have in common." One parent co-researcher described in her journal her efforts over several months to coax a neighbor to attend an AOP city-wide meeting because she believed if the neighbor heard other parents speak, she would want to become more involved with the education of her second-grader who could not yet read. As the section below on teams indicates, recruiting new parents was a constant tension.

4. Parents are experiencing both the rewards and tensions of exploring new partnering patterns with administrators, teachers, other members of the school staff and community organizations and churches.

Parents express pleasure in the partnerships *they* are constructing with others. Parent leaders who have had the benefits of AOP training are reaching out to teachers, administrators and others to create new ways of working together to support the education of children. One of the parent co-researchers recorded her efforts to explore a partnership with teachers around reading. She was struck when she went back and read her journal entries on her change in attitude about the possibilities for parents and teachers working together. Before the interviewing she had felt the teachers were powerless to do anything

to improve reading and that was the problem. In January she had recorded, “The teachers’ hands are tied.” But after interviewing teachers about possible ways to improve reading she saw the need for a reading program in which parents and teachers worked together. “Met with Ms. P. in her classroom. Discussed thoughts she had on increasing reading levels and how change could take place. Another teacher, Ms. C., believes there should be one teacher for each class the entire year, not four. I am seeing that parents have to work with teachers in teams to help their children increase their reading abilities. We need a reading program that involves parents and has the materials to send home so parents can help at home.”

Working to create partnerships, however, takes a lot of time and commitment on the part of individual parents. The parent co-researcher whose inquiry into reading is described above commented that “I think a lot of our parents are working and they are just barely making it. They don’t have time ... they say, ‘I’ll be back,’ but it’s just too much work for some of them.” Another parent leader made a similar observation at a public action. She told the audience that being an AOP parent leader on a team takes a lot of time and effort. The experience has promoted a wealth of knowledge for her and new relationships in the community as she has gone out to interview local officials about how to increase safety in the area of the school. She has seen results: lights are going up around the school and there has been increased police surveillance around the school. But she is not sure she will be able to give the same time next year that she has for the past two. The balance between working to improve schools for all children, attending to the needs of one’s own child, and the demands of work and family challenges many parents active in the AOP—as well as possibly being a barrier to joining for others.

The Formation of Parent Teams

Team formation is a critical early step in the organizing process. The team is the unit which formulates ideas for change from a parent perspective. The team, through its research and action, can also be catalyst for change at a school site. If a team fails to establish and/or sustain itself the organizing is truncated.

1. Organizing an AOP parent team at a school site is a staged process which happens over the course of a year or more. During this time parents on the team begin to identify themselves as a group in support of all the children in the school.

The start-up phase of a team is intensive and takes time. Organizers are often negotiating entry to the school¹³ and recruiting parents to be team members simultaneously. In its initial stages a major task of a team is to establish itself as an entity. This involves an internal process in which team members make commitments to

¹³ A school is selected as a site for organizing by an organizer who, through meetings at the cluster and local school levels and with parents, assesses the needs of the school and the desires of the parent population for the organizing.

each other and cohere as a group. It also involves an external process in which the team interacts with the broader school community. Although the steps to building a team follow a sequence (see below) they overlap with one another.

The process of entering a school is variable. The receptivity of the principal to the organizing can greatly affect the ease or difficulty of entry. The organizer's personal inclinations about how to best get established at a site, however, also influence this process. For example, in order to familiarize themselves with the school site and allow educators to become familiar with them, organizers at two of the case study sites became "participant-organizers" finding volunteer jobs at the school that allowed them to have regular exchange with school staff and parents in the school. At another site one of the organizers used the Home and School as a point of entry. Another organizer, who questioned whether the principal was open to the AOP organizing, established a team outside the school and only when the team was formed did the members begin to strategize how they might enter the school. Regardless of the pattern of entry, entry is a delicate process and the way in which it happens lays the groundwork for creating relationships among parents, the principal, and school staff.

Recruitment of parent leaders to teams through one-on-one meetings between organizers and parents is similar across sites. Often, in the initial phase this happens both inside schools and outside schools in the homes of parents. Both parents and organizers report that recruitment is a time and emotionally intensive activity. Organizers are listening to parents and learning from them about their concerns. It is also a time when parents learn about the AOP and decide whether they want to make a commitment to being a part of a team and participate in training to be a parent leader. Although recruitment might be the dominant activity early on and lessen after a core group of team members has been identified, it is a continuous task in order to keep teams which inevitably suffer attrition replenished with new parents. A team, once formed, typically consists of 6-20 parents.

Following these earliest challenges of entry and initial recruitment of parent leaders, the AOP organizing model provides a map for a team establishing itself as a recognized group within the school. As stated in the introduction, the stages of organizing include (1) a "listening campaign" in which team members bring the broader parent population at a school site together in order to listen to their concerns; (2) prioritizing concerns; (3) conducting research into ways in which one or more concern might be addressed and (4) a public action in which team members both recount the issues that concern them and other parents and invite potential school and community partners to commit to working with them to make change. The principal is always among the "partners" who might also include other district personnel such as teachers, elected officials and community representatives such as area clergy or adult after school teachers, depending on the issue the parents are organizing around.

The example below is of a post-public action evaluation.¹⁴ It illustrates the relief parents feel at the chance which actions give them to voice their concerns for their children to broader audiences and their appreciation for organizers who have helped to create opportunities where their perspective can be heard. Organizers stress the establishment of the team as a group with which school officials are now interacting.

The evaluation of the Cross School¹⁵ team public action happened shortly after its end in a room close by the auditorium. Eight parents and two organizers were there as well as the teacher Ms. D. who had participated as a “partner” in the action. Shortly after I arrive one of the organizers congratulated the group saying that the event showed “all the hard work you did. You got credentialed today. Do you feel you got recognized? When did you feel you got recognized?” He responded to his own question telling the parents that the teacher Ms. D., the cluster leader and the principal all recognized the work they had done. The other organizer reminded the group that when the principal first arrived it seemed as if she had not wanted them. But she reminded them they had overcome those first mis-impressions of each other and learned to work together. The other organizer then asked the parents, “How did you feel about each of your pieces?” One parent responded, “I’m glad its over. I feel relieved but also good because I’m getting my point across.” He turned to another parent and asked, “How did you feel? You felt strongly about substitutes.” She responds similarly to the first parents saying, “I felt relieved.” Other parents echoed the sentiments of these two. This organizer then asks the parents how they felt about the organization of the event. A few respond together that “it was good because [the organizer] was on top of us.” One parent adds “If it weren’t for [the organizer] I never would have spoken to a crowd. I might be a big mouth, but never to a crowd. Step by step she taught me.” Ms. D. says she is proud because parents at their school have never spoken out. She comments of the parents present: “They used to walk the halls with their head down not saying anything.” (constructed from researcher’s fieldnotes)

Review of the Teams in this study indicated that from the earliest stages of recruitment of parents and negotiation of entry into the school through the newly formed team’s first public action could take a year or more at a school site. Parents who sustained their participation with a team often reflected that although their initial reasons for participation was concern about their own child they were now also seeing themselves as working on behalf of not only of their own children, but all the children.

[The organizer] made me think about, oh, well, you know, your child’s here and your grandson’s here, and my future grandchildren that are coming in here. And so I want what’s better for them. And I want to change the system for them. If I didn’t do it for my kids, then I’m going to them and their children. So this is what keeps me coming.

¹⁴ Evaluations or debriefings were part of the AOP organizing process. We observed them following city-wide meetings, public actions and some team meetings. These were opportunities for participants to self-assess on both what they thought went well and where they thought improvements could be made.

¹⁵ The names of all the schools referred to in this study have been changed.

She [the organizer] can really push your buttons to really make you understand your focus that it's not to think of your children only. It's to think of other kids.

I don't only look at my one child. I rub everybody else's child's back too.

You let them see that it's not just their child, other children too, then they are more inclined to work with you. Because they realize that they will benefit and others will benefit too. And just showing the issues, especially the issues that are common and approachable. And work towards a solution.

The AOP organizing is built on an assumption that if the organizing begins with a parent's concerns for his/her individual child, over time s/he will connect this self-interest to issues affecting the larger community of children. In tandem with training which supports inquiry into how schools and parents might address these concerns, parents will then make connections to the larger system.

2. The work of sustaining AOP teams over time has brought parent participants face to face with the difficult issues of reaching out to parents and involving them in school change.

Inevitably, teams suffer attrition. Team members move to another neighborhood, return to school or enter the workforce. Some leave the team because the issue they have been concerned about is resolved, or alternately because they feel the team is not addressing their particular concern. Among the first skills that parents collaborate on with organizers is that of sustaining the team through continuous recruitment of new parents. In interviews, when we started to talk about future activities, parents frequently referred to the need to bring more parents into the effort.

Interviewer: What do you see as the main AOP work at [school] in the next couple of months?

Parent: I don't know, bringing in more parents. Getting more parents aware of what's going on and what we can do to help our children achieve. I think that's our main goal right there.

Team participants identified patience with other parents as a skill they learned working with AOP. "I always fought by myself, I didn't have the patience for the parents ... I think AOP has me how to have patience with parents. And how to go about not pushing them but just, you know, wiggling through and just talking to them in a nicer way where in a way that they understand what we are all about." Nonetheless, parents expressed frustration with the efforts to recruit others.

[The parent] expressed some frustration, saying she was about to give up, but now two more people have joined the team and she is going to keep trying. Since they started there have been 3 people who have sustained their participation on the team. Now there are two new members. Both she and [the organizer], beginning last spring, have had many one-on-ones. I ask her why since they have done so many one-

on-ones the team is not larger. She said it is an uphill battle they are fighting. (from a researcher's fieldnotes)

It's depressing, we're trying to do this so that they can help their kids, and look (parent gestures to empty room).

I think what they perceive over at the school, everything moves so slowly, you know, for every little, what would you call it, achievement that we make, it's so hard fought. They just don't want to fight that hard.

"Most parents have problems with the school, but don't take the initiative to address it with the school." She explains that she is trying to recruit more parents to be involved with the school, but it is really difficult. She says that she tries to get them to attend the parent [Team] meeting, but they still don't have as many parents attending as they would like. (from a researcher's fieldnotes)

We have huge problems at [school] not of our making. We have one deficit—not enough of us come here.

... the life cycle of a parent group, you know, we have our highs and lows, we're constantly training, retraining, just trying to regroup I think is a challenge.

Two organizers in this study who have been working at sites for two years have increasingly left recruitment to team members. At both sites, the sizes of teams have decreased as the responsibility for recruitment has become a team responsibility. At one, despite the smaller numbers of team members, the organizer sees the team as more able to make change because they have adopted techniques which keep them connected to the larger parent body of the school and representative of it.

I have to help them identify leadership and bring them in. It will go slowly because I'm not doing this so much but helping them. But they are beginning to do this ... As they move forward they have to do this. The team is smaller now. But even though it is smaller it is more representative and many people see them as representing them. We have had maybe three listening campaigns. At elections they get more of the votes. They are more at the table and able to negotiate and get what they need for kids. They have built relationships with the principal and in the school, but they are a smaller team. ... The question is, "How can the team maintain contact with a larger group who feels ownership and relationship but can't live at the school?"

In contrast, the other organizer believes that to sustain the team and its effectiveness she will need to go back and recruit for them.

I tried to just let parents do individual meetings and grow into the process, but because I did this I think not much happened. So I have returned to trying to recruit now.

Sustaining teams is a challenge to organizers and parents at least as difficult as the work of establishing an initial core group of parent leaders.

3. The position of AOP teams in relation to the local schools appears to be similar across school sites in their initial phase. After this initial phase, however, there is a diversity of ways in which Teams position themselves. The position of Teams is not static, but may shift over time with changes in circumstances.

In the initial stages of organizing, the primary task of an AOP team is to establish itself within the school as a distinct group alongside other parent involvement programs, e.g. the Home and School and the Local School Council. (See Chart 2, Figure 1, p.24) Following this initial stage, however, there is variety in the relationship of teams to schools. In some cases, the teams are in schools where there are no other parent involvement programs. In at least one school in this study, a Home and School was developed out of the team. (See Chart 2, Figure 2, p.24) In other schools where Home and School and Local School Councils exist, the AOP team may remain distinct but share co-membership (See Chart 2, Figure 3, p.25) or fold itself into the other programs, becoming one and the same. One parent described the relationship this way: “We’re a small team, parents basically ... Well, basically it’s just, I have to say about 7 or 8 of us parents that do Home and School, School Council, all volunteerism in the school, mentoring. ... everything is so meshed.” (See Chart 2, Figure 4, p.25) Yet others maintain their distinctness with no overlap with these other parent involvement entities. (See Chart 2, Figure 5, p.25) Each of these positions has implications for the relationship of teams to schools and how they function as agents for change. For example, some teams found that with a connection to Home and School, access to the broader community of parents was made easier. Others found, however, that when the team and Home and School became “meshed” it was difficult to maintain focus because of the considerable number of expectations that exist for Home and School. One organizer commented on this dilemma. “One of our setbacks is we went from being the Leadership Team to filling up positions in Home and School. That was more a set back than an opportunity. The Team got caught in doing fundraisers and going to meetings about things which were not their concerns like the reading and discipline are. It became more a distraction.”

The ways in which teams position themselves at a local school often is influenced by a range of factors. For example, previous and current affiliations of team members, i.e. whether team members are also Home and School members or Local School Council representatives, might influence the position of the team in relation to these other settings for parent involvement. The principal, who may or may not insist on limiting the settings for parent involvement, might also influence the position of the team in relation to other settings for parent involvement. The local context and whether or not other parent involvement settings are strong ones—or entirely absent—might also influence how a team positions itself. Each of these, as well as other factors which influence the position of teams, might change over time.

Chart 2

AOP PARENT TEAMS WITHIN SCHOOLS

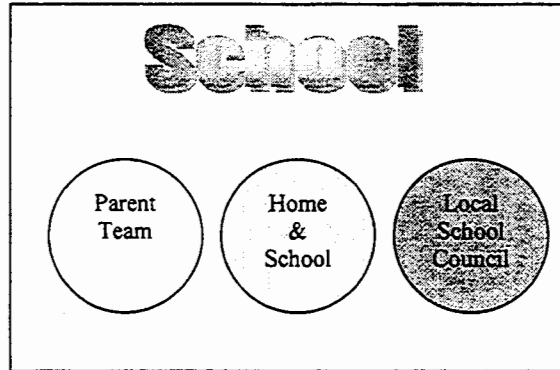


Figure 1

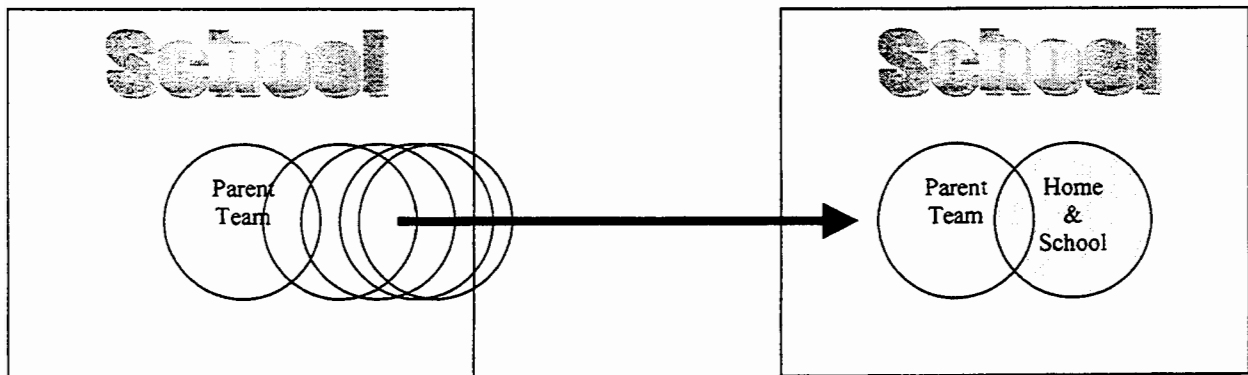


Figure 2

Chart 2 (continued)

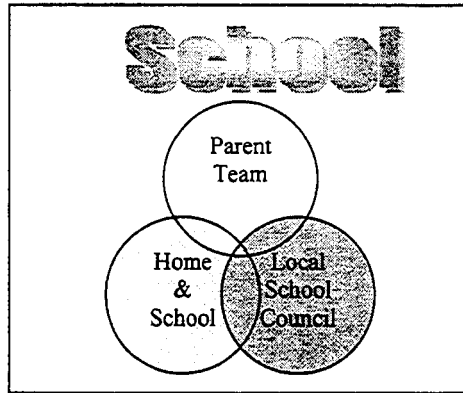


Figure 3

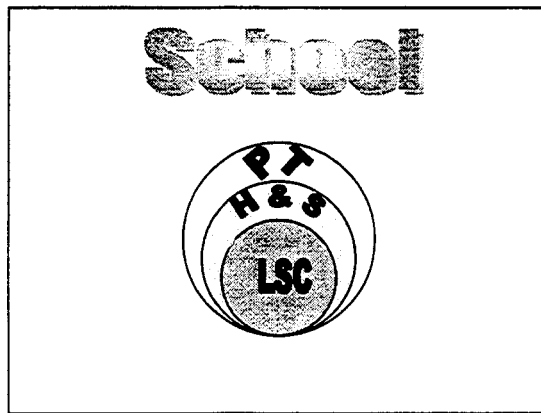


Figure 4

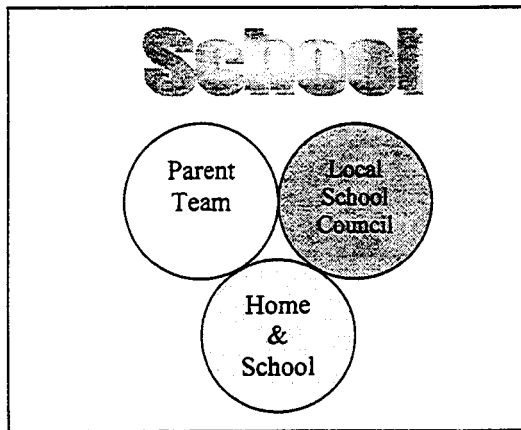


Figure 5

4. A few incipient partnerships among parents, community and schools now exist. These partnerships vary in their stages of development, but begin to provide measures for the depth and influence of the organizing.

During the course of this study, several AOP teams were working in partnerships at their schools and in some cases within the local community around specific initiatives to support children's school success. At one site, for example, a team had generated a parent and community partnership focused on improving safety around the local school, which they hoped would be a first step to improving the climate for learning at the local school. They established a Safe Corridors program and were working to obtain a much needed traffic light. At this site the partnership was expanding to link teachers at the school to community adults caring for youngsters in a church-based after-school program as well. Through this initiative the parents hoped that children would be better supported in doing their homework because after-school caretakers and teachers would be in communication. At two other sites parent-teacher partnerships existed around early literacy initiatives which involved increasing children's time reading at home and at school. At one of the schools, increasing children's writing was also part of the effort. At yet another school a parent-administrator partnership had established special programming for girls as an alternative to the usual punitive approaches to discipline problems. By the end of the year of this study, several other teams had identified willing school and/or community partners and hoped to develop initiatives for work together in the coming year. These partnerships, which are the product of the slow building of relationships among parents and between parents and schools, are important measures of the depth of the organizing and its potential for supporting schools as institutions for teaching and learning.

Relationships with Administrators

Although the Children Achieving design plan indicated that community organizing for the purpose of increasing parent and community involvement in local schools was a component of the reform, none of the principals we interviewed indicated that the district had oriented them to the purpose for the organizing previous to an organizer coming to their school. Despite this lack of orientation, we heard from principals (or other administrators) in four of the case study schools that they were strongly encouraged by the cluster leader¹⁶ to open their school to the organizers whether they were fully comfortable with the initiative or not. As one principal described it the cluster leader recommended that she "let them [AOP] in the building." The climate at the schools during the initial stages of the organizing was inevitably influenced by whether the principal perceived top-down pressure.

Whether the principal was complying with the wishes of the cluster leader or genuinely embraced the organizing was not, however, the only factor influencing the

¹⁶ Each of the district's clusters has an office headed by a cluster leader which provides services and supports to the schools in the cluster.

often had difficulties in knowing how to relate to an external group whose purpose was to open up a space in the school for the concerns of parents. Principals already had in place other settings for parent involvement, such as Home and School associations and Chapter I programs. They were mandated to establish Local School Councils which included parent representation as well. Often, it was unclear to them how the AOP team would interact with these other parent involvement structures. One district observer noted, "Since there are other parent groups, doesn't this look like taking over?" Principals were unclear about how AOP would contribute differently from these other settings for parent involvement to the school.

For some principals, it was also uncomfortable to have an entity such as the AOP which was sanctioned by the reform plan, yet considered itself an autonomous organization. One district administrator observed of this paradox, "The way in which AOP was brought in was incomplete. They really were not brought into the system. Even though they are part of the Children Achieving design, who was part of making it part of the design?" Many principals did not feel ownership of this aspect of the reform plan, yet there were expectations that they would welcome to their school this group which as the same district observer put it had "undefined boundaries." These undefined boundaries could create tensions when principals believed they could not meet the demands of parents, and expected the community organizers to explain the limits of the system to parents.

I think that parents have to be fair, too. I can understand that they want answers, but skilled organizers help them to learn school policy and procedures. Sometimes they demand things and things are not within school district policy.

The level of principal comfort with AOP often corresponded to a principal's conceptualization of himself/herself as a school leader. With other parent involvement initiatives the role and authority of the principal was clearly established; with AOP relationships of authority were less clear, a position which made some principals uneasy. The data from this study indicates, even in an instance in which a principal invited in the organizing without any pressure from the cluster leader, conflict over authority relationships created distrust and eventually led to the organizing being interrupted.

Implementation of the organizing proceeded in the absence of support for principals who were being asked as leaders in their local schools to re-imagine parent, school relations. Often, this meant different roles for parents in schools which included them in decision-making domains which had previously been reserved for education professionals. Interviews with principals and others indicated that there was little or no professional activity for principals to help them imagine what these new roles and relationships might look like. Neither is there evidence of much discussion among principals about how such revised relationships might support educators in achieving the overall goals of the district reform plan—to make schools places where all children have opportunities to achieve at high levels.

1. Relationships between AOP organizers and teams with principals and teachers often begin in a climate of uneasiness. In many instances, however, over time these relationships become more nuanced and distrust begins to play a less prominent role in shaping the relationship.

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, the schools in this study ranged along a continuum from very hospitable to very inhospitable to the organizing. The climate often turned on the principal's orientation to the organizing, although as the profiles of the Adams School in this section will show, the uneasiness of a principal might be mitigated by other school staff who are more amenable to the organizing. Importantly, as the two school profiles in this section show, the response to the organizing is not static. Over time, the relationship can move along a continuum. Although in six of the seven case study schools in this study the trend in the relationship was toward more comfortable zones on the continuum, in one case the relationship deteriorated from a comfortable zone to a very uncomfortable zone. The profiles of the Cray and Adams schools below provide images of the process of movement along the continuum.

The Cray School

Parents, the principal and the organizer at the Cray School all acknowledge that when the organizing began there was a great deal of mistrust. Early on, the cluster leader played a critical role in encouraging the principal to permit the organizing at her school. Despite this encouragement, the principal was unsure of the intentions of the organizing and as a consequence said that "I kept having the feeling I was going to be ambushed." These feelings were exacerbated when the initial focus of the parents and her own were not aligned. Although she said she understood and appreciated that the organizing was beginning with parent concerns, she wished that the areas the parents focused on would be the ones she agreed were important for the school achievement of the youngsters in the school. "He asked me if I would support them. I asked, can't we come to an issue that we agree is mutually a problem? He said on no uncertain terms this was not about me or the teachers, but about what parents are concerned about. Parents were driving the issue."

Despite the uneasy beginning of the organizing at Cray, over time the principal and parents have begun to develop a more productive relationship. Experiences of working together have made the mistrust a less salient feature of their relationship. One parent, for example, described the relationship as a "working relationship. One where there's a mutual respect and respecting the fact that there is a change. ... That it's a challenge but it's not necessarily a threat." The principal also saw the relationship as "evolving" and one where the parents, she believed, no longer thought "I was going to buck them. ... We started to build ground rules... With these ground rules I felt they were respecting the fact that I was the principal. Things started to move upward after that. They were showing they wanted to work together."

As the organizing developed, parents and principal became more focused on common objectives of early literacy. With this mutually agreed upon focus, the

principal has come to see the team as an “asset.” “Last year, at the end, we initiated a reading [program]. It was [the AOP team’s] idea. The teachers support it. At the end of the year, there was a celebration with [the team]. ... I became more trusting of my parents.” Nonetheless, the principal’s growing positive relationship with the team coexisted alongside a persistent wariness of the organizing. She was candid in admitting that “I don’t trust the organizers” even though she saw that “parents had developed their own face. They were taking this thing and turning it into their own.” The organizer was keenly aware of the mix of positive and wary feelings connected with the organizing. When asked how he would characterize the relationship between himself and the principal after two years at the school he responded, “It is a relationship of collaboration as far as the public relationship, but I am not sure about whether there is respect.” In an effort to further the working relationship between them, at his end of the year meeting with the principal the organizer talked explicitly about how the organizing might work together with her on efforts to increase the school achievement of the children at the school. The principal responded by requesting grade meetings (an AOP format for gathering parent input) around a new initiative being started at the school. The organizer reflected to a researcher his interest in the “institutionalization” of some of the forms of the organizing for listening to parents.

It appeared that over time the school leadership at Cray had moved from an uneasy and suspicious state to one in which she was beginning to value some of practices the organizing had introduced. She was beginning to incorporate into schools practices “spaces” for parents to express their interests, opinions and concerns.

The Adams School

The Adams school is another instance where the organizing began at the encouragement of staff of the cluster office, this time the Family Resource Network (FRN) coordinator.¹⁷ The organizer feels that it was because she had a relationship at the cluster level that the principal was told to “just work with them.”

Parents at Adams do not believe that the principal really welcomes them. “We really don’t have the openness that we need with him, we really don’t. ... He knows he can’t get rid of us, so he’s tolerating it more. But he really doesn’t want our input. He doesn’t. If he can get one or two ... He has told me once before, we don’t need all these parents. I can work with my little group of parents.” Nonetheless, over the last two years the principal has sanctioned other administrators and school staff to work on issues the AOP parent team has identified as important. Team members describe these other administrators as their “link.” These school staff admit that “there were tensions initially. We were apprehensive about its [the AOP’s] purpose and what they were after... But what happened was good.” By their

¹⁷ The Family Resource Network was instituted by the Children Achieving reform to facilitate the connection between community and city services and families.

own account, it was the approach of the organizer that helped to reduce the tensions. “[The organizer] neutralized the tension by bringing us all to the table. Once she did, it created a dialogue. We created a checklist so parents understood some of the issues we were dealing with. And we were forced to look at ourselves.” These school staff point to several programs emanating out of a shared concern among parents and school staff around discipline that they believe has benefited the school in positive ways. They see the AOP as “distinctive” saying “they really get parents involved.” They can now envision additional roles for parents in the school. As one explained to a researcher:

With AOP there is a sense of involvement. Having input. Also, through groups like the discipline support group they are a part of shared decision-making. ... I would like to see a Family Center. We have a room, but I mean a real place for parents ... I would like to see training so they can help in the classrooms. They would be like staff. They could offer all sorts of support. They are not spies. They are here to help. Educating children is such a tremendous job.

The parents’ unease with their relationship with the principal persists. They believe “he knows his stuff [but] you just don’t know how to work with him.” Although he appears to be avoiding working with an entity that makes him uncomfortable by letting other members of his staff do so, the organizer believes she is beginning to detect signs of a change in the relationship between him and the team as well.

I guess he gave because he saw it was in his best interest not to be adversarial. He did not care for me and what I was doing with the parents because he felt threatened, but now at least on the surface it appears to be open. He is talking to me more and giving me and parents information. The relationship has changed. Lot less tension. ... He wants parents on the school council, he gave us the new promotion/graduation criteria, he asked us to get parents to a meeting with a state senator. He told parents that they could have the budget. This was very different from last year.

Despite the still uncertain relationship with the principal at the Adams School, the joint AOP team/school staff work together has begun to open up spaces for parent input into school policies and practices. The benefits of working together appear to be mutually acknowledged by those school staff and parents closest to the effort. With this foundation the school staff who have been working with the parents have begun to expand their vision of the parent, school relationship.

2. Principals have differing conceptualizations of their role as school leaders and different leadership styles. These differences influenced how they receive the organizing at their school.

As we explored the context for organizing at school sites, the variation among principals became more pronounced. We saw among principals a range of beliefs about

the home-school relationship as well as very different ideas about the principal's role as a school leader. The two case study schools profiled in this section both have principals who believe strongly in having parents in their schools, but each represents different extremes in leadership styles. Their different styles have had distinct consequences for the organizing at their school. At one school the principal has welcomed the parent team, opening multiple doors for its members to the school community in an effort to stimulate relationship building school-wide. At the other school the principal is at the center of all the relationships in the school. In this case, the principal was made uncomfortable by her lack of authority over the organizing and broke off the relationship.

The Walker School

At Walker School the principal, new this year, said that when he learned that the AOP organizer was at the school "I made it a point to meet with her and just to express my desire to work with her and to welcome her participation in whatever way, shape or form." He added that "In terms of my style and approach and my belief, I would like to see parents visible in the building every day." This principal, in contrast to the more common conceptualization of schools as institutions of professionals draws on the metaphor of the school as service organization with an emphasis on the rights of parents and students as "clients" to guide his ideas of the proper relation between parents and schools.

Parents and students are our clients and they're the folks that we service. And they should, just like teachers, have a say-so in the decision making process. ... And more than any of the integral parts, parents have that right because they're the recipients of the service. So, they should have a voice in what goes on in terms of constituting an instructional program.

Congruent with this conceptualization of the school-home relationship, he invited the AOP team to speak with his cabinet this year "so they have had the opportunity to share with that particular group who they are, what they are, and to ask, to join hands with them in terms of working toward the betterment of the school." He also invited the Team to have input into the budget and has discussed with them his plans for school restructuring. One of his staff has also invited parents from the team, for the first time, to join her in several professional development workshops. The principal also has made a commitment to identify a room in the school that could be designated a parent room, a request the parent team has been making since their inception two years ago. He hopes this room will be a place where teachers will go to find parents and that out of familiarity teachers and parents will begin to be able to build working relationships. Of AOP's work he reflects, "yes, it's actually in the school... actually bringing the parents in. Now they might be having more access to the staff and communicating to the staff. Her [the organizer] work is very critical and I think we're getting more to the meat of things in terms of activating what needs to get done here and bringing the parents in." In summing up his philosophy he says,

“Well, I started out by letting the parents know that, from the top, from the principalship on down, they are welcome. This is their school.”

The principal of the Roberts School presents a different conceptualization of leadership than that of Walker. Although her investment in the school may be no less than that of the Walker principal, her leadership style conflicted with the objectives of the AOP organizing to establish an independent parent team in the school. Ultimately, the conflict in objectives resulted in the organizing being discontinued.

The Roberts School

The principal of the Roberts School invited the organizing into her school because she thought it could help her involve parents in her school in creating a safer climate around the school for the children. Several months after the invitation, however, she found that she was having “discrepancies” with the organizer over the work with the parents. She believes that whatever happens at her school “I’m responsible. ... I need to oversee what happens here.” She says that “my door is open, they have open access” and she expects to know everything that is going on. “I run this building. I’m the principal. Give me that courtesy.”

This principal’s effort to run a “tight ship” conflicted with the objectives of the AOP organizing. There was an established Home and School at the school with whom she felt she had a relationship of trust. “I had the feeling of two different parent groups and I wanted only one group, the Home and School. I wanted one strong group of active parents. They have access to me carte blanche. We can talk about anything ... but I need to oversee.” She said that what was needed at the Roberts School was “help in getting parents from point A to B in support of what we were already doing.” She felt that the AOP organizer was coming into the school and rather than supporting a unified effort was there to “divide and conquer.” One parent who was both part of Home and School and the AOP team disputed this sentiment. Aware that the principal believed that the AOP organizer divided the parents into two camps, Home and School and AOP, she stated simply “this wasn’t true to me.” She queried, “What is the problem with [the organizer]? We need what she has to offer. She has done nothing wrong.”

The organizer had a different conceptualization of her work from that of the principal. She saw herself creating a “base for parents. Some might be in the Home and School, the Local School Council or volunteers, but the Team is a place where all of them could come together to discuss.” She didn’t see the AOP effort so much as a competing group as a foundation for parent activity within the school. Given the different orientations of the principal and organizer towards the purposes for the organizing—to further the school agenda in contrast to creating a parent base—it was not unpredictable that the principal and organizer would experience tension.

After the organizer had been at the school for several months building a team and the team was readying itself to present its concerns publicly, the principal told the

organizer she was no longer “needed.” Several parents who worked with both the Home and School and the AOP Team commented on the rupture. Neither questioned the deep investment that the principal has in the school, remarking on many positive changes that have happened since she has come. Yet one reflected that she believed that the principal wants to be in charge of everything herself. “Before we talk to a parent we have to exhale and get permission. She doesn’t want any parent demanding in her school. She wants to solve everything herself.” The other believed that when the AOP Team scheduled a public event in the school in which they were going to discuss their concerns as parents “the principal felt left out.” The organizer’s work at Roberts was discontinued. Although several parents expressed a desire for her to come back, by the end of the school year the organizer and the principal had not reestablished a relationship and the team was not functioning as a group.

3. Principals frequently do not have ready access to the communities their schools serve. In a number of instances, the organizing has connected principals with the local community. These principals appreciated the linkage the organizing was creating for them. It also provided opportunities for them to see their parents in different roles- as community members and leaders.

A primary concern of many parents living in urban communities is the safety of their children. The organizing, in four of the case study schools, has directly addressed this parent concern. For example at the Thomas School parents, principal and teachers are concerned about drug trafficking that takes place in the school vicinity. The organizing has connected the principal to a community-wide effort to address this issue. She was an invited speaker at a community public action at a local church where local police as well as city officials were invited to hear and respond to the community’s need for greater attention to safety issues in the area. Parents from AOP teams in two schools were also speakers at this event.

The community public action is inside a large church hall. Despite the torrential rains between 400 and 500 people are in the pews. I sit with parents from AOP teams at the Thomas and Walker schools, both of which are in the vicinity. The principal from the Thomas school comes in a bit late and sits with us, next to one team member and her child. On stage are several clergy and others from the community, including parents and students from local schools along with local police and city officials whom the community groups have invited to hear and respond to their need for increased safety and security measures in the neighborhood. Mid-way through the event the AOP organizer comes up the aisle and kneels beside the principal. She gets up and follows him toward the stage. She is announced to the audience and goes to the stage. There she affirms that the dangers in the street that the students from Walker school described just before her are a concern to her as well. Then she turns and looks directly at the local police. She tells them that there is a drug trafficker just a half block from her school and that the youngsters who

attend her school must walk by them in the morning and afternoon. She says that she needs the help and support of the local police in getting rid of this problem. She is brief, but unhesitant and direct. She leaves the stage and comes back and sits in the audience with the parents. Later in the program when the mother of the child she is sitting next to her speaks from the stage I see her bend down and whisper in the ear of the little girl, "Let's stand up and clap for mommy." (from a researcher's fieldnotes)

Similarly, the principal of the Cray School, at the invitation of an AOP parent participant, attended another community public action at church close-by her school where she too spoke about the need for more support from the local police in keeping the areas around her school safe for youngsters. Several days later at her school she spoke positively of the opportunity to participate, saying, "I was very happy to be part of it. It was really the community as it should be." Shortly after this event she experienced direct benefits of her participation; she had a problem at the school and called the local police district who she said recognized her school from the event and responded in record time.

At the Patrick School the AOP team was, according to a parent, "brought about by parents' fears for their children's safety. We wanted our children to be safe." Working out of a nearby church, the parent team went to adults who live in the area of the school and together organized a Safe Corridors program. They have kept focused on the safety issue, maintaining Safe Corridors and working to get a much-needed traffic light for a school corner. Building from this initiative, the team branched out to partner with local community adults, groups and churches to benefit the school in other ways. As one parent explained at a public action, "Now that we have gotten the traffic light, don't think that we are stopping there. We want to be involved in policy and curriculum. We are taking steps to have a voice in the cluster. Look to hear from us a lot more."

The principal, who admits that when he first heard about the AOP "we did not proceed forward until we learned to trust, I did not trust them, because they, well, they didn't use appropriate networks" now says that the group has "blended with the Home and School. I invite them to Leadership Team meetings [and] AOP is helping with getting a School Council together." With new levels of trust, the parents and principal, along with a local church, have begun to look for ways to work together around improving reading levels. Among their joint initiatives has been linking classroom teachers with community adults from a local church's after-school program for the purpose of making the after-school program more able to assist with homework. At an event in the local church celebrating this partnership, which about 200 parents, community adults, school and cluster staff attended, the principal endorsed the partnership forged among home, community and school. "Good things are happening for children as a result of this partnership" affirming that with such partnerships "we can only get better." The local clergy affirmed his belief in the partnership as well closing the event giving thanks to all those in the audience for the opportunity to serve as part of it.

ISSUES RAISED BY THE FINDINGS

The AOP organizing, although small in scale to date, shows much promise. The data indicate that in a range of school settings, AOP teams have been able to establish themselves, identify concerns parents have about their children's school experience, and bring issues emanating from these concerns to the school community-at-large with proposals for how to work "in partnership" on these issues. The data also indicate that even though the relationship between AOP and school administrators often begins with distrust and uneasiness, where both persevere the relationship begins to show results in areas of mutual concern such as safety in the school area, discipline and early literacy. In a few instances, connections which the organizing has facilitated between schools and their local communities have been especially helpful in positioning families and the local neighborhood as resources to schools. The process of organizing and forming partnerships, however, is not a "quick fix"; it takes time and patience for parents and school staffs to grapple with the effort to revise parent, community, school relationships to make schools better able to help all children achieve.

The following ten points explore issues raised by the major findings. The issues we raise come from the point of view of interested "outsiders." It is our hope that this evaluation report will be a document for organizational reflection and that AOP Board, organizers and parents as well as other interested stakeholders will review, revise, extend and add to them.

1. Examination of AOP's theory of action revealed that the assumptions behind organizing with parents for school change and mutual accountability were not necessarily shared ones or the only ones among the actors involved with or affected by the AOP organizing. It is important that AOP revisit its theory of action continuously, and the assumptions undergirding it, in light of ongoing experience. Although differently positioned school stakeholders are likely to hold varying theories and assumptions, it is also important that all parties—parents, organizers, administrators, teachers and other school staff as well as other interested community members—have opportunities to engage with each other across their roles on the topic of organizing, parent involvement, and parent-school partnerships, what they mean by it and why they think it is important to school reform.
2. AOP organizing involves parents in identifying their concerns and making connections between these concerns and a range of issues important to school reform, from budgets, school improvement plans, discipline to literacy. Coupling organizing with experiential models of adult education, the AOP organizers work with parents to identify their questions about these issues and to conduct "research" –going out and investigating alternative approaches to what exists. Learning to systematically research an issue and bring alternative approaches to the attention of the school community recasts parents from being passive observers of or chronically disaffected

with their children's education to being active agents working on behalf of their children. Systematic inquiries, however, require planning, practice, reflection and time as well as organizers-as-facilitators who themselves are familiar and comfortable with experiential approaches to teaching and learning. It is important that as the work of AOP proceeds, the pressure of expansion and quick results does not displace this critical component of the organizing and the training for both organizers and parents that it demands.

3. Parents are attracted to the AOP because of their concerns about their youngster's education. Involvement with AOP encourages them to see their concerns in the light of the needs of all children. Participation with AOP often means that parents must find a balance between their activity on behalf of their own child and their activity for all the children. As parents are associated with AOP over longer and longer periods of time it is important to keep this tension in mind and to investigate how parents are managing what might feel like competing pulls, and what might lead to some parents discontinuing participation in the organizing.
4. Formation of AOP parent teams and sustaining participation are critical to the AOP model for change. In enumerating the qualities that were important about teams, for example, one organizer stated, "[What is important in a team is] a consistent group over 2-3 years which is what you need to make a change at a school." Recruitment is a time-intensive and ongoing activity. AOP organizers and parents find themselves challenged in the task of reaching beyond the original core of parent leaders and recruiting new members to join them in their efforts. Systematic investigation into what inhibits participation by those parents whom team members and organizers might have hoped to see getting involved but have failed to do so was beyond the scope of this evaluation but might help inform the difficulties of outreach. The challenges of sustaining teams suggested here and in the previous point also suggest that organizing is an ongoing task and that the commitment to it needs to be a long-term one.
5. The position of teams in relation to schools varies with the context at the local school. The differences in positioning raise questions about the strengths and drawbacks of each. Given a year of experience with an array of differently positioned teams, AOP now has the opportunity to assess how the different positions of teams within schools influence the ability of a team to maintain its identity and mission *and* be connected enough to the school to influence it.
6. AOP teams in schools and AOP city-wide have successfully organized public actions, creating a space for parents to dialogue with school staffs. The next stage of the organizing, however, establishing partnerships between parents and schools around mutually agreed upon initiatives, is still very young. Monitoring the development of the first set of partnerships is critical because the partnerships represent settings for the institutionalization of parents' participation in decision-making with schools and potential for mutual accountability. Partnerships—numbers, scope, focus and the assessment of their impact by participants—might well represent one of the clearest

measures of AOP's effect on strengthening schools as institutions for teaching and learning.

7. The responses of principals to AOP was very variable along a continuum from receptive to rejecting the organizing altogether. The principals' response to the organizing appeared to reflect different conceptualizations of the relationship of schools and communities as well as a range of leadership styles. Principals need professional development for the kinds of changes new relationships with parents demand of them in their role as school leaders. Opportunities to reflect with others on parent-school relations and the implications of different conceptualizations for the revision of parent, community, school relationships is also important. Additionally, AOP organizers and school teams need to be responsive to the varying styles of school leadership and the implications of these styles for building relationships with individual principals and school staffs.
8. Principals may perceive the organizing effort at their school as a burden, not a resource. It involves them with a group external to the system which is the creation of the reform, yet not part of the district. Furthermore, the AOP team initially might appear like a competitive setting with other parent involvement settings, such as Home and School and the Local School Council, despite the fact that the case study schools showed relations among these parent involvement settings to be complementary. The AOP faces the challenge of engaging principals so they see the organizing as an asset. In a few of the case study schools, the connection the AOP made between the principal and the local community was valued by the principal and helped to move the relationship between the AOP organizer, team and principal along the continuum from uneasy to being more positive.
9. Even though the AOP methodology stresses the importance of building a relationship with the principal, its efforts are driven by its commitment to parents. Issues which parents identify as critical to the education of their youngsters might not always be the same as the priorities principals believe they must address. The AOP approach has within it competing elements: relationship building with principals and school staffs alongside fidelity to an agenda emanating from parent concerns. The consequence is, as one organizer aptly put it, relationships which are "fragile, often turning on an event." The very existence of the organizing raises tensions that previously were suppressed; the challenge of learning to channel this tension to productive ends is one facing administrators, school staffs, parents and organizers alike.
10. The Children Achieving reform asks those in schools as well as parents to reexamine the home, community, school relationship. The existence of the organizing brings conflicts inherent in changing these relationships to the foreground. While the AOP is working from the parent end, school leadership, teachers and other school staff need opportunities and time to consider changes in this arena as well in order to be "ready" for parents in new roles. In order to revise roles and build new kinds of relationships, support such as professional development and chances to share

promising endeavors and dilemmas is needed for school staffs throughout the various layers of the system—small learning community, school, cluster and district.

Concluding Comments

The focus of this report on the AOP organizing begins to examine the value of community organizing to an overall reform strategy which includes involving parents in substantive ways in their local schools and creating a broader civic culture to sustain public education. The Children Achieving reform plan, however, also includes a number of other initiatives directly concerned with parents and their roles and relationships with schools. The broader evaluation of the Philadelphia Children Achieving Challenge will produce a more comprehensive report which will purposefully address the array of initiatives around parents and schools and how the multiple approaches the reform is sponsoring has begun to meet the objective of “[transforming] the relationship between every school and the parents and communities that surround it.”

Calendar of Fieldwork

October 1, 1997 - February 28, 1998

- **Observations**
 - Team meetings and/or trainings at 7 sites (new, one year old, and two year old sites) informed by brief interviews before and after sessions with organizers.
 - 4 city-wide meetings.
 - 1 city-wide public action.
 - 1 retreat.

- **Interviews**
 - Cross site focus group with 12 parents (new parents, parents with AOP teams for one year, and parents with AOP teams for more than one year).
 - 1 district principal (non-AOP school).
 - 1 Children Achieving Program officer.
 - 1 CASA official.

- **Initiation of parent co-researcher group.**

- **Feedback of initial findings.**
 - AOP Board.
 - Children Achieving Challenge

March 1, 1998 – June 30, 1998

- **Observations**
 - 5 public actions (new and two-year sites).
 - 3 city-wide meetings

- **Interviews**
 - 6 principals and 2 other administrators from 7 sites.
 - 12 teachers at 2 sites.
 - 19 parents from 7 teams (in small site based groups).
 - 5 organizers from 6 sites (one organizer in two sites).

- **Parent co-research group.**
 - 3 monthly cross group meetings.
 - 1 - 2 telephone interviews per month with each of 4 parent researchers.

- **Feedback of findings.**
 - AOP Organizers

Site visit protocol

Location of activity

Type of event/activity

Date

Time of Activity

Researcher

Describe the location and setting for the event/activity.

Describe the purpose and content of the activity.

Who attends? parents, organizers, others? number/race/ethnicity/gender?

Who conducts/facilitates/leads the activity/event?

How does the event/activity begin and end?

Handouts or other educational devices used? (a/v equipment, etc.)

Describe what happens during the activity/event.

Who talks? Who asks questions? Who comments? Give examples of the “discourse” and kinds of interactions

What are the “skills” or knowledge base being developed?

What are the range of roles of parents?

What stories about parent/school relations are told and by whom?

What are the issues parents are concerned about? What did you hear that helps you understand why these particular issues are ones which concerns parent(s)?

How would you describe the roles of the participants -- organizers? parents? others?

Does any particular parent(s) stand out for you? What makes the parent(s) stand out? Describe the parent(s) as fully as you can.

City-wide meetings - observation protocol

Location

Date

Researcher

Describe the physical setting for the meeting. Where is the meeting and why is it at this location? Were there any issues around location?

How is the room arranged? Where is the facilitator in relation to the group?

Who attends? parents, organizers, board members, others? numbers of each? race/ethnicity? gender?

Who facilitates?

How does the meeting begin, end?

What is the content of the meeting?

How would you describe the kinds of interactions that occurred at the meeting? What is the tone? Provide a vignette which illustrates the kinds of interactions you observed, tone and discourse.

What were the variety of issues that parents raised that concerned them (in their words)? What did you learn about why parents have these concerns?

How did parents describe parent/school relations?

How would you describe the role of parents at the meeting? What are the ways in which parents participate (or not) in the meeting? Do parents ask questions? make comments? tell stories? Try to capture some parent "talk"--questions parents ask in their words, comments they make in their words, stories they tell in their words.

Does any particular parent(s) stand out for you? What makes this parent stand out? Describe the parent as fully as you can.

FOCUS GROUP WITH AOP PARENTS

February 3, 1998

1. *Introductions, provide your name and the name of your child(ren's) school (and level, elem, m.s., h.s). Please also include the ways in which you have been involved in your children's school before your participation in AOP. (probe, H&S, Parent Scholar, classroom volunteer, office volunteer, cafeteria volunteer, LSC, or a parent who wasn't involved or wanted to be involved but didn't know how to get involved, etc.)*
2. *Thinking back to your previous involvements in your child(ren's) education, what's different about your involvement in your child's school now that you are a part of an AOP team? What's different about your relations with other parents? With school personnel? (Probe whether they now want to do some different kinds of activities that they had not imagined themselves doing before/ have relationships they didn't have before, etc. Probe for whether they are continuing with their previous activities or not, whether AOP activities are replacing those activities, whether they see themselves doing those activities in a different way.)*

**With new parents, What is your hope that your involvement with AOP will change? In your relations with your child's school, relations with other parents? With school personnel?*

3. *Please jot down 3 things that you believe are among the most important new skills, knowledge or perspectives you have gained through your participation in AOP? (Do a read around and then see where there is overlap and divergence, clarifying meanings. Probe for why these areas are the ones parents feel are important. Probe for how these are the same or different from what they do in their other areas of involvement)*

**With new parents might have to ask, please jot down 1 or 2 things that feel important to you about your first experiences with AOP. (read around and probe why these feel important and how they are the same and different from their experiences with other school-related groups)*

4. *Please describe any change you have had in your view of the role of parents in their child(ren's) school, or city-wide in public education, since your participation in AOP?*
5. *(Ask this question only if you don't think it has already been answered through parents responses to the previous questions.) Tell a positive experience you have had being a part of AOP, either as part of your Team, part of the city-wide, or in relations with your child's school. (Let's be sure to get some school stories)*

6. *Tell about an area in which you have experienced tension as a result of being part of AOP, either within your Team, in the city-wide, or in relations with your child's school*

**With new parents might have to modify this and ask, Do you anticipate any tension/conflict as a result of your AOP participation, within the Team, city-wide, at your child's school, with your child?*

7. *How do you see your participation in AOP affecting your child(ren)?* (Probe for whether the child sees the parent as an advocate now more than before/ a more effective advocate than before. Whether the child feels the parent is listening more to him/her. Whether the child's attitude and or performance in school has changed. Whether there have been any negative consequences.)

8. *Imagine you are talking to a representative from the school district. What is the most important one or two things you would want them to know about AOP?*

**AOP Spring Fieldwork
Protocols (Principals, Parents, Organizers)
4/98**

Principals

How did you first hear about AOP? What is your source of information about AOP? (probe for Ch. Ach. or other documents, the parents at his school, other principals, etc.)

What was your initial contact with AOP at your school?

What has been your contact with AOP since that initial one? Who have you met who identifies themselves as AOP? On what kinds of occasions have you met them? What are the activities of AOP at your school (probe for what they think AOP is doing.)

What are the issues AOP parents are bringing to you? How do these compare and contrast with your goals for your school? with your assessment of the major strengths of the school/the major areas for concern? With the school mission? School improvement plan?

Who else among your school staff would be aware of the AOP organizing? Why would they be aware of the organizing? Who in the community would be aware? Why would they be aware of the organizing?

How would you characterize AOP's approach? What do you think AOP's mission is?

How would you characterize your relationship to AOP? (probe for adversarial, painful, collaborative, a resource) (Probe to see if this changes over time, is different at different times, ie goes from one state to another but not in a progressive sense)

What are the other parent groups active at your school? (probe for H&S, LSC, Parents Union, etc.) How do these groups relate to each other? Do you see parents as participating in multiple groups? How does this work? How do the group work/not work with each other?

Are there parents not part of AOP who are familiar with it that you would recommend we speak to? (probe for positive or negative impressions of AOP)

What is your image of the roles parents should play in the school?

Organizers:

How would you characterize AOP's approach? How would you describe AOP's mission? (Probe—Overall, at this school)

How did you come to organize at [name] school.

Describe your entry into the school, who you talked to and how you began to work there.

(Probe for conversations with cluster, FRN, principal, other school staff)

What information did those you talked to have about AOP? How do you think they keep informed about AOP? (Probe for whether the organizer talks with them or sends them stuff, or a parent meets with them.)

In thinking about how you started the organizing process at [name], would you do it any differently the next time?

What concerns have parents identified for their children at this school?

What strengths have parents identified at the school?)

What are the AOP activities at this school? How do these compare and contrast with the school mission? School improvement plan?

How would you describe your relations with the principal? (Probe for adversarial, collaborative, etc.) How do you/the AOP team maintain communication with the principal? What do you think the principal's main concerns might be about the organizing? How do you know this? (Probe whether the principal has articulated the concerns, they just believe this from what others have said, etc.)

Who, if any are the other key school people familiar with AOP? what is your relationship to them? What kind of communication do you have with them?

What other parent involvement efforts exist at the school? (Probe whether the parents have contact with/work with Home and School, LSC, Parents Union or any other parent group)

What do you see as your relationship and AOP's to these groups?

Are there parents with whom you have spoken that have not become part of the Team but who you hoped would be? Why did they not become involved? Could you give us a couple of names and numbers?

What do you see as the main issues for you and the parent team over the next phase of work?

What is your image of the roles parents should play in the school?

Parents

How would you characterize AOP's approach? What do you think AOP's mission is?

How were you first introduced to the AOP?

Please describe how the AOP first made its entrance into the school . (Probe for how they made school staff aware of their team/activities)

What are the major strengths of your school?/the major areas for concern?

What are the main AOP activities at [name] school? How do these compare and contrast with the school mission?/school improvement plan?

How is your participation with the AOP contributing to change at your school?
How do you believe this change will contribute to children's school achievement?

How have school staff supported your efforts/ obstructed your efforts? (probe for the principal, other staff, etc.)

How would you characterize your relationship to school staff (principal, teachers, others) and what has happened that makes you feel this way? (probe for adversarial, collaborative etc. and the evidence of the kind of relationship it is.) (Probe for whether the relationship has changed over time or is just different at different times and why they think this is)

What do you see as the main focus of your AOP team work over the next few months?

What other parents groups are active at your school? (Probe for H&S, LSC, Parents Union, etc.) How does AOP connect with them? Are you connected to any of them?

Are there parents you had hoped would become active in AOP but didn't? Names and numbers (or where and how to reach them)

How has your participation in the AOP team affected your child? Your relationship with your child? Your concerns for your child's education?

What is your image of what the roles of parents in your school should be?

AOP Parent Co-Researchers

A. Background

At the AOP retreat in January 1998, Research for Action invited AOP parent leaders to participate in the evaluation as co-researchers. In order to prepare for the work of co-researcher, the parent leaders shared memories of their own school experiences and probed their theories about the organizing process. They identified major questions they were struggling with as active AOP participants. Questions raised by the group included:

- What can I do to help my child's school to become more effective?
- How can we improve the reading skills of our students?
- How should parents in AOP reach out to [disengaged] parents?
- What supports does AOP provide for parents of special needs students?

B. Parent Profiles

In March 1998, five of the parent leaders began meeting with Research for Action as co-researchers. Over the next three months they kept notes in journals about AOP and school-related events including their participation in team meetings, interviews they conducted with other parents, teachers, and politicians.

Of the five parent co-researchers two sustained a high level of activity, two were "in and out" of the process, and one did not contribute any data.

Two of those who were co-researchers are African American women. One is active at a comprehensive high school. She is the mother of a special needs student. At the second co-researcher meeting she explained how she introduced her work to others. "I tell them that I have been asked to be a researcher for AOP and I am trying to get a better understanding. I have questions about things, I know you do too, so I ask them just to talk. Then I ask is it OK to tape and if I have permission to use their names." The other African American woman is the grandmother of a middle years student. Her very shy grandson, who usually attended AOP functions with her, spoke out at the parent co-researcher meetings and he helped his grandmother gather data towards a case study of a "disengaged neighbor" whose daughter could not read.

Two Latina women were also co-researchers. They are both leaders at their local schools as well as at the AOP citywide level. In addition, they are AOP Board members. One is also the president of the Home & School at the middle school her children attend. She used her role as researcher to reach out to teachers at her school and learn about approaches to reading. The second has worked for many years as a teacher's assistant at the elementary school her children used to attend.

The fifth parent, an African American male, is a community activist and taught school. Soon after the parent co-researcher group began, he found that he had conflicts with the meeting times and he did not contribute any data.

SCHOOL	NEW	1 YR	2+ YR	AOP* TEAM OF CORE PARENT LEADERS	Home & School	Local School Council	ISSUE ACTIVELY WORKING ON
Cray			✓	15	Overlapping with AOP Team	Overlapping with AOP Team	Reading Writing Safety
Adams		✓		8	Identical to AOP Team	Identical to AOP Team	Discipline Reading
Patrick			✓	10	AOP Team is helping to form	Does not exist yet	Safety Reading
Cross	✓			14	Overlapping with AOP Team	Overlapping with AOP Team	Special Ed Bilingual Ed Reading Teacher Attendance
Roberts	✓			12	Overlapping with AOP Team	?	Safety
Thomas			✓	19	Overlapping with AOP Team	Overlapping with AOP Team	Reading Library Power
Walker		✓		8	AOP Team is helping to form	Distinct from AOP Team	Creating Partnerships with Community Organizations and Clergy

* The number might fluctuate slightly during the year, but these represent an average.