

The SAGE Handbook of Educational Leadership

Advances in Theory,
Research, and Practice

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

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A New Conception of Parent Engagement

Community Organizing for School Reform

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Box 11.1 The History and Characteristics of Community Organizing

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

Community organizing groups:

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

Read more about community organizing:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Analysis of those interviews yielded a preliminary indicators framework:

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

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

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

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

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

RETHINKING PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOOL REFORM

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

—Parent leader, Alliance Organizing Project, Philadelphia

