

THE PROMISE OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

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Public schools often struggle in low-income communities. School failure cheats the youngsters who most need solid preparation, and stands as a roadblock in America's quest to become an equal-opportunity society. Nearly half of all students in our large urban districts fail to graduate from high school with their peers. Yet in today's economy, all young people must do well in school if they are to reach their potential as adults who can support a family and participate fully in our democracy. Nearly forty percent of young black men without a high school degree are in prison or jail today – blighting their own lives and those of their children.

Many school reformers recognize that educational failure is virtually a way of life in communities where people struggle with poverty, racial barriers, and a sense of powerlessness. But how can things be turned around? School officials often try one top-down reform after another, only to see each fall short. A fresh and more promising approach makes school reform part of a broader agenda of community engagement. Doing better for children can bring people together – not just school officials and teachers, but parents and neighbors and young people as well. Community organizing allows the people most affected by school failures to gain voice. It draws the families whose children attend troubled schools into the process of making them better.

What Community Organizing Can Do

In a comprehensive study of efforts across the country, my colleagues and I have discovered and analyzed the vital contributions that organized parents and young people are making to school reform. For example:

- In Mississippi, community groups have built political coalitions to increase state funding for schools in low-income communities, winning an historic \$600 million increase in 2007.
- In Denver, Colorado, a model community effort works to cut short the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Harsh school discipline policies have been replaced by more equitable and effective restorative justice programs.
- In East Los Angeles, organizers bring school principals together with congregational leaders to address safety and public health concerns in surrounding neighborhoods.
- In Chicago, the “Grow Your Own Teacher” program in the Logan Square neighborhood encourages low-income parents to be leaders and instructors in their children's schools.

Ways to Build Parent Participation and Leadership

Community organizing is not meant to advocate “for” parents. Rather, it works when parents are deeply involved and help to lead group efforts. Successful organizing:

- Approaches parents as potential leaders, not just people with problems.
- Creates relationships among parents so they can engage with schools together rather than as isolated individuals.
- Devises systematic ways to help parents without high levels of formal education build the skills, knowledge, and self-assurance they need to effectively address school issues and policies.
- Is sensitive to differences of race and class – not to highlight divisions, but to find thoughtful ways to enable diverse groups of parents and educators to work respectfully with one another.

Collaboration Works Better than Confrontation

What happens when community members get organized? Just banging on school doors gains little, we discovered. Demanding change from outside does not work any better than top-down directives from principals and district leaders. We found that deep and sustained reform develops from collaborations between educators and members of participatory community organizations.

- School reform takes deep hold when attention is paid to building social connections and understandings, not simply imposing an expert-defined agenda.
- Rather than looking for quick fixes, reform leaders – including school officials – must be willing to invest time and energy, because relationships and trust take time to build.
- Naturally, parents and educators may have different views and priorities. But the tension can be positive if both parents and educators show willingness to compromise and hold each other accountable for making compromise work.

Community mobilization and collaboration take patience – but the time has come for this approach. The search for a silver bullet solution to the problems of public education in low-income communities has proven fruitless. Imposing across-the-board bureaucratic formulas has not worked. Our research shows the value of organizing the participation and engagement of low-income people themselves in addressing the problems their schools face. Through community organizing, parents and young people have found ways to build the political power to increase funding and create more equitable practices in public education. They have also learned to collaborate with teachers and principals to weave a more effective web of support, instruction, and safety for the benefit of all school children – even in America’s most troubled neighborhoods and cities.

Read more in Mark R. Warren, Karen L. Mapp and the Community Organizing and School Reform Project, *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform* (Oxford University Press, 2011).