



NCPIE Update

A Publication of the National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education April-May 2005

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Community Organizing for School Reform *A Review of Strategies for Organizers and Leaders*

The presentation given at the March NCPIE meeting provided an in-depth look at the field of community organizing for education and school reform. Kavitha Mediratta of the Institute for Education and Social Policy, at New York University gave a presentation that provided many things, including:



- An overview of the history of community organizing;
- A look at the impact community organizing is having on parent involvement and;
- Examples of the types of organizations from across the country that are doing this work and their achievements.

Mediratta's presentation, and subsequently this issue of *The Update*, also includes an overview of a document developed by the Institute of Education and Social Policy at the Steinhardt School of Education, at New York University titled: "*Lessons from the Field of School Reform Organizing: A Review of Strategies for Organizers and Leaders.*" It draws on a longer report, recently reviewed in the Spotlight section of *The Update* titled "*Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Reform*" and offers community organizers, parents, youth and residents a number of field-tested strategies for organizing for school improvement.

Community Organizing—A Definition

Community organizing is defined as an effort to build power by mobilizing large numbers of people to address the imbalance of political and economic power in society. It involves the ongoing recruitment of parents, youth and, sometimes, educators. All of whom require training to develop their skills and capabilities to lead organizing efforts. Community organizing is focused on increasing school accountability, quality and responsiveness. It is not traditional

parent involvement in that it works to benefit all students, and rests on a base that is external to schools. It is not controlled by school staff or administrators.

Community organizing differs from other forms of community improvement activity in that it is not based in providing services to families or in advocating for those families. It works to engage people in a process of learning, relationship-building, and mobilization to act on their own behalf.

Why Do Groups Organize?

Education organizing has increased exponentially. In 2000, research completed by the Institute for Education and Social Policy and other studies identified over 200 groups across the United States doing education organizing; four-fold increase since the early 1990's. Groups organize for various reasons, including:

- Neighborhood improvement successes lead to school quality
- Demands from parents or young people to improve the conditions and quality of local schools
- Expansion of national organizing networks to more places
- Increased funding and support for the work

What Community Organizing is Achieving

As it relates to parent involvement, as a result of their participation in community organizing, parents often become more involved in the traditional types of parent involvement. As parents become more knowledgeable about their children's education through their participation in community organizing efforts, they feel more confident and authorized to take on roles at home and at school.

Other examples of victories include:

- More money for underserved schools. Groups have brought millions of dollars for new school construction, facility repairs and new programs.
- New policy and leadership to increase equity, access and accountability. Such as a new district-wide small schools policy in Oakland, California.
- Innovative teacher recruitment and professional development programs. Such as the "Grow Your Own" teacher program in Chicago, Illinois.

How Do Community Organizing Groups Change Schools?

A range of approaches are being used by groups from across the country to address school reform. Some groups utilize big power mobilizations, like rallies and public meetings to win large scale policy reform. Others opt for school-by-school work to build a new culture of trust and relationships between educators and parents. The key however, to establishing true change and reaching any measurable amount of success lies in building power *and* partnerships with educators. These two components are critical. Groups have learned that external pressure and accountability is not enough and that they have to build relationships that transform the capacity of schools to do better.

Mediratta's presentation covered many more areas of community organizing and gave specific examples of groups from across the country doing this work. For more information please visit www.nyu.edu/iesp

For now we turn our attention to... ..

“Lessons from the Field of School Reform Organizing: A Review of Strategies for Organizers and Leaders”

Our review of the material on this subject will involve an overview of 3 Issue Briefs that explore how community groups are responding to three strategic organizing challenges:

1. Developing partnerships with schools based on accountability;
2. Organizing both youth and adults for public education reform; and
3. Improving instruction practice in low performing schools.

Issue Brief #1-- Building Power and Partnerships to Improve Neighborhood Schools

Lesson 1: Build an Independent Source for Power

Often community groups have trouble and experience suspicion by the staff at schools where they would like to see change. The studies have shown that schools are often isolated from the communities they serve and often defensive about their academic practices and achievement levels. Thus, officials often refuse to sit at the table with community organizing groups and take a seat at the table to begin discussions about community concerns as they relate to the school.

One of the first steps that groups organizing to do this type of work must do is recruit parents, youth, and community members to work on their team and then subsequently establish themselves as legitimate representatives of constituents served by the schools.

Lesson 2: Look for Strategic Allies within the System

Access to information about academic data from a school can be hard to acquire by groups doing this type of organizing. Often district officials, administrators and teachers themselves are defensive and deny access to parents and community groups. However, groups need the facts and figures about student academic outcomes, teacher certification and quality measures in order to engage school leaders in discussions of true school climate, culture and conditions.

All too often, however, groups organizing for reform have a hard time breaking down barriers to obtaining this information. To get data, however, many groups conduct their own investigations. Yet, the key to acquiring the data to analyze how well or poorly a school is serving the community hinges upon the development of relationships with that school principal and a core group of teachers at that school. The goal is to build and maintain alliances with strategic allies. Those relationships give the organizing group legitimacy and provide access to information and entry into the school itself.

Lesson 3: Develop Relationships with Teachers

Developing relationships with teachers is essential to community based efforts to improve schools. Discord between school officials, community and neighborhood groups must be placed aside if academic improvement is to take place. The brief identifies 3 reasons why relationships may not take place:

1. Some teachers may be reluctant due to fear of being labeled trouble makers by district administrators.
2. Some teachers may fear that parents and these groups may use the relationship as an opportunity to dictate teaching methods and style.
3. Often there is no real willingness on behalf of schools to see parents as true contributors to the education process.

To break down these potential barriers, groups often develop initial relationships around uncontroversial issues with the goal of building trust and powerful relationships so in turn more difficult issues and conversations about improving achievement can be made down the line. The strategies used by organizing groups to gain access to educators vary, but all are based on the premise that one-to-one relationships between teachers and parents are crucial.

Lesson 4: Maintain External Pressure fro Reform

Community organizing groups must continuously remind themselves that the goal of their work is to engage schools in a dialogue about how each side can work together to improve school performance. These groups must not be side tracked by schools enlisting their help in matter such as fundraising or providing various other services. The focus of the relationship built in lesson 3 is to delve into the more salient issues of true school reform.

Pressure for reform must remain constant. Often groups exert this pressure with campaigns focused on targets at levels of the system beyond the school. This allows them to maintain the relationships they have developed with school level leaders, while at the same time pushing for change within individual schools. By maintaining a public presence community organizing groups remind school officials that the group is truly focused on reform and ready to take action against them if the pace of reform is too slow.

It is important to point out however, that community groups are increasingly finding it difficult to work on simultaneous multiple projects and campaigns at various levels of the school systems. This constant activity overextends leaders.

Issue Brief #2—Organizing K-12: Emerging Models for Organizing Youth and Adults

Efforts to improve public education require participation by community members of all grade levels and ages. However, a 2001 study by the Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP) found that of the sixty-six groups surveyed, only a quarter of them worked with both adults and youth.

The reasons and benefits of working with a broader range of ages include the facts that campaigns can draw on two power bases. One in which adults have voting power and established networks of connections and constituents, and another in which youth have firsthand knowledge of what goes on inside schools, energy and new ideas for reform. Youth additionally can serve as mediators and bridge the gap between parents and schools.

Strategies for how to work with both adults and youth are being developed. Below is an overview of some of those strategies being implemented in various places across the country.

[Intergenerational Organizing: Creating space for Youth in the Mississippi Delta](#)

The Mississippi-based community organizing group Southern ECHO believes that developing a new generation of community organizers is one of the best ways to fight for positive social changes. They have developed an intergenerational model of organizing that integrates young people into all aspects of school reform efforts. The youth in Southern ECHO affiliated groups do everything from serving on governing boards to participating in planning, implementing, and evaluating campaigns.

An example of collaborations between youth and adults in Mississippi that have been successful include the efforts of the Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County community organizing group. Young people joined with adults in a 4-year fight to oppose the development of a new school facility to serve a sparsely populated white middle class neighborhood and to demand the creation of a new school to relieve overcrowding in majority black and working class neighborhoods. Additionally, young people on the governing board of the Indianola Parent Student Group, another Southern ECHO affiliate, launched a successful campaign against chemical spraying at a nearby plantation, and led an adult/youth campaign to win new science labs, books, and science curricula for their school.

Working together, youth and adults in the Southern ECHO network have not only made improvements to the development of true school reform in Mississippi, but they have also broken down barriers of communication between the two groups and discredited many of the negative stereotypes of one another.

Moving Beyond the Transience of Youth: Bronx Organizers Commit to Long Term Reform

Transience can make youth constituencies and membership a low priority for adult organizing groups. The problem is that young people grow up and simply age out of the work very quickly. Often many groups feel that investments of time in leadership development for young members did not make sense when those youth would eventually grow up and move out of the work and scope of the organization.

However, in the 2001 study by IESP, it found that many groups with a history of organizing only adults have come to find the benefits of working with youth as well. The Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC) had existed for over two decades as an adult only organizing group, but in 1999 realized that youth also shared adult concerns about neighborhood problems. Organizers of the group began to draw youth into campaigns on local school issues and found that integrating youth and adult organizing required a shift in the organization's view of young people, from being perceived as supporters to being seen as potential leaders.

Changing Adult Expectations and Creating Youth Capacity: South Central L.A.

Youth have also led the way for adults to take up education organizing. The South Central Youth Empowered Through Action (SCYEA) group is the youth arm of a decade-old coalition of multiracial adult organizers working on substance abuse issue. From its inception, SCYEA mobilized youth around issues of reducing the number of neighborhood liquor stores and decreasing the availability of illegal drugs. Its first education campaign focused on ensuring that funds from a \$2.4 billion bond designated for physical repairs of LA schools went to the schools that needed it most. It won this campaign and then moved to student achievement issues.

The organizing efforts of this youth led group has fostered a pipeline of young student leaders and an education academy to help students work on such skills as public speaking, data analysis, and outreach to the media. The group trains its youth to work on school and community public policy issues and in 2002 began organizing parents as supporters.

When adults and youth are brought together in organizing groups, they are forced to pay attention to power dynamics. Groups need to be attuned to youth needs for skill development in their own spaces, and need to understand adult concerns about youth commitment and ability. To bridge the gap, groups are often required to shift its style of organizing and must be open to letting youth speak out and make decisions.

Issue Brief #3—Focusing on Instruction

The goal of the groups that are organized around the country for school reform is to reform the structure of school climate and instructional practice. Namely:

- The relationships among adults as well as between adults and students;
- The teacher attitudes, beliefs and expectations of what students can achieve;
- And the teacher and administrator skills and capacities focused on improving student outcomes.

Increasingly, organizing groups are now focusing on the improvement of teacher quality in their schools. Several promising strategies have been implemented. They are outlined below.

Changing Attitudes: Sacramento ACT and Teacher Home Visits

In California, Sacramento Area Congregations Together (ACT), an affiliate of the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), developed a campaign to address what members saw as a crippling cultural divide in their schools. Because teachers didn't live in the same neighborhoods as their students, they had little connection or relationship to the families the schools served. And because parents did not have the same education level as the teachers, they felt looked down upon by teachers and were hesitant to raise their concerns.

Applying a basic organizing principle about the necessity to build relationships, ACT resolved to help parents and teachers get to know each other. In 1998 ACT began taking teachers into poor communities to visit their students' homes. The visits challenged teachers' stereotypes about families as uncaring, and challenged parents' fears about interacting with school staff.

ACT involved parents, teachers, and engaged principals in the development and implementation of the project. Through the efforts of the statewide PICO organization (Pacific Institute for Community Organizing), what began as a project in eight schools has turned into its own entity – the California Home Visiting Center, supported with federal funds and modeled on the Sacramento ACT project. The increased communication between teachers and parents and students in Sacramento has yielded positive results, including rising graduation rates, improved classroom behavior and lower in-school suspension rates, as well as improved standardized test scores.

Changing who teaches: Chicago ACORN's "Grow Your Own" teacher campaign

When Chicago ACORN parents learned about the poor test scores in their children's schools, they quickly focused on improving teacher quality as a central strategy. The group approached school principals and learned that the rates of teacher turnover were so high in ACORN schools that district funded programs for teacher recruitment, induction, and professional development were almost completely ineffective and a huge waste of money.

To reverse this trend of severe teacher attrition, ACORN members resolved to help people from their communities develop the credentials needed to become teachers in their schools. According To find ways to recruit new teachers who would stay, ACORN looked to existing models such as a 14-year-old program in North Carolina that trains paraprofessionals to become teachers in the state's hard-to-staff rural schools (and reports an 89 percent retention rate for these teachers). It also looked at the Grow Your Own project, developed by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, to help neighborhood parents get the credentials necessary to become teachers. These examples convinced ACORN to develop a campaign to introduce "Grow Your Own" on a citywide scale. The campaign has won wide support from local universities and the Chicago Public Schools.

Focusing on increasing school funding, on curricula changes, on changing school disciplinary rules or improving school facilities are important in transforming schools, but without a focus on creating the school culture, teacher attitudes and staff commitment to deliver effective instruction, whatever achievement gains result may be temporary because the changes may represent only stopgap measures. The building of strong relationships with educators takes time and commitment, but they are critical to changing teacher beliefs and classroom practice.

For more information about school reform organizing, the groups profiled in Mediratta's presentation and profiled here, or IESP, please visit www.nyu.edu/iesp.

Sources: "Community Organizing for School Reform: It's Growing and Getting Results," "Lessons from the Field of School Reform", by Amy Zimmer and Kavitha Mediratta

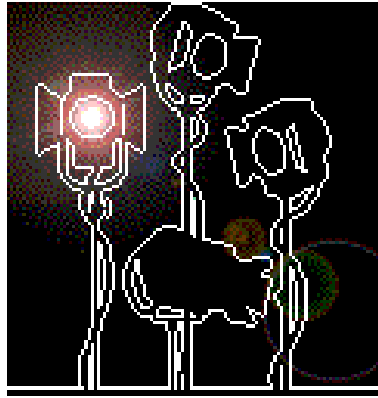
Action Guide for Education Organizing:

www.communitychange.org/issues/education/actionguide/

This guide is a web-based tool for organizers just starting to work on education reform issues. We hope the guide will help you begin to think about ways of approaching your campaigns, thinking about a power analysis and understanding the basics of No Child Left Behind and school funding.

The guide is posted on the web in a format that allows readers to look at the case studies and chapters in whatever order makes the most sense for you. Or, you may download the entire document by clicking on the link in the middle of the circle.

Spotlight on *A New Wave of Evidence* Will Return next month!



Parent Involvement Resources & Upcoming Meetings & Trainings

Becoming a Community School: A Step-by-Step Guide to Bridging the School-Family Gap

This publication is the eleventh in a series of how-to guidebooks developed *By Teachers For Teachers* with support from the Project for School Innovation (PSI). It highlights the successful program at the Robert L. Ford School where Dr. Claire Crane serves as principal. For more information on this publication please contact PSI at 617-825-0703 or email them at psi@psinnovation.org

New Online Resource for Men Who Want to Become Better Fathers

All Pro Dad is a premier website offering a free daily e-mail service called Play of the Day. This service provides dads with hard-hitting information, advice and inspiration to make them better husbands and fathers. The All Pro Dad website also offers fathers interactive quizzes and activities designed to further improve their relationship with their children. At AllProDad.com, fathers can also find books, brochures, free articles, online classes and surveys, support groups and many other resources on parenting. Best of all, it's free! Visit www.allprodad.com for more information.

Advocacy Organizations Join Forces to Promote Political Action By and For Youth

More than 30 of the country's leading national advocacy organizations have launched an unprecedented partnership to raise awareness and generate support for children and youth policies through political activism with the development of **The Youth Policy Action Center**. The Youth Policy Action Center is a web-based resource that helps youth and concerned adults

be heard in Washington and allows them to regularly contact elected officials about important programs and initiatives – especially in the critical days before votes are cast on the floor of Congress. Visit the Youth Policy Action Center Web site: <http://www.youthpolicyactioncenter.org> for more information.

New Study on Families from the YMCA and the Search Institute

“The vast majority of African American and Latino/Latina parents are working hard to raise strong, healthy, and successful children and adolescents, and most feel they are doing well as parents. Yet they are doing so in the face of multiple challenges in their communities and society.” This news comes from a 2004 study by The YMCA and Search Institute titled *Building Strong Families 2004: A Study of African American and Latino/Latina Parents in the United States*. The Building Strong Families study is part of an ongoing collaboration between the YMCA of the USA and Search Institute around strong families and parenting. It is part of the larger Abundant Assets Alliance, which combines the resources of the YMCA of the USA, YMCA Canada, and Search Institute—three organizations with proven success in building strong kids, families, and communities. For more information, visit www.abundantassets.org.

Don't forget to check the NCPIE web-site periodically for new information on parent involvement at www.ncpie.org

NCPIE's April Meeting and Presentation

Our next NCPIE meeting will be **Wednesday, April 27th** from 9:00 to 12:00 at NEA, Conference Room B. NEA is located at 1201 16th Street NW, Washington DC. Please join us at 9:00 for coffee and conversation. The meeting will begin at 9:30.

Our guest speaker is Mary Kusler, Senior Legislative Specialist at the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). Mary will talk to us about what's going on in Congress, particularly in the education arena, and she will also share her insights on what to expect from the 109th as the year progresses. We'll leave plenty of time for Q & A. For those of us who do not spend much time on the Hill, you will learn a great deal.