



Communities and Schools

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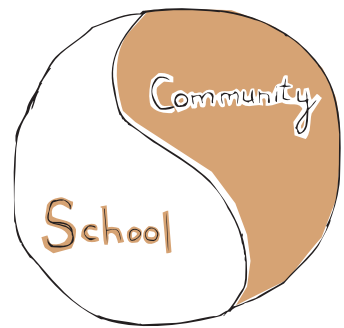
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Community-Led Reform

Robert Rothman

As just about everybody now knows, President Barack Obama began his career as a community organizer. Forsaking the more lucrative careers his fellow Columbia University graduates sought, he moved to Chicago and worked with the Developing Communities Project, working with residents, community organizations, and faith-based institutions to bring job opportunities, improved housing, and education reforms to the city's South Side.

As he explained in his book *Dreams from My Father*, Obama committed himself to community organizing as a college student and would tell his classmates why he believed so strongly in the idea. “Change won’t come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grass roots” (Obama 1995, p. 133).

President Obama has retained this view of change. His presidential campaign was a triumph of organizing, in which thousands of volunteers and small donors propelled him to the Democratic nomination and the presidency. And he has made clear he intends to govern through organizing. As he noted in his speech accepting the Democratic nomination in August 2008:

You have shown what history teaches us, that at defining moments like this one, the change we need doesn’t come *from* Washington. Change comes *to* Washington. Change happens because the American people demand it, because they rise up and insist on new ideas and new leadership, a new politics for a new time. (Obama 2008)

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Increasingly, this view of change *from* the community, rather than *to* a community, is taking hold in education. Many educators and community leaders are recognizing that education reform is not just a technical enterprise, requiring only the right ideas. Rather, they know that it is also a political and social endeavor that takes demand and support by an entire community.

In their landmark 2001 book, Clarence Stone, Jeffrey Henig, and their colleagues (2001) found that the ability of urban school systems to build and sustain substantial improvements depended on the ability of the entire community to come together to address educational needs. They called this ability “civic capacity.”

More recently, researchers at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform examined community organizing efforts in seven cities and found that these efforts contribute to school-level improvements and that successful organizing strategies have contributed to improved student achievement in several sites (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2008).

Despite these findings, the idea of community-led reform continues to face resistance and a lack of understanding of its effects. In many cities, large segments of the community find that they have little voice in decisions that affect them and their children’s schools. In some cases, community members who have had advantages are unwilling to share power with underserved communities. In others, reformers have instituted new policies and programs, often with the best of intentions but with little support from the community. With such a weak foundation, they are unlikely to last.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* looks at the role of communities in bringing about and supporting education reform.

- Eva Gold, Maia Cucchiara, and Elaine Simon show how the market-based approach that was implemented in Philadelphia in 2002 thwarted the development of civic capacity.



- Rodney Hero and Mara Sidney examine the attitudes of Latinos and find little evidence of support for substantial change in education.
- John Portz, Lana Stein, and Sabina Deitrick describe the involvement of communities in Boston, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis and how that involvement has affected the course of education reforms in those cities.
- Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari and Ocynthia Williams discuss a parent-led collaborative in New York City that has succeeded in securing new support for low-performing middle schools.
- Seema Shah and Anne Henderson look at a student organization in Los Angeles that led a successful effort to institute a more rigorous curriculum in high schools.

These articles show that community-led efforts to build civic capacity to lead and support reforms are not easy and not always successful. But they suggest some elements that might lead to success. For example, the New York and Los Angeles stories show that building broad coalitions can help advance policy ideas. They also show the importance of data in making the case for improvement and of the role of partners in helping provide the technical support these coalitions need to make their case.

Community organizing and engagement is not the only condition needed for educational improvement. But if educational opportunity and outcomes are to become more equitable, the community voice in improvement is essential. Now, with a community organizer in the White House, the idea just might get more attention.

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Market-Oriented Education Reforms: The Cost to Civic Capacity in Philadelphia

Eva Gold, Maia Cucchiara,
and Elaine Simon

The market-based approach to education reform that was implemented in Philadelphia in 2002 thwarted the development of civic capacity.

The authors wish to acknowledge Research for Action senior research assistants Cecily Mitchell and Morgan Riffer for their contributions to the research that is the basis for this article.

In 2001, Philadelphia became the largest urban district ever to be taken over by a state, as well as the largest experiment in educational privatization. Initiated by a conservative governor and legislature, the new arrangement resulted in a complex privatization scheme that included district outsourcing of school management and other core educational functions, the expansion of school choice, and mechanisms for interaction with parents characterized by a focus on customer service. This market-oriented model for reform received a further boost with the 2002 implementation of the No Child Left Behind legislation, which embraced various forms of privatization as solutions for persistent school failure.

The district's new orientation also reflected the larger turn, locally and nationally, toward market strategies to solve urban problems. As cities were being called upon to re-create themselves as "markets of choice" for an increasingly upscale professional class of knowledge workers, many urbanists saw education as the next step in a

broader revitalization scheme. As Paul Grogan and Tony Proscio (2000), the authors of *Comeback Cities*, note:

In some ways, the new battle over schools is the final frontier of inner city revitalization. All the other incipient positive trends will fall short of their potential if city schools continue to push huge numbers of working- and middle-class families out of the city. ... If that dreadful "push factor" can be neutralized in time by some combination of charter schools and privatization ... the ultimate victory might be in the cities' grasp. (p. 7)

The state takeover and the subsequent market-based reforms brought Philadelphia's school system in line with this national trend. As the Philadelphia school district moved in the direction of market-oriented reform, a profound – but not always visible – institutional shift began to take place. This institutional shift reshaped the district's relationships with its constituencies, creating a new landscape for civic and community involvement in education.

Although district leadership has changed since the initial push toward market-oriented reform in Philadelphia, market ideas have become "normalized," with New York City, Chicago, and

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other urban centers following suit. Even as Philadelphia – and other urban areas – grapple anew with the question of the role of public participation, it is critical to understand the legacy of the first round of major market reforms. Indeed, the normalization of market ideas that has occurred makes it even more urgent that a discussion of their impact take place. And the effect of these reforms on public participation – particularly the impact on civic capacity – is too often left out of the discussion.

The normalization of market ideas that has occurred makes it even more urgent that a discussion of their impact take place. And the effect of these reforms on public participation is too often left out of the discussion.

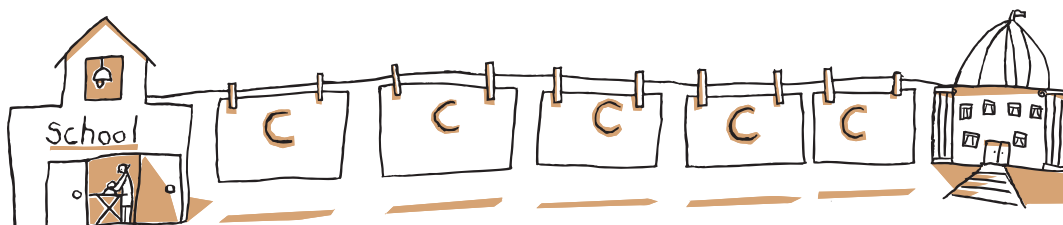
To understand the institutional shifts and their effects on civic capacity – the ability of community, civic, and political actors to arrive at a shared agenda for school improvement and mobilize resources to achieve concrete goals within a broad community agenda (Stone et al. 2001) – it is important to examine the district from different vantage points. Looking “top-down,” for example, is a way to see how high-level district administrators articulate a district’s approach to working with

outside individuals and organizations. A “ground-up” perspective, on the other hand, reveals the ways in which groups that are active in education fare within the current city and district environment. In combination these vantage points provide insight into the way in which the adoption of market ideas affect the opportunities for, and the development of, civic capacity.

The work of political scientists Clarence Stone, Jeffrey Henig, and their colleagues has documented the important role civic capacity plays in moving reform forward in a particular setting. Looking across eleven cities, their studies showed that cities with high levels of civic capacity were more likely to be able to sustain reform efforts than those that lacked civic capacity (Stone et al. 2001; Henig et al. 2001; Portz, Stein & Jones 1999). Furthermore, later work by Henig and Stone (2007) points out the importance, especially in urban areas, of the reconfiguration of civic relationships to include low-income groups in building civic capacity for school reform. This reconfiguration often demands special resources and specific interventions, as well as intentional outreach. The inclusion of low-income families, however, ensures that the reforms both meet the needs and aspirations of students and families who have traditionally been least well served by our education systems and help sustain reforms as they become integrated in a broader, multisector community agenda.

The Top-Down View

Looking top-down can reveal the way in which school district officials make operational the rhetoric of markets, which has implications for interactions between local individuals and organizations and the school system. When we



looked top-down at the School District of Philadelphia we found five ways – what we call the five Cs – for describing what district interactions looked like with the public.

First, the district assumed a *corporate* governance structure in which decision making was centralized and took place behind closed doors. Rather than airing their differences in public meetings, the members of the School Reform Commission (SRC), at least for the first several years, ironed out differences in private, almost always speaking with one voice.¹ The SRC also eschewed public debate or oversight, strictly regulating public speaking at its meetings. As one top official acknowledged, “civic engagement and community involvement” were generally regarded as “nice, but not essential.” This closed system meant a lack of transparency and few opportunities for public input.

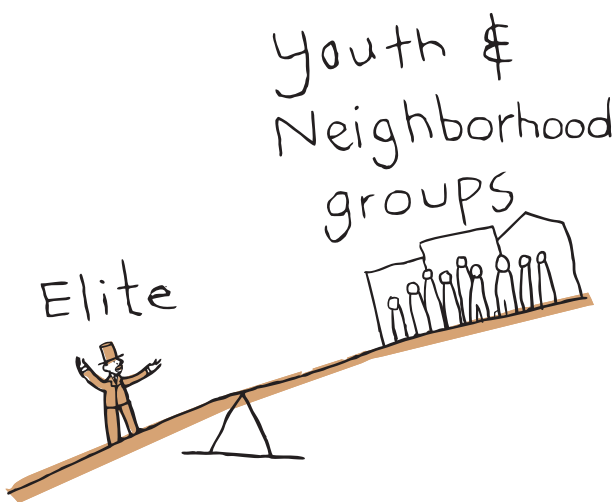
Second, to restore confidence in the discredited system, district officials hired a public relations firm and structured

communications around marketing the district and managing public opinion. The SRC and CEO Paul Vallas, according to one long-time district official, placed a great deal more emphasis on public relations than any previous administration. The emphasis on the media as the favored mode of communications positioned Philadelphians as *audience* rather than as *participants* in reform.

Third, the district greatly expanded the practice of *contracting out*, including to small local nonprofits, eventually spending a quarter of its operating budget on contracts with outside groups. As one district official commented, “Everyone is at the door, and it is open.” According to another district official, the contracts that community groups received were the primary means through which groups engaged with the schools.

Fourth, district policy increasingly focused on individual *choice* and charters, with the number of charters increasing from forty-one in 2001 to sixty-two today, enrolling over 15 percent of the district’s students. The number of high schools was also

¹ The SRC was put in place at the time of state takeover and replaced the mayorally appointed school board. The governor appoints three members to the SRC; the mayor, two members.



increased significantly – from thirty-eight to sixty-two – during the same period. The emphasis on choice channeled parents’ involvement toward being consumers in the educational marketplace and skewed participation toward individual schools, rather than the district as a whole.

Finally, the district embraced a *customer service* orientation, creating a myriad of programs to respond to parents’ individual needs, including a call center, hotlines, and school-based parent welcome desks.

The result of these changes was a multifaceted structure for interaction with the public that favored individually oriented activity and discouraged collective forms of engagement. Further, the system of contracting, particularly with the large number of local community organizations as service providers, compromised the groups’ ability to question district policy, because their relationship with the district became narrowed to contractual agreements.

In other words, these changes – because they reduced transparency, elevated individual interests, and muted potentially critical voices – made it more difficult for individuals and groups to access information, identify shared interests, and come together in meaningful ways to develop and pursue shared goals. As such, they created significant barriers to civic capacity, which requires authentic public participation and collaboration around education.

The Ground-Up View

To understand how the market-oriented approach looked from the ground up, we followed four groups active around education issues. These four groups represented different constituencies and had different strategies for achieving their agendas.

The first was the “downtown group,” which was interested in providing middle-class families with a special system of enhanced school choice as a way of making the downtown area more attractive and furthering its revitalization. The organization’s leader had extensive contacts with city and district elites and was able to penetrate the district’s decision-making structure with relative ease. In fact, because the initiative raised equity concerns both among some district middle-level staff and some community advocates, the district’s closed-door practices worked to the advantage of the downtown group by allowing it to hold discussions outside of public view. The group’s agenda also aligned with the district’s focus on building a choice system, making the system responsive to consumer demand, and supporting the city’s pro-growth agenda. For these reasons, the downtown group was quite successful in achieving its goals.

The second group was an African American school choice group that worked to increase options for Black families, supporting charter schools and tuition reimbursement programs for private and parochial schools. Like the downtown group, it was able to penetrate the decision-making hierarchy, in this case because its network of political leaders reached the state level and had influence with members of the SRC. These relationships, as well as the alignment of its agenda with the district’s new focus on choice and parents as consumers, similarly helped this organization achieve its goals.

In contrast to the downtown and African American choice group, the other two other groups we followed – a youth organizing group and an education coalition – continuously struggled to make their agendas, which were

largely focused on equity issues, a part of the district’s plans.

The youth organizing group aimed to transform large high schools in three low-income neighborhoods outside of the downtown area into high-quality small schools. Lacking networks of elites who could gain influence for them, they organized and developed leadership within youth and neighborhood groups as a means of leveraging power.

Their public and collective approach to influencing the district did not fit easily with the district’s new structures and practices. In its emerging form, the district could respond well to individual complaints but lacked a venue for the development of productive relationships with groups that took collective action and whose equity agenda – in this case, new small community high schools to serve low-income constituencies living in low-income neighborhoods – did not match the district’s market orientation or the city’s focus on revitalizing areas. While these groups gained recognition

In contrast to the downtown and African American choice group, a youth organizing group and an education coalition continuously struggled to make their agendas, which were largely focused on equity issues, a part of the district’s plans.

The need for transparency is an important precondition to building civic capacity. In order for groups – especially those representing low-income constituencies – to collaborate with the district and other civic organizations, they need information about district plans and priorities and clear mechanisms through which they can engage with district decision-makers.

and some legitimacy during this period and succeeded in carving out a space for themselves in which to meet with district officials, progress has been slow. For example, it took five years before ground was broken in fall 2008 for new schools in two of their neighborhoods – while a number of schools were built or rehabbed in the more affluent downtown much more quickly.

The educational coalition also lacked elites with networks of influence. In addition, many of the coalition's member groups became contractors with the district, putting them in the difficult position of having to balance inside-outside tensions. Their area for input to the district was often limited to the terms of their contractual agreement for services. Their collective voices – historically those associated with equity – were muted by their narrowed role as service providers and, in the case of smaller grassroots organizations, by financial dependence on the district.

The Outcome for Civic Capacity

According to our data, the adoption of market models of reform leads to public participation based more on individual or group interests than on a conception of public education as a collective process in the name of “the public good.” The case of Philadelphia showed that the introduction of market reforms had an effect both on the district's modes for public interaction and on the organizations operating within this new environment – with profound implications for building civic capacity for school reform in Philadelphia.

First, the lack of transparency in the district's centralized, top-down decision making contributed to an uneven civic playing field. It privileged those who had access to decision-makers because of their existing social capital or political reach and whose agendas matched the growth-oriented practices of civic elites and the district's interest in market-oriented reforms. As a result, those groups were able to further their agendas in the absence of a broad cross-sectoral conversation about their policies and goals.

In turn, the lack of transparency disadvantaged groups that used public engagement as their strategy for gaining influence. These groups lacked access to those who operated behind closed doors or to those with “insider information,” and their more public, collective approaches to engagement did not match the district’s emergent institutional structure.

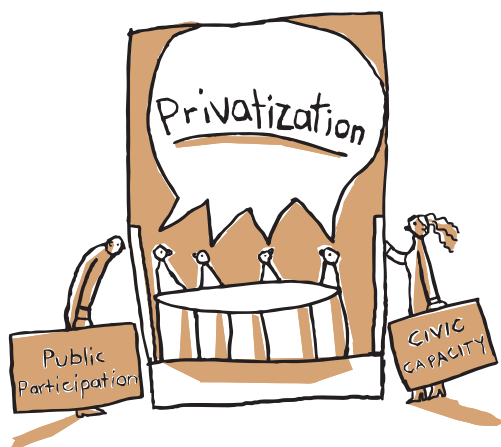
The need for transparency has not been discussed in the civic capacity literature, but our study indicates that it is an important precondition to building civic capacity. In order for groups – especially those representing low-income constituencies – to collaborate with the district and other civic organizations, they need information about district plans and priorities and clear mechanisms through which they can engage with district decision-makers.

Further, the relationship between civic capacity and transparency may be especially critical in a market-oriented environment where core public services, such as school management, are being outsourced and agreements around contracts become the locus of decision making. When transparency is low, civic capacity is diminished because the public lacks adequate information about why key decisions are made, the effectiveness of various contractual agreements, and even a public setting in which to interact with the district. In this context, the public is not able to serve its critical role of providing checks and balances in the system (Minow 2003).

Second, as Jeffrey Henig and Clarence Stone (2007) observe, “If it is to be effective in problem solving, civic capacity needs a broad base, and for urban education that means wide engagement of the less advantaged” (p. 130). Our study points out the ways in which a market orientation

complicated the task of building these inclusive coalitions and, in the process, served to reinforce existing power hierarchies.

The adoption of market rhetoric and practice in Philadelphia thus channeled parent and public interaction with the district into consumer, contractor, or audience roles – making *collective action* and, particularly, the authentic involvement of low-income constituencies more challenging. Of course, school districts are not solely responsible for building civic capacity. It is a civic and community process. However, to be a good partner in creating civic capacity, the district must be open with data and in its decision making and must be willing to interact with groups in a collaborative and public manner – groups with powerful allies *and* those that represent low-income and minority communities.



In places where civic capacity exists, public, collective negotiations determine policies and practices that are in the interests of the broader public good. Market-oriented reforms can create environments that are inhospitable to civic capacity. We have documented the individualistic orientation of market reforms, in contrast to the conception of education as a community enterprise necessary for civic capacity. Further, by favoring elites and muting criticism, market reforms can create an imbalance in the voices represented among those that help set the education agenda.

As Philadelphia and the nation move forward with the next round of education reform, the ways in which market-oriented reforms are shaping public participation – and the consequences for building civic capacity – should be front and center. Without some disruption of the patterns we saw in Philadelphia, and without greater clarity about the role citizens should have in educational decision making, equitable and sustainable reform efforts could well remain elusive goals.

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Multiethnic Moments: A Further Look

Rodney E. Hero and Mara S. Sidney

An examination of the attitudes of Latinos in the current “performance regime” finds little evidence of support for substantial change in education.

Our book *Multiethnic Moments: The Politics of Urban Education Reform* (Clarke, Hero, Sidney, Fraga & Erlichson 2006) examined dimensions of civic capacity and their implications for urban education reform, with specific reference to four cities – Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Boston – and focused on the period of the early into the late 1990s. We began with the puzzle that significant reform efforts seemed to be accompanied by persistent discontent and low outcomes for students of color, particularly Latino students, who made up a substantial portion of the student body in three of the four cities.

We argued that a fuller understanding of the issues required an analytic framework that directly examined three core dimensions of politics: the configurations of *interests*, *ideas*, and *institutions*. We concluded that for significant change to occur, transformations in *all three* dimensions would be needed. Specifically, substantial changes would be needed in:

- *interests*: minority groups’ resources, cohesion, articulation, and coalition formation;
- *ideas*: the creation of new policy images, problem definitions, and policy solutions responsive to

multiethnic concerns but also resonating with broad values and wider audiences;

- *institutions*: the creation of institutional arrangements that consolidate and reinforce these interests and ideas.

Has this occurred? In this article, we consider changes in education policy and politics since our study ended. We suggest that a new reform paradigm has emerged, characterized by emphases on performance, proficiency, and punishment. We set out our framework and summarize earlier findings, then analyze the current moment and consider the implications for Latino students and families, the largest (now-not-so-)new constituency in many, if not most, U.S. cities.

Briefly Looking Back

Multiethnic political divisions, especially regarding education, were central features for a growing number of cities in the 1990s. This multiethnic condition was often analyzed through the White/Black paradigm of the previous era. That paradigm is hardly irrelevant even now; it does not, however, adequately

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consider the importance of “new” and rapidly growing minority groups and the resulting uncertainties about problem definitions and policy solutions. In important respects, the politics of education during this era appeared most influenced by groups seeking goals that were not necessarily hostile to minority groups, but that did not directly address minority groups’ central concerns.

Hence, our analysis suggested, we might think of this orientation as a form of “interest group conservatism” – that is, group competition seems to create outcomes that are particularly problematic for emerging minority groups. At the same time, we noted that minority intergroup relations, while often competitive or conflictual, are not only or always so. They are at times cooperative, and there are other possible patterns such as making small, “independent” gains here and there on one’s own. Further thinking of the

1990s era – in itself, but also compared with previous eras – we suggested that the ideas, interests, and institutions could be thought of in ways summarized in Figure 1.

During the time of our study, what we termed a *new educational populism* seemed predominant. There appeared to be a renewed emphasis on “responsible” government, somewhat differently defined by broad notions of accountability. It was more “outcome” or “bottom line” oriented and less structurally or procedurally oriented than it had been in the reform era; proponents argued that its favored solutions were equally beneficial to all individuals and groups of students. Standards, school accountability committees, and the like are examples. Advocacy of mechanisms to “deregulate” or partly “degovernmentalize” certain aspects of public education (as with charter schools and voucher systems), or to allow for new mechanisms to distribute education resources (such as site-based management), were evident.

There was also evidence of notions of “community” (e.g., citizen/parental involvement through site-based management) and of “competition” (through market-like mechanisms), two prominent ideas in American political thought. With both approaches, there is reliance on ostensibly non-coercive approaches. Not only did these seem more consistent with certain strands of American ideals, they also advantaged the reform and contemporary models in contrast to the post-reform reliance on (coercive) court orders. The orientation differed from post-reform regimes in that it “disaggregated” policies from government responsibility to a series of individual, market-like choices. In this fashion, policy questions were thought, and claimed by proponents, to

A major impact of federal and state actions was to open the way for new players in school politics; namely, nonprofits and private-sector groups. In general they tended not to be closely associated with the concerns of minority groups.

	Reform	Post-reform	New Educational Populism
INTEREST			
Social Cleavages	White vs. White ethnic	White vs. Black	Multiethnic and class
Politics of...	Good government	Interest-group liberalism	Interest-group conservatism
Group relations	Constrain or deny group consciousness	Recognition of historical group relations	Inattentive
Expression of voice	Implicit	Explicit	Through individual choice
IDEAS			
Substantive goal	Responsible government	Responsive government	Accountable government
Procedural goal	Administrative efficiency	Procedural efficiency	Market efficiency
Policy orientation	Effective distribution; consensus is structurally induced	Redistributive; social regulation; challenge or addition to consensus	New distributive; deregulation; structural creation of choice
Social order	Community	Command	Community and competition
Notion of public	Assumed	Collection of groups	Aggregation of individuals
INSTITUTIONS			
Reform approach	Institutional design	Addition or modification of existing programs and practices	Circumvent existing programs through market mechanisms
Administrative orientation	Strong superintendent	Representative bureaucracy	Extra-bureaucratic
School board election	At-large	District	Mixed
Administrative specialization	By function	By clientele	In response to choice
School/city relations	Separation	Non-issue	Informal links and partnerships

Figure 1: Reform eras and education policy regimes

be depoliticized because the allegedly “invisible hand” of the market is/was not viewed as “political.”

Federal court desegregation orders and their specific provisions were central to shaping education politics in multiethnic settings. Similarly, state governments became more involved in the 1970s around school finance questions and in the 1990s with legislative and initiative activities affecting charter schools, school finance, and so on. Yet, these federal and state activities did little to change the formal structures

of urban school governance. Indeed, in some ways a major impact of federal and state actions was to open the way for new players in school politics; namely, nonprofits and private-sector groups. The ultimate impact of these groups is still not entirely clear, but in general they tended not to be closely associated with the concerns of minority groups.

The new populist orientations of the nineties, like reform regimes, also stressed efficiency, but defined primarily in *market*, not administrative or bureaucratic, terms on the assumption that market mechanisms assure leaner, more cost-effective practices. Frustrated with

the bureaucratic and centralized procedures integral to the reform era goals, this orientation stressed such extra-bureaucratic, institutional mechanisms as charter schools, vouchers, and a form of decentralization, through site-based management. Quality, effectiveness, professionalization, etc., were to be achieved from “the outside in” as much as or more than from “the inside out.” To a considerable degree, the goals echoed the “good government” sentiments of an earlier era, but new methods to achieve the goals were suggested.

The institutional landscape of the post-reform and subsequent policy periods differed in the roles played by



some actors. The role of the federal government, especially through court decisions beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), was a prelude to the broader civil rights movement that was at the center of the post-reform era. As a result, the 1990s policies to increase choice through market institutions might allow for a “new separatism,” or even a “new segregationism,” partly because of the distributional consequences embedded in these new reforms. And recent evidence suggests there has been considerable school resegregation, on poverty as well racial dimensions (Orfield & Lee 2005).

Analytic Framework: Ideas, Institutions, Interests, and a New “Performance” Regime

We view the current era (from at least 2002 to the present) of education reform and politics as a performance-oriented regime. Students and school officials are required to perform certain tasks, centered on the administration of standardized tests; the specific application of performance emphasizes “proficiency” as a goal. The regime is “public” in that districts and states publicize the test scores and are held accountable for them. At the same time, it is “particularized” (some would say “stigmatizing”) in that test results are published and examined according to group status – race/ethnicity, poverty, disability, English language ability. Finally, this regime emphasizes punishment as an engine of change; that is, to the extent certain performance or proficiency goals are not met (over specified periods of time), sanctions or punishments may ensue.

Overall, major developments in public policy during this era, and since our study ended, include the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Supreme Court decision striking down voluntary integration plans, the small schools movement, and the proliferation of mayoral control of school districts. We focus below on NCLB, which we view as the dominating feature of the new paradigm for education reform.

Figure 2 broadly summarizes how we might think about post-2000 developments in terms of our analytical framework.

	Current Era
INTEREST	
Social Cleavages	At-risk groups; racial minorities
Politics of...	Bureaucratic/outcomes-based policy
Group relations	Racial groups explicitly recognized in legislation; implications for their intergroup relations not entirely clear; likely to vary across places
Expression of voice	Through potential use of choice mechanisms and other ways
IDEAS	
Substantive goal	Proficiency
Procedural goal	Assessment, monitoring, sanctions, competition, limited targeted support
Social order	Command, competition
INSTITUTIONS	
Reform approach	Testing, reconstitution, supplemental services, choice, privatization
Administrative orientation	Top-down federal-state-district interaction; bureaucratic
School board election	Continued/same as previous methods
Administrative specialization	Compliance/testing Bureaucracies elevated
School/city relations	Not central to NCLB Mayoral control

Figure 2: Current era: the performance paradigm

Ideas

The *ideas dimension* of our framework brings attention to a paradigm’s dominant policy goals and orientation, understanding of social order, and notions of the public. NCLB embodies the dominant ideas of the current paradigm. Its overall orientation is one of achieving student proficiency by holding schools accountable for student performance through monitoring and cascading sanctions. There is a shift in emphasis from universal access (e.g., desegregating schools) (Casserly 2007) or inputs (e.g., equalizing resources) to tracking particular outcomes (Henig

2007). The language of adequacy and proficiency dominates the implementation process, with a focus on a “floor,” or a basic standard (e.g., every child can read at grade level), rather than a striving for excellence. This is part of what we see as a narrow vision of what constitutes education.

Educators and researchers have traced the shifts in classroom time spent on various subjects since NCLB. They find that less time is now devoted to non-tested subjects (Chapman 2007; Jennings & Rentner 2006; Pederson 2007) and that the content of the curriculum also shifts toward the types of material that can be covered in multiple-choice tests.

The assumption is that school officials will behave in desired ways to avoid punishment. Imposition of competition is one of the sanctions – schools failing to make adequate yearly progress in their students’ performance on tests must allow parents to select alternative schools for their children. Here the assumption is that schools will improve when directly competing against other schools for students. Finally, some limited and targeted support is available to “failing” schools and their students, suggesting a belief that additional knowledge, technical help, and the like will bring about better outcomes (although this comes in the form of Title I and other preexisting grants for the most part, rather than new sources of funds).

Institutions

The *institutional dimension* of our framework brings attention to a paradigm’s tools of reform, orientation to administration, and governance features. The NCLB paradigm is administratively organized in a top-down, hierarchical manner by which the federal government interacts with state (and by exten-

sion local) governments by imposing mandates. State and local bureaucracies are charged, for the most part, with implementing these mandates and reporting on their activity. Departments and officials charged with testing and federal compliance assume increased importance and responsibility. This paradigm also involves the executive branch of the federal government rather than the courts, the prominent actor in the post-reform era.

NCLB does not produce a particular arrangement of relations between schools and city governments but does affect these relations. The supplemental services provision and the choice provision do open the door to the involvement of the private sector. The relations between school districts and their constituents also come to center on the annual test results and report cards. When schools are labeled by NCLB as failing, parents express concern. Thus, relations between schools and parents come to involve much explanation of these scores.

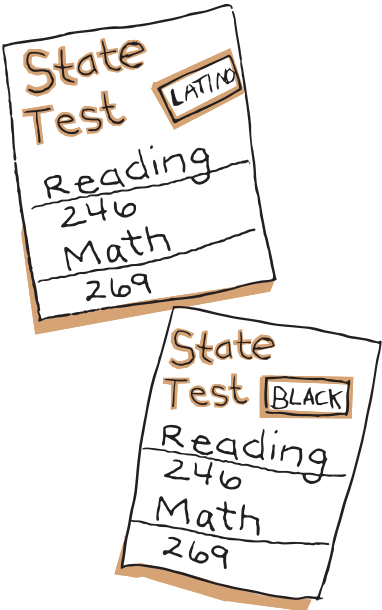
NCLB has its greatest impact on schools defined in social class terms because the schools to which sanctions can be most directly applied are defined, essentially, by income. Racial minorities are also a relevant social group because the legislation requires the collection of data on racial group outcomes.

To some extent this spills over into concern about a city as a whole, possibly increasing or decreasing anxiety among families with choices about local schools. NCLB in practice seems to have heightened this anxiety rather than dampened it, as educators and state and local officials complain about the categorization criteria used to mark a school as “failing.”

Interests

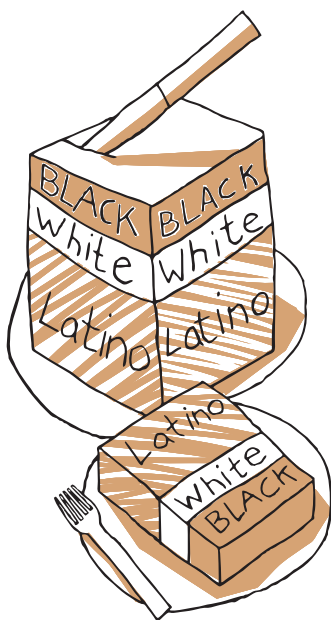
The *interests dimension* of our analysis brings attention to minority groups’ resources, cohesion, articulation, and coalition formation. The social cleavage(s) most directly affected by NCLB are economic class and racial in nature; that is, NCLB has its greatest impact on schools defined in social class terms because the schools to which sanctions can be most directly applied are defined, essentially, by income. Racial minorities are also a relevant social group because the legislation requires the collection of data on racial group outcomes.

The legislation does not, however, necessarily confront the possible, even likely, intersection of class and race inequality and may thus not fully acknowledge or compensate for lack of group resources. On the other hand, because racial groups’ outcomes are explicitly part of the evaluation process, this would seem to provide the minority groups some standing or leverage on what policies or reforms they might wish to emphasize. But their effectiveness in doing so would require group



consensus or cohesion, as well as a related ability to articulate preferences clearly and strongly.

At the same time, the implications of NCLB for intergroup relations and possible coalitions are not entirely clear. It would not be difficult to imagine divergence in the policy preferences between (and even within) groups, because the particular factors associated with less-than-desired levels of proficiency or achievement vary across group. Variations in intergroup relations are likely to differ across school districts based on the racial/ethnic composition of the schools as well as previous relations between the major groups. To some extent, however, it appears the “expression of voice” may mostly or even primarily occur in more particu-



Though Latinos (in the mass public) are keenly concerned about education, their “interests” are such that they are likely to have only modest impacts on public policy.

larized ways in that several potential mechanisms to induce improvement are market- or choice-based – that is, more individualized.

Latinos’ Attitudes about Education: NCLB and Other Issues

What are Latinos’ views of contemporary education? We turned to national surveys of Latinos, particularly the Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation’s *National Survey of Latinos: Education* (2004) and more recent data from the 2006 Latino National Survey (LNS), which covers a more limited set of questions. (For more regarding the LNS, see Fraga et al. 2006 and Martinez-Ebers 2007.)

Aggregate public opinion patterns almost certainly vary across the country, yet the “big picture” they present seems to generally underscore that though Latinos (in the mass public) are keenly concerned about education, their “interests” are such that they are likely to have only modest impacts on public policy. More so than other groups, Latinos list education as a high priority; at the same time, Latinos express higher degrees of satisfaction with education outcomes than do other groups, and they also feel schools are reasonably open, accessible, and accommodating to parents who wish to be involved. (This varies considerably by whether survey respondents are foreign- versus native-born, with greater dissatisfaction evident among the latter.) In general, this evidence might suggest “responsiveness” to Latinos. Yet Latinos express concerns or reservations about several issues.

Assessments by Latinos of why Latino students have difficulty in school vary considerably, with “internal”/parental factors being identified as

significant (e.g., parents neglect to push kids to work hard; weaker English language skills); but the schools, teachers, and external factors are also seen as part of the problem (schools are often too quick to label Latino kids as having behavior or learning problems; White teachers do not know how to deal with Latino kids because they come from different cultures; racial stereotypes). How, how much, and how directly recent policy developments address these, or improve upon methods to deal with such concerns, is not obvious.

Notably, Latinos' attitudes as expressed in surveys seem consistent with and ostensibly supportive of policies that are part of NCLB. At the same time, the level of understanding of those policies seems very limited. Latinos are not unique in this regard; however, the disconcerting evidence on Latino educational achievement and outcomes seems to make the lack of understanding more problematic from the standpoint of this group's interests. Likewise, that Latinos appear to know rather little about such programs as vouchers and charter schools, which can potentially play a role in the NCLB implementation process, implies that available (market-related) reform mechanisms may not be very useful if and as Latinos seek ways to change and improve education.

Finally, it is notable that there is a divide among Latinos concerning racial integration. While there is a split among the general Latino population on this issue, Latino advocacy organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF 2008) and scholarly analysts (e.g., Orfield &

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Lee 2005) have argued strongly about the negative effects of segregation on education outcomes and have asserted the desirability of integration.

In short, there appears to be little to modest evidence suggestive of (increased) cohesion among Latinos in their views of education issues, if various survey data are an indication. It would also seem difficult to articulate – much less advance – firm and clear policy preferences under these circumstances. Whether NCLB's requirement of data on racial group outcomes will facilitate or hinder "coalition formation" is not immediately apparent; one can imagine either or even both scenarios within and across locales.

Prospects for Change

The most recent era, one we characterized as a "performance" regime, adds another layer to the evolution of American educational politics. This performance regime arguably recognizes the multiethnic nature of contemporary society, as is indicated by the requirements of NCLB that school report cards provide data on racial/ethnic and other groups. Also, the rhetoric of NCLB, particularly its criticism that past

The current and immediate future is likely to look rather like the recent past, the policy/regime changes notwithstanding. It does not appear that the idea/interest/institutions configurations have changed in a way that the education position of minorities has been altered appreciably.

practices had exhibited a “soft bigotry of low expectations,” is likewise notable in its acknowledgement of racial/ethnic dimensions of public policy. On the other hand, some would question whether the policy prescriptions are such that they will adequately address racial/ethnic and/or economic inequality – though, again, that is not the policy’s only or central thrust. In other words, will the present era continue the history we documented of education reform that does not match Latinos’ educational needs and problems?

Some critics have noted, for example, the long history of cultural/racial bias in standardized testing and expressed concern that high-stakes testing will be damaging to Latino students’ self-esteem, engagement with school, and educational outcomes (Altshuler & Schmautz 2006; Smyth 2008). Also, as the stakes of tests rise, high-resource schools seek out supplemental materials and professional expertise, whereas low-resource schools, which Latinos are more likely

to attend, are not able to do so (Smyth 2008). Thus, there is the possibility that the current regime may actually undermine academic achievement and educational equity. It is ironic that given the Bush administration’s emphasis on scientifically proven methods of instruction as a criterion for educational grant making, the administration nonetheless ignored the longstanding evidence that standardized tests are flawed and incomplete measures of academic ability for children of color.

NCLB also presents challenges for school districts with high levels of English language learners. Such districts are less likely to demonstrate adequate yearly progress, thus are more subject to the punitive dimensions of the law (Smyth 2008). Also, NCLB mandates a three-year limit on bilingual instruction, narrowing the flexibility of districts to tailor programs to the needs of individual students, continuing a policy trajectory of “ending, not mending” such programs and, in the view of many critics, advancing a misunderstanding of both the strengths and the weaknesses of bilingual programs (Krashen 2001). In general, the performance regime’s focus on outcomes rather than inputs means it does not address the resource disparities across school districts that disadvantage many Latino students.

We have discussed recent policy developments in light of their implications for minority groups in American society, especially Latinos. Our consideration, through the lens of ideas, interests, and institutions, suggests the current and immediate future is likely to look rather like the recent past, the policy/regime changes notwithstanding. In

sum, it does not appear that, at least in the short term, the idea/interest/institutions configurations have changed in a way that the education position of minorities has been altered appreciably.

Rapid change in such a complicated issue as education is unlikely in the notoriously “incremental” American political system, in any case. The performance regime’s rhetoric resonates in some ways with the concerns of multiethnic constituencies in its call for universal achievement and for narrowing gaps. But coupled with narrow definitions of education and relatively moderate aspirations toward “proficiency,” the regime’s ideas seem only thinly to respond to Latinos’ needs and concerns. Its institutional arrangements only further entrench the mismatch by directing attention and activity toward compliance and standardization. In terms of interests, the continuing resource, articulation, and coalitional situation of Latinos does not at present seem to be likely to position this group to bring about major education policy change.

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City Schools and Civic Capacity: Another Look at Pittsburgh, Boston, and St. Louis

John Portz, Lana Stein, and
Sabina Deitrick

The variations in community involvement in Boston, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis have affected the course of education reforms in those cities.

Urban school systems face immense resource and academic challenges. One prominent approach to analyzing these challenges is the concept of “civic capacity.” As Clarence Stone (1998) writes, civic capacity “refers to the mobilization of varied stakeholders in support of a communitywide cause” (p. 15). It calls for participation and involvement of key civic players, as well as a common understanding or agreement that a particular issue is, indeed, a community problem.

Building civic capacity to improve urban education is a formidable challenge. Stakeholders from both inside and outside the school system are needed. Paul Hill and colleagues (1989) refer to a “double helix of educational reform” in which an “outer strand” of business groups, foundations, nonprofits, and elected officials is joined by an “inner strand” of administrators, teachers, and parents (p. 11).

Analyzing civic capacity became the focus of an eleven-city study in the 1990s led by Clarence Stone, Jeff Henig, and Bryan Jones. One product of that study was a book titled *City*

Schools and City Politics: Institutions and Leadership in Pittsburgh, Boston, and St. Louis (Portz, Stein & Jones 1999). Looking over the previous decade, from the late 1980s to 1997, the book explored how each city developed – or failed to develop – civic support for public education.

Pittsburgh showed the greatest promise in terms of developing and activating civic capacity and Boston ranked as the second most successful of the three cities, while St. Louis offered the weakest case for the development of civic capacity for school reform. Where do these school systems stand today in their development of civic capacity for public education?

Three School Districts

The school systems in Boston, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis have some important similarities. As noted in Figure 1, in all three school systems, two-thirds or more of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In addition, students of color constitute a majority in all three districts. Importantly, all three districts have experienced a decline in student enrollments in recent years.

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	Boston 2007–2008	Pittsburgh 2007–2008	St. Louis 2005–2006
City population	590,760*	312,820*	347,180
Number of students	56,190	29,350	39,550
Number of schools	144	65	93
Percent free and reduced-price lunch	71%	66%	82%
Percent special education	20%	20%	16%
Percent English language learners	18%	1%	N/A
Percent Asian	9%	7%	2%
Percent African American	41%	57%	82%
Percent Hispanic	35%	1%	2%
Percent White	14%	36%	14%

Figure 1. School district profiles

*2006 data

Boston Public Schools

In 1997, Boston was fortunate to have a strong alignment of key actors and institutions in support of public education. City Hall, the school department, the school committee (school board), and the business community were generally on the same page in supporting school reform.

There were several key elements in this support structure. Perhaps most important, since 1992 the mayor of the city had authority to appoint the seven-member school committee. This arrangement replaced a thirteen-member elected committee that had become factionalized and in frequent battle with the mayor, particularly over the budget.

The business community also was strongly supportive of the schools. It developed strong institutional connections with the school department through several venues, particularly the Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE).

BPE became a partner with the school system in designing and implementing school reform. The school department itself also became a stronger institution as Superintendent Thomas Payzant, hired in 1995, reorganized the system and championed a five-year plan, called Focus on Children, for achieving academic improvement.

Between 1997 and 2007, this constellation of actors and institutions – the civic capacity of the city – remained relatively intact. Perhaps most striking is the continuity in leadership. Mayor Thomas Menino continues to serve as mayor after successful re-elections in 1997, 2001, and 2005. Superintendent Payzant guided the school district until July 1, 2006, an eleven-year tenure. Beyond those two key players, continuity also was evident on the school

This alignment of leaders in Boston is quite unusual in an urban school system. Such continuity played an important role in fostering communication and cooperation around school improvement.

committee and in the teachers union. Elizabeth Reilinger served as chair of the committee from 1999 through 2008 and, on the labor side, Edward Doherty served as president of the Boston Teachers Union for twenty years, retiring in 2003. His replacement, Richard Stutman, was a long-time teacher in the school system and continues to serve as president today.

This alignment of leaders is quite unusual in an urban school system. Such continuity played an important role in fostering communication and cooperation around school improvement. To be certain, tensions sometimes developed, but familiarity among these key leaders played a major role in sustaining broad support for the school system.

Of particular interest is the ongoing support for public education by Mayor Menino. Critics of mayoral control as a reform strategy often raise the concern of undue politicization of the school system by a mayor or, alternatively, neglect by a mayor whose attention turns to other pressing urban challenges. Mayor Menino's interest

in school reform, however, remained steady. Many state-of-the-city addresses by the mayor highlighted education reform initiatives. On the budget side, the mayor provided consistent support for the schools, although in economic downturns the schools faced budget cuts like other city departments. From Menino's perspective, a failing school system would undermine his efforts to make Boston a world-class city.

The business, higher-education, and foundation communities continued their support for public education. BPE became heavily involved in a number of reform strategies, including whole-school improvement, teacher coaching, and small learning communities at the district high schools. With over twenty-five staff, BPE operated in partnership with the school district on a number of initiatives. To support these and other activities, it played a key role in raising more than \$65 million between 1995 and 2004 for the schools.

Community organizations also have played a role in Boston. In 1995, for example, a group of school reform advocates and community groups created an organization called Critical Friends of the Boston Public Schools. Payzant's incremental approach to reform was seen by this group as too slow to address the deep-seated problems that faced the schools (Critical Friends of BPS 1997). For the next five years, this group provided an outside critique of school reform. As another example, in 1999 the Boston Parent Organizing Network (BPON) was founded by individuals and neighborhood organizations seeking to build

parent leadership and involvement in the schools. BPON provided another venue to hold the school system accountable.

More recently, at the end of Payzant’s tenure, some individuals and community organizations joined forces to produce an assessment of the previous decade. Titled *Transforming the Boston Public Schools: A Roadmap for the New Superintendent*, this report recognized some accomplishments in the school system but concluded that the system “urgently needed transformative change” if all students were to succeed (Citizen Commission 2006). These community-based efforts are important in the overall development of civic capacity, but they are sometimes overshadowed by the mayor and other institutional actors.

The last ten years brought important successes, and challenges, to the Boston Public Schools (see Reville 2007). The school department sustained a sharp focus on teaching and learning, and overall test scores rose during this period. Students still score below statewide and national averages, but they fare reasonably well in comparison to other cities (U.S. Department of Education 2007a, 2007b).

The key players in this governance system have received national recognition. Mayor Menino is identified among urban mayors as a leader in building and sustaining political support for public education. Superintendent Payzant received numerous recognitions, including the 2004 Richard B. Green Award in Urban Excellence from the Council of the Great City Schools. The Green Award for urban school leadership was also given to school committee chairwoman Elizabeth Reiling in 2007. In 2004, the Boston School Committee received the first Award for Urban School



Board Excellence from the National School Boards Association/Council of Urban Boards of Education. And finally, in 2006, the Boston Public Schools won the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education.

Although these are important accomplishments, significant challenges remain. The constellation of leaders has changed, which will require some adjustments. After a year with an interim superintendent, Boston Public Schools hired Carol Johnson in the summer of 2007 as its new superintendent. She is now establishing her own mark on the system, although her task has been significantly complicated by an economic recession that will result in budget cuts and staff layoffs.

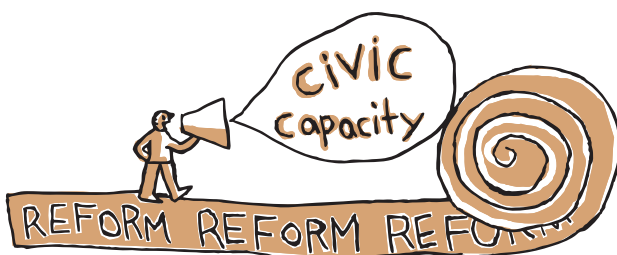
On the academic side, despite progress on test scores, almost half of grade ten students do not meet the proficiency level on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests established by the state for math and English language arts. The racial achievement gap also is a major concern, as is a high dropout rate at the district high schools.

The challenges are significant, but Boston still has a strong civic base in support of education. The mayor remains on center stage and continues to support the schools. The new superintendent has proposed new reform strategies and a reorganization of the school department as she charts the next stage in school reform. Whether this will take Boston to the next level in student achievement remains to be seen, but the civic capacity of the city in support of public education remains strong.

Pittsburgh Public Schools

In 1997, the Pittsburgh Public Schools system was struggling, although it could look to a positive and successful past. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, Pittsburgh demonstrated strong civic support for public education. Richard Wallace served as superintendent for most of this period. He built a strong relationship with the business community, through the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, and with the University of Pittsburgh, which provided extensive support for the school system.

This civic support structure, however, turned out to be a “fragile balance” that soon faded (Portz, Stein & Jones 1999, p. 56). Within the school district, leadership turnover became a problem. Between 1992 and 1999, there were three superintendents with relatively short tenures and limited success in moving the district forward. A smaller school population prompted calls for school closures, and the continuing decline in the regional economy prompted local business leaders to focus more on economic development than the schools. By 1997, Pittsburgh had clearly lost its luster as a city with strong civic support for public education.



The next decade, 1997–2007, would follow two trends: a continuing decline in civic support for education in the earlier part of this period, followed by a significant revival. The decline that began in the mid-1990s continued as conflict over school attendance patterns and proposed school closures carried racial and economic overtones and divided the community and the board. At the same time, frustration over stagnant test scores, particularly in reading, mounted. The civic partnership and institutions that had supported the school system were waning. Key actors who had previously joined forces around school improvement diverged as these broader interests became more prominent.

The tenure of Superintendent John Thompson, from 2000 to 2004, captured this downward spiral. His appointment was controversial. Five board members approved his hiring, while the remaining four members abstained (Thomas 2001). In Thompson's first year, he proposed closing eighteen schools and raising taxes. This restructuring pitted groups along lines of race and class. The school board did not approve all the school closures and a subsequent school board race reversed Thompson's slim majority.

The board and superintendent became polarized. Efforts to bridge differences were unsuccessful. Three local foundations concluded that a "crisis was looming" in the schools and announced publicly that they would pull \$3.5 million from the district, effective immediately. The foundations delivered the blow at a press confer-

ence, scolding the district for "bickering, distrust and chaotic decision-making" (CNN.com 2002).

The school system was at a crossroads. Civic support for public education was at an all-time low, but foundations and other community actors did not abandon the schools. In searching for alternatives to turn the system around, Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy established the Mayor's Commission on Public Education. The commission's report, *Keeping the Promise: The Case for*

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Reform in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, identified a number of recommendations, including mayoral control of the system. The report concluded that "the current governance structure of the Pittsburgh Board of Education has contributed to a crisis in leadership" (Mayor's Commission 2003, p. 22). Although it captured initial attention, support for mayoral control faded as the city itself came close to financial bankruptcy.

There was more agreement, however, on the creation of a new institution to connect the community to the schools. Called A+ Schools, this

nonprofit organization was supported by the foundations and charged with improving the schools through community engagement and dialogue. A+ Schools mobilizes residents and professionals to improve the operations and quality of Pittsburgh Public Schools. For example, it releases annual progress reports on student achievement, by individual school. Through its Board Watch program, it brings together forty volunteers to evaluate the school board.

A+ Schools plays an important role in connecting individuals and organizations interested in the Pittsburgh schools, and it also provides grassroots support for community and neighborhood involvement in the school system. Its most recent strategic plan focuses on good governance, excellent teaching, and family and community empowerment. This organization provided an important venue to help focus the civic capacity of the city.

By 2007, following over a decade of turnover and turmoil, the Pittsburgh school district was in a more stable position and poised for progress. The district's financial position was considerably improved and civic actors were renewing their support for the schools.

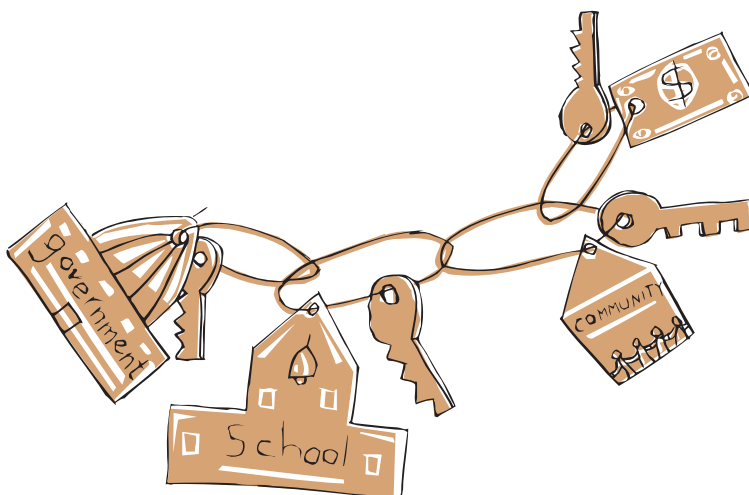
The selection of Mark Roosevelt in 2005 as the district's new superintendent brought positive, albeit difficult, change to the district. Roosevelt, a former Massachusetts state legislator and a non-traditional candidate, moved to deal with the district's most pressing problems – its looming fiscal deficit and continuing low student achievement. Less than a year into his tenure, Roosevelt produced a four-year Excellence for All plan to increase student performance. He proposed a “right-sizing” rationalization plan for the district's schools, ultimately closing twenty-two – or one-quarter – of the district's schools in the next year. Unlike previous closure attempts, a majority of the board backed the superintendent.

The renewal of civic support for the schools is also captured by the development of Pittsburgh Promise, a fund to help graduates pay for post-high school education. In late 2007, the school district announced a \$10 million contribution from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center to guarantee funds for 2008 high school graduates.

By 2007, following over a decade of turnover and turmoil, the Pittsburgh school district was in a more stable position and poised for progress. The district's financial position was considerably improved and civic actors were renewing their support for the schools. To be certain, challenges remained. Student test scores showed a mixed picture, and a racial achievement gap persisted. Yet, the district and community appeared to be on a path of growing civic cooperation and support for the public schools.

St. Louis Public Schools

In 1997, the St. Louis Public Schools faced major challenges. Low academic achievement and racial divisions were prominent. Since 1982, the school



system had been covered by a voluntary desegregation agreement that was overseen by the federal district court. Under desegregation, there was extensive busing within the city and between city and suburban schools. Desegregation and busing created a furor in parts of the city and dominated the agenda for almost two decades.

In this environment, interests were focused more on individual concerns than the broader community. There was little evidence of civic capacity in support of student achievement in public education. The administration of the St. Louis schools, for example, was very in-bred and jealous of the prerogatives left to it, given the judicial oversight. The partnerships it formed with outside entities were of a very limited nature. That was also the way Civic Progress, an organization of the largest corporations located in St. Louis, preferred it. Civic Progress helped support

certain school board campaigns, and its members sometimes aided a particular school, but it eschewed broader assistance to the schools.

Among St. Louis elected officials as well, there was limited interest in the schools. About half the city's children attended parochial or private schools. Few, if any, of the White officials were products of the public schools, nor did they send their children there. St. Louis remained a fragmented machine-politics town. The prominent interest in the schools centered around patronage jobs. African American politicians allied with the black middle-class professionals employed by the public schools.

The decade that followed was one of missed opportunities resulting in a continuation of this city's very limited civic support for public education. An opening for change came with the desegregation settlement in 2002. This settlement altered the institutional nature of the St. Louis School Board. It reduced the board from twelve members to seven, and it stipulated that four seats would be up for election in April 2003.

Mayor Francis G. Slay brought together several community organizations and business elites to support a slate of four candidates, two African American and two White. Civic Progress was the principal bankroller of the slate, and the teachers union endorsed three of the four candidates. The reform slate coasted to victory. St. Louis appeared headed down a different path in which civic support for public education would find root.

However, it didn't last. With the departure of the superintendent, the new majority agreed that bureaucratic shortcomings of the system should be the top priority in the coming year. With this goal in mind, the board hired a management turnaround firm, Alvarez & Marcal, for \$5 million. Alvarez executive William Roberti, a non-educator who had resuscitated Brooks Brothers, became the acting superintendent and headed a team of about twenty-five consultants.



From the outset, it was a difficult move. There had been little consultation before hiring Alvarez & Marcal, and the cost of the turnaround team aroused ire. The teachers union, which had supported the reform slate, feared layoffs often associated with the hiring of turnaround firms. Adding to the concerns, school board members learned that the deficit was \$73 million, not the \$20 million they were led to anticipate.

News of the \$5 million turnaround team – plus a huge deficit that would necessitate layoffs – ended the reform bid by the newly constituted school board almost before it got started.irate crowds packed school board meetings. Many parent and community groups were very critical of the board's actions. To deal with the deficit, the board decided to close twelve schools, but the impact fell disproportionately on the city's predominantly Black north side, provoking further protest. Amidst this controversy, the board was unsuccessful in hiring a new superintendent, relying on two interim superintendents.

Finally, in March of 2005, the board selected Creg Williams, a protégé of Paul Vallas, to be superintendent. However, the majority who supported Williams soon found itself in the minority as reform opponents won in school board elections in 2005 and 2006. Within three months, the new board majority dismissed Williams as superintendent.

Tests scores and other measure of academic achievement continued to decline, and the school district faced ongoing fiscal problems. In early 2007, with the support of the mayor's office, the state department of education moved to take over the St. Louis school district. The governor, mayor, and presi-

While experiences in the three cities differed, the fundamental challenge in building or sustaining civic capacity is similar: to connect key stakeholders from inside and outside the school system around a common agenda of academic achievement.

dent of the city's board of aldermen each named one person to sit on the newly established school board.

By 2007, the St. Louis school system faced major challenges. Divisions in the district and community over public education were deeper than ever. For St. Louis, a reform strategy that relied so heavily upon the school board proved to be of limited duration. The outside strand of key actors who could build civic support was not sustained. The mayor's office now concentrates on recruiting sponsors of charter schools, and the business community has turned its attention elsewhere. Civic capacity evaporated and today the future looks no better than it did in 1997.

Conclusions

From 1997 to 2007, our three school districts demonstrated different patterns in building and sustaining civic capacity in support of public education. Boston experienced the most continuity and continues to rely upon a system in which the mayor plays a key role. Pittsburgh went through turbulent times and appears to be back on track with a superintendent supported by

the school board. St. Louis continues to struggle in a politically fractured system and is now under state control.

While experiences differed, the fundamental challenge in building or sustaining civic capacity is similar: to connect key stakeholders from inside and outside the school system around a common agenda of academic achievement. The successes – and failures – to achieve this task point to several lessons.

Reform Ideas and Context

Reform ideas, like mayoral control and charter schools, can help to rally stakeholders around a common agenda, but they also can become points of division and polarization within a community. Which effect they have – positive or negative – depends in large part on the context within a community.

Mayoral appointment of school board members is a good example. In Boston, this idea for school reform became a central element in that city's development of civic support for education. When adopted in 1992, it was

Civic capacity is critical for successful urban school districts, but it is an *enabling* factor rather than a *determinative* one. The alignment of community interests around a common vision of academic achievement, supported by cross-sector institutions, is critical.

generally supported and fit with the city's experience at that time. In Pittsburgh, however, this idea never took root, even though it was a prominent recommendation of the Mayor's Commission on Public Education. The city's own financial problems, among other concerns, made this proposal problematic from the beginning. Other cities that have entertained this strategy also have found that its success is highly dependent upon the local context.

Another example is the hiring of a non-traditional superintendent, which is a popular school reform idea in many cities. St. Louis followed this strategy when the school board hired Alvarez & Marcal in 2003; Pittsburgh followed suit in 2005 with the hiring of Mark Roosevelt. Roosevelt, whose tenure continues today, has been quite successful in bringing different parties together

in support of the Pittsburgh schools. The St. Louis experience, on the other hand, only contributed to the ongoing turmoil in that city. Again, context matters.

Institutions and Building Bridges

Institutions play a very important part in building and sustaining civic capacity. In particular, institutions that connect different civic sectors, like businesses with the schools, or communities and parents with the schools, play a critical role. Such institutions aggregate and focus resources while providing continuity. Institutions build bridges that allow school districts to maintain their focus in turbulent times.

In Boston, for example, BPE provides an important vehicle to connect business, university, and foundation support to the school system. In Pittsburgh, the recently formed A+ Schools organization offers the potential to build important connections between the community and the school district. In St. Louis, the failure of such an organization to develop contributes to that city's woes in trying to improve public education. Indeed, civic capacity is not static or fixed. It requires ongoing efforts to build and sustain key relationships that bring stakeholders together.

Is Civic Capacity Enough?

Civic capacity is central in supporting academic achievement in urban school districts, but is it sufficient? Will it lead to higher test scores and other measures of achievement? By itself, our short answer is "no." Civic capacity is critical for successful urban school districts, but it is an *enabling* factor rather than a *determinative* one. Civic capacity is a very powerful platform for school reform. The alignment of community interests around a common vision of

academic achievement, supported by cross-sector institutions, is critical.

Civic capacity is a first step that must be followed by successful implementation of critical reform strategies across an entire district of schools. This is a daunting task. The pieces needed to enhance student learning are many, including an appropriate curriculum, high-quality instruction, teacher professional development, and data-driven decision making. It is a major undertaking to bring all of this together in the complex organizational environment of a school district. Civic capacity – the alignment of actors and institutions in support of public education – provides a critical foundation for building and sustaining these reform efforts.

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Parent Power in New York City: The Coalition for Educational Justice

Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari and
Ocynthia Williams

A parent-led collaborative in New York City has succeeded in securing new support for low-performing middle schools.

The New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) is a coalition of community-based organizations and unions that aims to end inequities in New York City’s public schools. Led by parents, CEJ was formed in 2006 from three local collaboratives in the city. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform provides policy research and technical support for the collaboratives and the coalition.

Since its inception, CEJ has been successful in generating support for improvements in middle grades, science labs, and teacher quality in the city. Its most recent report, *Looming Crisis or Historic Opportunity? Meeting the Challenge of the Regents Graduation Standards*, called for major changes in high schools to ensure that all students are prepared to meet the new graduation standards.

Two parent leaders of CEJ, Ocynthia Williams and Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari, spoke with *Voices in Urban Education* Editor Robert Rothman about the collaboratives and the coalition.

Zakiyah Shaakir-Ansari and Ocynthia Williams are parent leaders in the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice.

How did you two get involved in the Coalition?

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: I’m one of the founding members of CC9, the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools. I was involved all those years working with CC9 before we decided to merge all the collaboratives in the city; one was BEC, the Brooklyn Education Collaborative, where Zakiyah is from. I wanted to be a part of making sure that we were able to expand citywide. So, as we formed CEJ, I wanted to be there at the beginning.

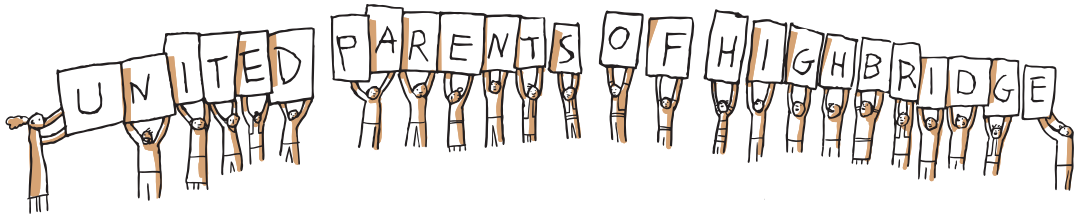
ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: I was part of the Brooklyn Education Collaborative. We were working on reforms in particular districts in Brooklyn, and we

realized that if we wanted to make real change – because it wasn’t just about Brooklyn, and it wasn’t just about the Bronx – if we wanted to bring equity and excellence throughout the school system in New York City, that we had to come together. That’s what we did. Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx got together to try to make real change, which we’ve done.

Getting Started in Local Collaboratives

How did you get involved in your local collaboratives in the first place? What led you to become part of the collaborative?

ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: Like most parents, I was involved in my children’s schools – PTA officer in the school,



school leadership team member, just volunteering time. And then branching out – I was part of the [United Federation of Teachers] parent outreach; in each borough, the UFT has a parent liaison, and I was part of that. We started to have conversations around schools, and then the Community Involvement Program, at that time at New York University,¹ was creating collaboratives, and CC9 had already been in place by the time I got started. We started having conversations about how do we do this, what was happening in the Bronx and Brooklyn. We started having meetings, and BEC was created, and that led to CEJ.

So I started as grassroots as you can get: being involved in schools and PTAs, and then realizing once you start getting involved that everything is not equal. In the system there are a lot of children that may not have as much as your child does because you are an advocate. How do we ensure that that does not happen, that all children have the best education possible?

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: I became involved through my local organization, which is Highbridge Community Life Center. Highbridge was working on a project to develop leaders in the community, to have a leadership group

to oversee the project they were working on. The leadership group had to develop a vision for how they saw the community. One of the things we realized very soon after taking part in that initiative, in order for the community to improve, the schools had to improve. So we created a subcommittee of the leadership group and named it United Parents of Highbridge.

I happened to be a member of that group, too. We started looking into what needed to be improved in the schools. We started with little stuff, like just getting a crossing guard in front of the schools, which seemed like it was little but it was major for our kids. So that was my involvement with Highbridge.

Like Zakiyah, I also was part of the New York City public school system by being a parent association president for three years at my kids' school, as well as president's council treasurer at the district level. And I realized that being involved with the PA is one thing; it was great to have that parental involvement. But I didn't really get a good sense of what was going on in the schools until I started being a part of the Highbridge group and realized there was so much that needed to be happening in the schools. That has kept me involved, coming up with ways of improving what was happening in the system.

¹ In 2006, the Community Involvement Program merged with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Moving to Citywide Issues

Now that you've created this citywide organization, what issues have you focused on?

ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: When we started off as a citywide collaborative, we made a conscious decision to work on middle school. BEC started working on science in Brooklyn, and we grew that into a citywide initiative, where now, by 2010, the Board of Education has committed to make sure that all middle schools have science labs, which is a big issue. It was a big problem in New York City: many schools with middle grades didn't have science labs, yet there was an eighth-grade component on the science test that involved labs.

That was a big one. That was \$444 million put toward ensuring that all schools with middle grades had science labs.

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: We felt that those were the grades that the school system and everybody else just forgot about. The Department of Education had put so much money into elemen-

tary school and into developing their famous high school [reform], making high schools smaller, and not really paying attention to the transition that children make from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school, and how they were suffering there. Going through puberty and their hormones out of control, and transitioning from being a young child to being an adult, but not there yet, they suffered the most and had the most issues, as far as trying to adjust to middle school.

Not just socially, but with academics as well. In middle school you had teachers who were less trained in the subjects they teach – they just threw any teacher in a class – and they suffered terribly. So we wanted to address the issues that were facing middle school and felt that this would help prepare young people to transition into high school and have them better prepared to graduate high school in four years with a Regents diploma and be prepared for college and the world of work. We felt that that is where kids suffered the most and needed the most attention.

So we rallied around middle schools and brought that to the attention of the Department of Education and anyone else who would listen. And it seemed to work. We were able to secure a Middle School Success Initiative in the Department of Education, and they put \$30 million behind a comprehensive reform for low-performing middle schools in New York City.

How were you able to accomplish that? What exactly did you do to bring the issue to the attention of officials?

ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: In 2007, we came out with our first report, which was CEJ's breakout (NYCCEJ 2007). We did it on the steps of Stuyvesant High School, because that

We wanted to address the issues that were facing middle school and felt that this would help prepare young people to transition into high school. That is where kids suffered the most and needed the most attention.

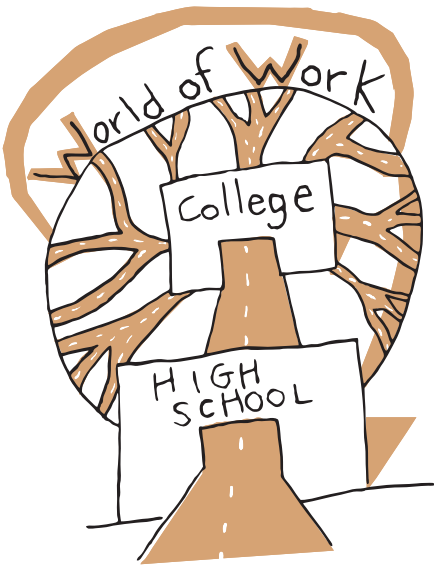
was one of the highest-performing, if not *the* highest-performing, high school in New York City. And we said, why can't all kids go there? That was what we were trying to represent.

We had a huge press conference with parents and youth, we had a ton of press out there. It was a great first step. We called for Chancellor [Joel] Klein to meet with us to discuss how we're going to make change.

There was almost a perfect storm as CEJ started, because the test scores for middle schools had come out either that day or the day before, and they showed just what we were saying: that for some reason our children are getting through elementary school and they're at higher levels – we know that there can be improvement, but they're much higher – and then by the time they get to middle school, it's a downward staircase. And for the last two or three years, it's been constant. The same type of dynamic has been happening.

We called for a middle school task force. We met with the Speaker of the City Council, and she was on line with that, because that was something she wanted to address. They created the task force, and myself and another parent from CEJ, Carol Boyd, sat on the task force.

In the process, we at CEJ had already been talking and visiting different schools in different parts of the country. We went to Boston, and all over, to get a sense of schools that are working in neighborhoods that looked like ours. What's happening in those schools that's different from what's happening in our schools? We had already created – and it was hard work – what we called our middle schools success plan. We were parents at the table with the likes of Pedro Noguera and Charlotte Frank, who were



We were able to convince [policy-makers] that this report was a valid report, and that there was a crisis in the middle grades, and to work with us to make sure we come up with solutions.

our co-chairs, and Michele Cahill from Carnegie [Corporation of New York]. And we had principals sitting at the table with us, and business people there. And that's how we think things should happen. It's a collaborative effort; everybody's on the same page about how to make change. And out of that came our first set of recommendations, which we presented at a press conference in August of 2007, with Klein and [Mayor] Bloomberg saying that they were going to invest not only in our platform, but that they were committing a total of \$30 million into fifty-one of the lowest-performing middle schools in New York City.

From there, we took off with our next report.

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: We do our research, first of all. We've got a name [behind the research], like the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, to validate CEJ's reports. And the report was done with data from the state department of education, from the [city] Department of Education, so it was undeniable data. When we called on the Department of Education and the City Council to stand with us and create this task force

to look at middle grades, we were in a sense saying that we've done our report and we feel that these are the issues that are happening in middle school, but we want to be certain about it, and we want you to be a part of helping us discover exactly what needs to happen to the middle grades, but first to admit that there is a crisis in the middle grades, and then to work with us to come up with solutions.

It was all-inclusive. Zakiyah said earlier about how we work in collaboration with people, and we feel that is the best way to have success. So we were able to convince [policy-makers] that this report was a valid report, and that there was a crisis in the middle grades, and to work with us to make sure we come up with solutions to make changes and improvements in what was happening in the middle grades.

That was how we were able to be successful. Everyone, all stakeholders involved, had a stake in what was to happen. It all boils down, ironically, to what we had in our report anyway.

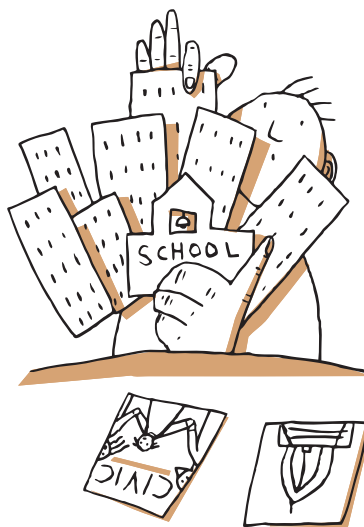
ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: At CEJ, it's never about, "Oh, we won something, that's great! Let's sit back and enjoy it." It's always next steps, next steps. How do we push this further? How do we make more changes to more schools? How do we get parents involved? How do we get more stakeholders in this conversation? How do we create our allies?

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: Our last report (NYCCEJ 2009) was about high school graduation requirements. We're calling for a working group to see what is in place [to help children achieve] the new standards for high-schoolers starting in ninth grade this year, and how we can make sure there's something in place even though there's a crisis in the budget. Something still has to be in place now to help kids who are going to be looking at these new standards.

Dealing with Challenges

As you describe the middle school work, it sounds like a case of providing information and bringing it to policy-makers' attention. But especially with resources tight, there must have been some questioning and some resistance. How did you deal with that?

ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: The way you say it makes it sound as if it was easy, but this was constant. We have not let up. We bring things to policy-makers, people who can make changes, [but] it's about us being at the table also. It's about us constantly being in their faces, but collaboratively and respectfully, which is key. We follow the process along. Even though we moved on to K–12, conversations are still being had around middle school, and we're still at the table on that level.



OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: We're constantly thinking strategically about our moves. To have the speaker of the City Council call for this task force, we didn't have too much resistance. We are able to use the influence of those folks who are able to get the job done to help us push our agenda forward.

ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: I can't reiterate enough, it was not easy. It was a lot of hard work; there were some tears involved. But once we issued our first report, and then our second report, CEJ had the respect of people in New York City. We are a parent-led organization, and they know that we will not let up on youth, but at the same time, we're willing to work together. We're open, we're respectful of their conversation, but we don't have a problem pushing back.

That's another thing that's allowed us to knock down that barrier of resistance. We've connected ourselves, as

Ocynthia said, with allies, and we've empowered our base of parents. By being a community-based organization, it's not just the [CEJ] steering committee; it goes out to the larger group. It's about bringing in more parents. Once you involve parents and empower more parents who understand the process, then they can go on and speak on things themselves. It may not be at a formal CEJ meeting, but they may say, "I was at a CEJ meeting and I heard X, Y, and Z. How come we don't know about this?" So it's about empowering parents and youth.



The respect we've gotten lessens some of the resistance. We still get some, but for the most part it's not what we got when we first set our foot out in CEJ.

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: We also don't come off as if we know everything. Our main agenda is truly about improving the quality of education for kids in New York City. We're not the experts on what needs to happen. We can just bring attention to the issues that

we feel are the issues, based on our research and what's happening in our communities. We're open. We tell people to look at these things and read our reports and improve them.

As you move forward, what challenges do you face? What is it like to have a coalition of volunteers? Does that make things challenging, and how do you deal with that?

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: The challenges we have are just as they would be if CEJ weren't doing anything. We have a system that is built on racism – when I say a system, I mean in this country – that is built on inequities in communities of color. That's a huge challenge trying to get through that barrier.

On a local level, as far as CEJ, our barrier now is funding – money. Having foundations believe in the work that we are doing, to make sure they continue to fund school organizing, which is not that popular of a thing to be doing in these times (although recently it's become a little more popular since we have a president who was a community organizer).

And then there's the human capital. It's challenging trying to keep parents involved. We have a core group of parents involved, who stay involved and are committed, but to keep the parents who are there from being burnt out [is a challenge. So the key issues are] being able to keep the organizing going, to be sure you don't burn out the core group of parents you have, and reaching out to the community to try to get more parents to be involved.

ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: In the beginning we faced challenges, because we were getting parents together, and they're not used to working in a certain area together. But there is no place that I know of where, on a Saturday from 10 to 2, you can get a roomful of forty

parents, happy to come, happy to see each other, sharing and conversing and talking about real issues that are affecting their kids. Once a month, on a Saturday, the room is full. And we get stuff done. It's a lengthy agenda, because the system is big, and there are a lot of things to do. And because we're connected to other collaborations – for instance, we're working on the [issue of] mayoral control, we're part of the Campaign for Better Schools, and previously we were part of Put the Public Back in Public Education, now we're One New York around the budget cuts – it's never-ending.

We're of like minds with regard to what our focus is: educating kids and making sure the system looks as good as it could, especially in neighborhoods of color, as Ocyntia said. Because the majority of parents in CEJ are Black and Latino parents. The reality is, if you look at the numbers, in our neighborhoods, our children are failing horribly. And we know they can do much better. It's about, how do we make that happen? How do we make it so that it's not just our forty kids, or however many parents are in that room, [who] are excelling just like kids at Stuyvesant? What keeps us together is that focus, that we do have successes, that the information is real.

We're accountable to each other; we're accountable to our parent members. We have transparency. As horrific as it is, the data comes from Annenberg [Institute research]; the data is real. As painful as it is, it is so right on. And we literally have meetings where we're tearing up and crying because we see, what's going to happen to our kids? On the high school requirements, the data they were giving us, if we don't

We're of like minds with regard to what our focus is: educating kids and making sure the system looks as good as it could, especially in neighborhoods of color.

do something, create something new, our kids are going to be falling by the wayside. If we think they're failing now, it's not going to get any better with Regents diplomas required.² It's not that we don't want them passing with the Regents diplomas – if a real plan is not put into place, we know we're going to be back, way back in the day. We'll be going backwards, and we don't want to be going backwards.

When we go to meetings, our voice is one, which is really important. Even when people come in for the first time, new, and they come with their own agenda, or they try to, we have created such a focus that you

² Under a state policy that goes into effect beginning with ninth-graders in the fall of 2009, all students will have to pass rigorous Regents examinations and earn a Regents diploma in order to graduate from high school. In the past, students could graduate from high school with a so-called local diploma that could be awarded even if students did not pass Regents examinations. Only 37 percent of the class of 2007 – and only 30 percent of the African American and Latino members of that class – earned a Regents diploma.



are almost forced not to agree with everything that's said, but to fall in line with the way decisions are made – collaboratively, by consensus. You can't go against us, because we have built this great machine, and it's really going forward. At the end, you want to be part of it, because you see that we're real, we're going forward, and you realize what we really want to do is make change for all children's lives.

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: One of the [challenges we face] is in DOE itself. We've been great with our organizing, we've been great with bringing attention to the issues, but suppose the administration changes? Suppose the elected officials we've made great relationships with change over? Those are things that we have to worry about. We're coming up with solutions to deal

with those things, but they are things that could become issues for us.

But as Zakiyah said earlier, our focus is the kids, and it's going to take a whole lot – I don't think there's anything that can stop us from moving forward. We have the passion. We have the energy and the will to make this happen. So we organize strategically to deal with all the issues that confront us.

Improving schools is not something that's new to this country. People have been trying to do it forever. But we are just this group in New York City who feels that we don't have a choice. We have to do this.

Sharing the Story with a Wider Audience

ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI: We work in New York City, but Ocynthia and I and others have been to other parts of the country and been on panels and talked about how we as parents do what we do. And we're no different from any other parent in any other part of the country who wants the best for her kids. It's about mobilizing enough of us together to have one voice. And it's about being open to working collaboratively. And it's really about being strategic. Because as much as we don't want to deal with politics in education and we don't feel it belongs there, it's there, and you as parents have to figure out how you make it work for you.

[What works is] having allies among top politicians, and doing your homework – know laws, know regulations – because you can't deny them. And it's about working together. You've got to have a collaborative way of thinking.

OCYNTHIA WILLIAMS: It has been such a great experience being a part of CEJ and this whole fight. Meeting so many different parents and people in this

business who are about improving schools, it's been such a thrill for me. I do this work on a volunteer basis, but it's my passion, a part of the fabric of who I am as a person. I was born in South Carolina, went to segregated schools, so I know how important it is for our children, kids of color in New York City, to get a first-rate education.

It's a great thing to be part of this organization, to share this story, and hopefully, by sharing this story, inspire someone in another community whom we haven't been able to touch yet to try to do the same kind of work we're doing. If we are able to inspire enough people, it'll trickle across this country, and maybe collectively we can do something to improve the quality of education for kids of color in this country.

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South Central Youth Empowered thru Action: The Power of Intergenerational Organizing

Seema Shah and Anne T. Henderson

A student organization in Los Angeles led a successful effort to institute a more rigorous curriculum in high schools.

This article is adapted from the forthcoming publication Community Coalition: Securing a College Preparatory Curriculum for All Students [working title], by Seema Shah, Kavitha Mediratta, and Sara McAlister, to be published in 2009 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Almost every day, Black and Latino students from across South Los Angeles gather at the offices of Community Coalition, a grassroots group that organizes young people to fight for educational justice. Many of the young people refer to the Coalition as their second home. The atmosphere is warm and playful, punctuated by good-natured teasing among youth and staff and animated chatter about MySpace pages or the latest music videos.

At the same time, these young people come with a vision and a clear sense of purpose. When asked to describe the conditions of their South Los Angeles schools, students indignantly recount a litany of problems: dirty bathrooms, gang violence, out-of-date textbooks, poor-quality teaching, too many low-level classes, and far too few college preparatory courses.

Julio Daniel, a senior at Manual Arts High School, whose soft-spoken voice and calm demeanor belie his fierce convictions, is deeply disappointed in his experience at Manual Arts.

I didn't expect it to be as bad as what it really is. . . . One of the most shocking things that still stays with me is that the average reading level is at fourth grade – so that means a majority of the school reads at a fourth-grade level! And that was shocking. I mean, that made me wonder – do I really want to walk the stage for graduation because there are kids that are graduating who are reading anywhere from three to five years below grade level and people are allowing them to graduate? What kind of honor could that be?

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Julio Daniel is one of over 700,000 students attending the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) – the second-largest district in the United States. While LAUSD faces many of the typical ills of urban school districts, as Daniel eloquently notes, schools in South Los Angeles are consistently among the district's most overcrowded and lowest performing.

The glaring differences between these Latino and African American neighborhoods and wealthier, mostly White communities like Beverly Hills, are obvious to Clive Aden, an alumnus of the Community Coalition's youth organizing program who is now in college.

They showed us, like, we went on a tour and they showed us L.A. and then we went to Beverly Hills and saw the difference and stuff and I realized

what's going on in my neighborhood doesn't seem to be fair. ... We have a liquor store on every corner and in Beverly Hills, they have grocery stores. We got check cashing places, in Beverly Hills, they have banks. ... We've got fast-food restaurants and they've got dine-in restaurants.

Shifting his focus to the schools, Aden points out that *Brown v. Board of Education* called for an end to segregation in schools and for equal treatment of all students.

It's fifty years later and things are still kind of the same. If you look at South Central [L.A.], African American and Latino students are receiving a poor education. You go to Beverly Hills [and see] predominantly White schools where 90 percent of their class is going to college and 99 percent is graduating. Out here it's like 50 percent – and not even, sometimes – is graduating, and not even half of that is going to college.

District data bear evidence of Aden's keen observations: graduation rates in South Los Angeles high schools hover around 50 percent. Not only are graduation rates for these high schools lower than those for the district overall, they have steadily declined for five consecutive years. As dismal as these numbers are, external research reports suggest that district and state numbers *overestimate* the actual graduation rate (Oakes, Mendoza & Silver 2004).¹

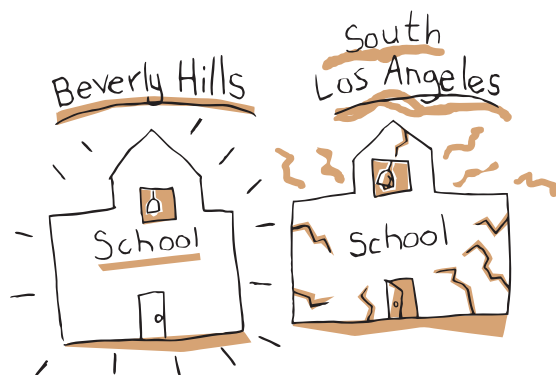
The dire state of schools in South Los Angeles compelled the Community Coalition to become a leading advocate for educational justice. Over the last decade, its activism has focused on two successful initiatives:

- pressuring the district to improve the physical condition of schools in South Los Angeles;
- fighting for more rigorous academic programs so that all students are prepared for college.

The first-hand experiences of Black and Latino students in South Los Angeles have been the driving force for these education campaigns. Lucy Castro, an organizer at the Community Coalition, explains: "Students of color are coming together to advocate for their own education because the school system has pretty much failed them."

Although many young members of the Community Coalition involved in the charge to improve school quality will graduate before reaping the rewards of their efforts, Tamara Jara, a high school senior and a youth leader, describes her motivation:

I know my little sisters are going to go to high school, and I don't want them to go through what I'm going through – the lack of books, the lack of [college prep] courses, the uncredentialed teachers, all of that stuff.



¹ Graduation rates computed using enrollment-based data rather than dropout-based data suggest that graduation rates are considerably lower than the district's estimates.

The combined efforts of the Community Coalition’s adult and youth organizers have won changes that will enhance educational opportunities not only for Tamara’s sisters, but also for thousands of other students. Among their major victories are a reallocation of bond monies to fund needed repairs in South Los Angeles’s schools and a new districtwide policy that adopts the college preparatory curriculum as the basic curriculum for all LAUSD students. This article explores the contributions that young people have made to these successful campaigns for educational equity.

The Growth of SC-YEA

Since its inception, the Community Coalition has made it a priority to build the next generation of leadership. Disproving widely held beliefs about the apathy of “Generation X,” Coalition leaders created a youth service program called Helping Our Peers Evolve (HOPE) to engage young people in their community and develop

their leadership skills. By 1993, the service program had evolved into the Community Coalition’s youth organizing arm, South Central Youth Empowered thru Action (SC-YEA).

Through SC-YEA, the Community Coalition developed a model of inter-generational organizing, one in which young people’s day-to-day experiences and struggles inform and direct the group’s organizing campaigns. Adult organizers and staff, in turn, help young people take advantage of the larger organization’s resources – such as media training and data analysis – to advance SC-YEA’s organizing efforts.

In 1996, SC-YEA started to tackle issues related to educational justice. Two years later, SC-YEA set up local chapters in five high schools, strengthening its capacity to produce change in schools and build its membership base. By 2006, SC-YEA chapters, called high school organizing committees (HSOCs), had expanded to all South Los Angeles schools.² The Community Coalition saw the HSOCs as “political centers on campus,” essentially school clubs through which young people could learn to advocate for student rights and concerns. Leaders from each school-based chapter attend after-school homework sessions, followed by trainings and strategy sessions at the Community Coalition two to three times per week. These meetings allow time to discuss issues and concerns across schools in South Los Angeles. At the same time, the youth leaders work with students

The *Los Angeles Times* asserted that “it took the whistle-blowing students to call attention to the failures of the adults who are supposed to be looking after their education and school environment.”

² In 2002, SC-YEA began organizing in four middle schools in South Los Angeles. This program, known as SC-YEA Jr., aimed to build awareness of social, economic, and educational justice issues among middle school students whose schools fed into the South Los Angeles high schools where SC-YEA already maintained a presence.

in their own schools to develop school-based organizing campaigns.

Ravaut Benitez describes the impact of these sessions on her development as a leader.

I think I've gained leadership skills, not being afraid to speak up. When I started here I was very kind of timid and scared to speak in front of a lot of people. But I learned that if you really believe in something, don't be afraid to speak about it and show how you really feel.

How did I do it? I would see the other students do it. We would break up in different groups by high school, and we would go over, "So what do you want to discuss at the HSOCs this week?" So they would choose somebody [and say]: "Go up and talk about it, act like this is the audience, how would you do it?" You start talking about it, and they pretty much give you the pros and cons about what you can do better and what you did good. I don't even know exactly how, but somehow I got over the fear, I guess because I knew the students here and they kind of made me feel comfortable.

SC-YEA's initial education organizing efforts focused on improving the area's appalling school facilities. One SC-YEA leader described the conditions in her school: "Horrible! The bathrooms were always locked, or the toilet stalls didn't have doors. ... The tiles would come off the ceiling and hit my teacher." At one South Los Angeles high school, SC-YEA members noted that only a single working bathroom was available for the school's 3,900 students (Liberty Hill Foundation 2000).

After SC-YEA documented how allocations of a \$2.4-billion school construction bond measure were unfairly skewed to wealthy areas,³ LAUSD reopened repair and construction contracts granted by the school bond and added \$153 million for repairs targeted for high schools in South Los Angeles and other high-needs communities. In follow-up media coverage, the *Los Angeles Times* asserted that changes in the conditions of facilities "wouldn't have happened without the students." The *Times* further noted that "it took the whistle-blowing students to call attention to the failures of the adults who are supposed to be looking after their education and school environment" (Boyarsky 1998, p. 1).

Increasing Access to a College Preparatory Curriculum (2001–2006)

In 2000, youth leaders from SC-YEA, with assistance from the Community Coalition's organizing staff, surveyed over 1,000 South Los Angeles high school students. Staff organizers expected students again to rank the poor condition of school facilities as the most pressing problem in their schools. Instead, students pinpointed the lack of challenging academic programs, specifically the tracking of students in "dead-end" classes, as a core issue.

School district data confirmed their concerns. In 2001–2002, only 39.5 percent of South Los Angeles high school graduates had completed college preparatory coursework, known in

³ A series of articles appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* between November 1997 and February 1998 documenting the efforts of SC-YEA youth to focus attention on the poor state of school facilities in South Los Angeles.

California as the A-G curriculum.⁴ With a graduation rate hovering at 50 percent, that meant only about 20 percent of South L.A. high school students were enrolled in A-G coursework.

SC-YEA's youth leaders began collecting additional data to investigate the extent of the problem. After researching course offerings using the master schedules at their high schools, they discovered that many South Los Angeles schools offered far more classes preparing students for low-wage jobs rather than for college. As student leader Marcus McKinney observed, "At Fremont High they had nine cosmetology classes and four chemistry classes. We wanted to point stuff like that out and let them know that it should be reversed."

A Campaign to Change District and State Policy

In February 2001, SC-YEA members met with the regional superintendent and several district officials to present their concerns. District officials agreed to three key SC-YEA demands:

- Provide every student with an academic transcript.
- Re-focus counselors' priorities on increasing college preparation.
- Hold school assemblies informing students of the college preparatory requirements.

Meanwhile, SC-YEA leaders continued to work with their local high school organizing committees to raise awareness among students about the A-G requirements. SC-YEA leaders educated

their peers with creative outreach efforts, such as a fashion show in which students dressed up in outfits contrasting occupational opportunities available to students who go on to college with those who end up working at Mickey D's.

An opening to influence statewide policy came in 2004. Independently of the Community Coalition's organizing, Senator Richard Alarcon (D-Los Angeles) introduced SB 1795, a bill that called for all students statewide to complete the A-G curriculum. The Community Coalition viewed the bill as a chance to inject youth voice into the critical debate. Partnering with Education Trust–West, a policy research and advocacy organization, SC-YEA members traveled to Sacramento to testify in support of the legislation.

In the ensuing hearings, some legislators balked. In districts like LAUSD, where fewer than a third of students met the state reading standard, legislators worried about negative effects of setting the bar too high. Some legislators argued that a more rigorous curriculum would not only increase the dropout rate, but also reduce the labor pool for low-wage jobs.

Ravaut Benitez, then a seventeen-year old SC-YEA leader (and now attending the University of Wisconsin–Madison), recounted her testimony before the state legislature:

The [legislator] who was against it started speaking and I remember him making a comment about what's going to happen when [his] car breaks down, who's going to fix [his] car? I really felt like ... he thought that's where we belonged. We belong working for them, fixing their cars, doing their hair, stuff like that. I really felt hurt, because I felt that it's not for him to make that decision, it's for the students to make that decision.

4. The A-G requirement stipulates the completion of fifteen year-long courses that are required for admission to universities within the University of California and California State University systems. Requirements include four years of college preparatory English and three years of college preparatory math.

Although the bill never made it out of committee, in large part because vocational-education lobbies and the state teachers union were strongly opposed, the measure spurred increased commitment and excitement about the issue of college access. Groups like the Community Coalition decided to renew their fight at the local level. In Los Angeles, a confluence of events had created an opportune moment to continue the campaign with new allies. The United Way of Los Angeles and Alliance for a Better Community, an advocacy organization, had created a buzz with their release of the *Latino Scorecard 2003: Grading the American Dream*. The scorecard, which examined the social and economic conditions of Latinos in Los Angeles County, gave the district a D on public education because of its low graduation and college-going rates (United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2007, p. 1).

A New Grassroots Coalition in Los Angeles

Charged with developing an action agenda based on the *Scorecard's* findings, Alliance for a Better Community met with the Community Coalition and identified the problem of college access as a critical concern. In June 2004, the two groups co-convened a roundtable of Los Angeles-based organizations to discuss how the district could be “held accountable” for fully supporting students to continue their education after high school (United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2007, p. 1).⁵ Thirty-five organizations attended the event, representing the research community, advocates, local community members



“At Fremont High they had nine cosmetology classes and four chemistry classes. We wanted to point stuff like that out and let them know that it should be reversed.”

⁵ Inner City Struggle, an organizing group based in East Los Angeles, also played a leading role in the coalition.



and organizers, parents, students, universities, and legal institutions.

The roundtable led to the formation of a grassroots coalition, Communities for Educational Equity (CEE).⁶ In just a few months, the coalition came to consensus on a shared vision, conducted additional research on A-G, held community forums, built new alliances, and assessed the political landscape through a power analysis.⁷ CEE members met with key stakeholders, including the vocational lobby, the teachers union, and school board members.

In February 2005, CEE member organizations decided to focus their campaign on passage of a LAUSD school board resolution to make A-G the standard curriculum for all students in the district. The coalition began collaborating with then-School Board

President Jose Huizar, who became a powerful ally. Huizar was moved by students who shared their stories of being diverted to “dead-end” classes because more demanding classes were oversubscribed (Hayasaki 2005, p. 1).

In the proposed resolution, the coalition argued that a college preparatory curriculum policy had important implications for the city’s economic future. For example, many representatives of the local building trades reported that prospective candidates were failing the math exam needed to qualify for their apprenticeship program. For the twenty-first-century workforce, students must have high-level math, science, and technology skills. Increased rigor was not simply about college prep, but about “work-prep” and “life-prep” (Communities for Educational Equity 2005).

Youth Mobilization for a College Preparatory Curriculum

Young people from SC-YEA, some of whom had been involved in the fight for A-G for four or five years, received ongoing briefings about CEE’s efforts and worked tenaciously to build grassroots support for the proposed A-G policy. Student leaders not only made classroom presentations to raise awareness about the A-G resolution, but also staged “Televizzle,” a cultural arts production featuring visual and digital art, music, theater, and poetry to educate their peers on the need to improve the quality of their schools. SC-YEA members collected roughly 5,000 of the 13,000 signatures for a petition supporting the A-G resolution and served as key media spokespersons on the need for increased rigor in the curriculum.

⁶ Originally known as the High School for High Achievement Task Force, the coalition adopted the name Communities for Educational Equity in February 2005.

⁷ A power analysis is an organizing tool that maps out key stakeholders, their respective power in the political landscape, and their positions on the issue that the organizing group is trying to influence.

Julio Daniel, a SC-YEA student leader, says the cultural events proved critically important to their movement.

Most people don't have an analysis, they just kind of live their lives and don't know what's going on around them. And they don't ever take the time to look at their school or their community and so, it's kind of messed up. So it is a challenge just because nobody ever raps on them and tells them to care about any of that. I think that young people are very, very vulnerable to pop culture, and pop culture doesn't seem to do that. ...

Well, I think we kind of tapped that idea with the cultural arts event. We put the message out there through these outlets that young people listen to, of gaining consciousness that there's something wrong, and students have the power to organize and do something about it. We had underground artists who do rap about conscious theory, conscious events, things that are actually going on. The play we put on was sort of a remix of this old movie *Boyz in the Hood*.

To demonstrate the depth of grassroots support, CEE organized three mass mobilizations during the month and a half prior to the final school board vote. Jesse Fernandez, a SC-YEA leader who was then a high school senior, described the push he and his fellow leaders made to ensure that the mass mobilizations were a success:

We'd just start talking to students about what was going on. ... I was going through summer school at the time, so I started harassing people in summer school. [Other SC-YEA leaders] on the MTA bus home, they were talking to people, just trying to muster up support and get people to commit to showing up on the days of the rallies.

In the weeks leading up to the vote, CEE won support for the resolution from Superintendent Roy Romer, State Superintendent Jack O'Connell, and key leaders from the Los Angeles Trade Tech and Building Trades Council. In addition, the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously in support of a symbolic A-G resolution. Meanwhile, CEE's aggressive media outreach resulted in more than 100 published stories in the local media, with editorials in all the major newspapers (some in favor, some against).

A Historic School Board Vote

A week before the vote, despite the intensive organizing effort, prospects for passage looked uncertain. Alberto Retana, director of organizing for the Community Coalition, reported that only three of the seven board members had pledged their support. In fact, the vote had already been postponed once. As school board member Marlene Canter noted, there were concerns about "unintended consequences" (Rubin 2005, 3). Not all the board members were comfortable with

Student leaders not only made classroom presentations to raise awareness about the A-G resolution, but also staged "Televizzle," a cultural arts production to educate their peers on the need to improve the quality of their schools.

mandating A-G for all students, rather than giving them a choice to opt in. Following the initial postponement of the vote, Jose Huizar acknowledged that the majority of the board did not favor the resolution (Rubin 2005, p. 3).

June 14, 2005, was the day of the vote. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that hundreds of students had gathered outside the school board building, “wearing T-shirts that read ‘Let me choose my future,’ and chanting ‘Give us life prep, not a life sentence’” (Hayasaki 2005, p. 1). SC-YEA leader Jesse Fernandez recalls the tense atmosphere.

We went inside to the back of the big conference room where all the board members are. And there was a lot of talk going on about A-G and the wording that . . . board members weren’t clear with. It was kind of nerve-racking hearing all this talk, because this was it, this was what everybody had been working on for so long, for five years. And the vote’s going to happen, it’s going to happen any minute now, so people are talking about it, trying to change the wording, trying to figure things out at the last minute. But it *passed*, it passed and it passed [on] a six to one vote. It was wonderful. . . . It was just unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. And everybody was so happy about it, [people were] yelling. . . . It was really cool.

The new policy phased in the A-G requirements by stipulating that A-G would become the default curriculum by the 2008–2009 school year. All LAUSD students would be expected to complete a college preparatory curriculum in order to graduate. Reflecting on the long journey she and her fellow SC-YEA leaders had taken, one youth leader shared:

You do something and then it’s like all the hard work that you do pays off. In the end, we won A-G and there was just so much work we did for about five years, working on A-G, everyone working on A-G and then we won. It wasn’t just us, the Community Coalition, but we had a bunch of other groups and a bunch of other people coming and supporting us to say our kids want to go to college, too.

Said Jose Huizar, president of the school board:

This is one of the most significant reforms this district is embarking on in the last twenty years. The payoffs will be huge, the impacts will be huge. . . . Really what this is about is providing thousands of students an opportunity to attend college – an opportunity denied to them with the current policies and practices.

“No amount of intellectual framing and data and research would have moved that district. We needed the 800-plus Latino and African American parents [and youth] to mandate rigor. It was organizing unlike anywhere else I’ve seen in the nation.”

The importance of CEE's grassroots support cannot be underestimated. Russlynn Ali, then the executive director of Education Trust–West (now an assistant U.S. secretary of education), asserts,

I am pretty convinced that no amount of intellectual framing and data and research that we could have provided would have moved that district. We needed the 800-plus Latino and African American parents [and youth] to mandate rigor. It was organizing unlike anywhere else I've seen in the nation.

Lessons Learned

As a member-driven organization committed to long-term community transformation, the Community Coalition's organizing campaigns are firmly rooted in the lived experience of young people. The Community Coalition model of youth organizing continually brings the organization's political relationships and considerable strategic and data analytic capacities into youth organizing campaigns to amplify and support young people's interests and demands.

As the A-G campaign progressed from local school-based work that was led by young people to a coalition-driven initiative for systemwide policy change, the Community Coalition renegotiated the involvement and leadership of young people. As this shift occurred, Alberto Retana noted the importance of

keeping parents, students, and residents connected. Because otherwise we're just another advocacy institution speaking on behalf of parents and youth and it's absolutely critical that they're at the forefront. ... SC-YEA leaders need to be pushing this fight, not the staff members.



Populated by adults well versed in formal meeting-going culture and accustomed to discussing the minutiae of policy and strategy, CEE meetings did not constitute a youth-friendly space. Retana observed,

The major challenge for this alliance is that creating space for [the youth] at the meeting is just funky because they're just like "What the hell, we're not going to waste our time."

Clearly, the active participation of SC-YEA leaders in A-G outreach demonstrated that they were well versed with the campaign and the relevant issues. On the flipside, their relative lack of involvement in strategy and negotiation sessions highlights the complexity of young people's participation and role in organizing. How do organizations strike the balance between invest-

ing the time and creating the space for deep and authentic youth engagement, while also attending to the real-time political dynamics of creating substantive policy change?

The compressed cycle of leadership among youth, who age out of high school within a few years, makes this balance even more challenging. Different groups have addressed this dilemma in their own ways. In the case of the Community Coalition, the formation of CEE required adults to eventually take the lead in strategy development and policy negotiation. At the same time, the Community Coalition helped create an environment within CEE in which adults felt deeply accountable to the demands young people were making for their own education. Jesse Fernandez, SC-YEA student leader, says:

There is a lot wrong with the world. I mean, it's mind-boggling what's going on. But if you can identify the problem and network with the people who, you know, feel the same way, there's definitely something to be done about it. I mean, a lot of times it's just that everyone is ignorant that something is going on, but if you can get that information out there, you get to work with some people that are ready to move on things, then, you know, it takes time, but change can happen.

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