

Proposal to the AERA for a Special Interest Group (SIG) Grassroots Community and Youth Organizing for Education Reform

August 2007

An Emerging Paradigm in the Politics of Education: Grassroots community organizing has been long used as a tool for disadvantaged people to gain power in political and social life.¹ Although organizing is a diverse phenomenon, it draws from the tradition of Saul Alinsky's neighborhood organizing, and has been enriched by the traditions of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and union organizing among others.

However, the employment of organizing by communities and young people to improve public schools and to address inequities in public education is a newly emerging phenomenon. Organizing efforts are distinguished from other, more orthodox forms of educational change by their collective nature and by the active engagement of parents, teachers and pupils themselves in the politics of school and community change. Unlike more orthodox forms of parent and community engagement, organizing efforts are characterized by a focus on building effective power to influence institutions and policy through processes of leadership development, relationship-building and critical consciousness.

The starting point for an organizing approach to education change is typically grassroots mobilization outside of school systems and electoral politics. As such, organizing differs significantly from the activities of the education interest groups that have historically been influential—e.g., national organizations like the National Education Association, the California Teachers Association, or the national PTA.

¹A useful definition of community organizing is found on the on-line site Wikipedia:

“Community organizing is a process by which people are brought together to act in common self-interest. While organizing describes any activity involving people interacting with one another in a formal manner, much community organizing is in the pursuit of a common agenda. Many groups seek populist goals and the ideal of participatory democracy. Community organizers create social movements by building a base of concerned people, mobilizing these community members to act, and developing leadership from and relationships among the people involved.

“Organized community groups seek accountability from elected officials, corporations and institutions as well as increased direct representation within decision-making bodies and social reform. Where negotiations fail, these organizations seek to inform others outside of the organization of the issues being addressed and expose or pressure the decision-makers through a variety of means, including picketing, boycotting, sit-ins, petitioning, and electoral politics.

“Community organizing is usually focused on more than just resolving specific issues. Organizing is empowering all community members, often with the end goal of distributing power equally throughout the community. Community organizers generally seek to build groups that are democratic in governance, open and accessible to community members, and concerned with the general health of the community rather than a specific interest group.

“There are three basic types of community organizing, grassroots organizing, faith based community organizing, and coalition building” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_organizing).

It is a relatively new notion in education policy that independent local organizations composed of low-income students and parents engage directly in local, state or national education policy decisions. Organizing has emerged over the past twenty years as a powerful force aimed at improving public education, addressing injustice and advancing youth development in low income communities. Some organizing groups are part of national networks, such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and its Alliance Schools, the Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now (ACORN), and the People's Institute for Community Organizing (PICO). Many others represent independent, local efforts; Californians for Justice is one example. Organizing groups focus their work at the ground level, and have yet to claim much of a public profile outside of their local area. Yet they number in the hundreds across the country.

An Emerging Field of Education Research: A unique body of academic literature is emerging that examines this new phenomenon of organizing as a strategy for parents, students and members of the community to improve schools, and education policy. The following is a very short review of some of the key work published on this topic in recent years.

In *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*, Shirley (1997) presents a case study of the Industrial Areas Foundation's Alliance Schools, which are located in low-income communities across Texas. He concludes that organizing efforts were often successful despite serious challenges. For example, at one school in the study, organizing led to the closure of vacant buildings where drugs were being sold, an increase in funding for an after-school program, the development of community policing, the development of an integrated housing strategy that supported low-income tenants, and the empowerment of parents to meet with local government officials and participate in public meetings. In a second study, Shirley (2002) limits his analysis to the historically rich and culturally unique borderland of the Rio Grande Valley. By focusing on this particular socio-historical context, Shirley (2002) is able to demonstrate that community engagement in school reform is a long process, with complex results. He explains that successful reform is hard to document in an era of federal and state mandates that measure school change by increased standardized test scores, or measure community betterment in terms of increased wealth. Rather, the success of school reform is better measured through positive change in the quality of civic engagement and the development of social capital in low-income communities. From this perspective, community organizing for education reform is successful when the culture of schooling becomes more inclusive of the community, powerful networks of civic engagement that provide support to students are created and additional funding is secured for high poverty schools.

In *Dry Bones Rattling*, Warren (2001) also studies the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Texas but focuses on their statewide policy initiatives. He argues that community building is essential to democratic renewal in the United States. Warren (2001) found that community organizing forces public policy to be responsive to the needs of low-income families, provides a model of multiracial collaboration, and generates the power needed to shift public opinion. He also links education and sociology theories of social capital to the rise of community organizing around the nation.

Capturing the breadth of community organizing, Gold, Simon, Mundell, & Brown's (2004) national study of community organizing for education identified multiple areas in which the power of the community contributes to improving schools. Gold et al. (2004) located over 140 active education organizations who work to increase educational equity, build cross-community alliances, develop democratic leadership, and aim to improve the civic participation and power of low-to moderate communities. They explain that increased community capacity, "creates the political will to address problems that would otherwise go unattended for lack of an organized constituency demanding attention to them" (pp.705). Thus, community organizing is seen as building both political power and civic capacity necessary to make equity-focused changes in the education system.

Mediratta and Fruchter, 2001 also documents the growth of community and youth organizing for equitable education. Their study includes survey and interview data from 66 community organizations across the country. In another report, Mediratta, 2004 presents the context and backgrounds of 8 community organizations working for education reform, synthesizing information about the goals, values, strategies and methods of organizing across organizations. The study found that though organizational approaches vary, community organizing is having a significant impact on education reform by creating the political context in which equity-focused change can occur.

In their book *Learning Power: Organizing For Education and Justice*, Oakes and Rogers (2006) highlight several "design experiments" in which they used social inquiry as a tool for engaging students, parents and community organizations in education reform. As one example, they highlight the work of Parent U-Turn, a local, multi-cultural coalition of parents organizing for better schools in Lynwood, California. This community organization went far beyond what is traditionally thought of as parent engagement by investigating the conditions of local schools and then holding policymakers accountable for making improvements. The authors report that Parent U-Turn built a sense of collective identity in their community; developed social capital by learning from existing studies and conducting their own research; and disrupted politics as usual by sharing their findings with policymakers and the public. Oakes and Rogers (2006) conclude that in building the knowledge and power of low-income communities and communities of color, activism and inquiry reconfigure the democratic landscape.

Anyon (2005) analyzes how organizing for equitable education policy fits into the larger federal political economy in *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, And A New Social Movement*. She links education inequity to macroeconomic policies that deplete urban centers of decent paying employment, affordable housing, health care, and social services. Anyon (2005) argues that fixing schools requires fixing economic and social policy and that social movements are the most successful engine for progressive policy change. She explains that the promise of community organizing lies in the reality that community organizations are outside the existing education system, and empower members of the community to actually engage in education policymaking.

Together, these studies point to the potential of community organizations to increase democratic participation and effectively transform the unequal landscape of American schools. They show both the increasing breadth of organizing across the nation, and offer insights into the detailed work of organizations in specific communities. Yet this field of study is very new, and scholars of community organizations need a space to develop new theories, define their field, exchange research and mentor young scholars in the field.

Purpose of the SIG: The purpose of this SIG is to advance research on community and youth organizing. The SIG will not itself engage in organizing. Rather, it will foster research that examines the ways in which organizing efforts affect school improvement and youth development, particularly in low income communities and communities of color. Organizing efforts we study are usually based in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color where they work to create the political will for change, to collaborate with educators and other civic professionals to increase the capacity for schools to improve, and to hold the institutions of public education accountable to organized constituencies for reform efforts.

The SIG will bring researchers together to promote ways to collaborate with each other to advance research and practice in education organizing and further equity in the education system. This SIG responds to a growing body of academic writing and inquiry on community and youth organizing (for examples please see the attached reference list). The SIG also responds to the need for a space for scholars in this emerging field to learn from each other, further define this area of study, and mentor junior scholars pursuing this line of inquiry as graduate students and junior faculty.

History of the need for this SIG: As books and academic articles on community and youth organizing began to emerge, and increase in volume over the last 10 years, we realized a need to come together and learn from each other. Initially we pursued this plan of action outside of the formal structure of AERA—which was appropriate at the time due to the small number of us studying these topics. Over the years we have established a regular external meeting during the AERA conference, Harvard University sponsored a conference on the topic, and a handful of senior scholars in the field have the benefit of meeting as part of a scholars' forum sponsored by the Public Education Network and the Ford Foundation. While these engagements are productive, the lack of an infrastructure limits the opportunity of scholars—and junior scholars, in particular—to engage in defining this field.

At our 2005 external meeting during AERA we decided that there was sufficient interest among scholars to form a SIG within AERA. We spent time developing a plan for gathering necessary signatures and developing a proposal. By AERA 2006, approximately 15 graduate students and professors volunteered to collect signatures for the development of the SIG. We first submitted these 127 signatures and our proposal in September, 2006.

In response to this growing field of study, a handful of scholars were invited to present their work and thinking on community and youth organizing at a Presidential Session

during AERA 2007. Again, in an attempt to be inclusive of the junior scholars in our emerging field, those of us invited to present decided to use our personal funds to host a reception after the Presidential Session. The positive response we received from members of AERA was frankly overwhelming. The meeting brought together scholars from several disciplines and specializations to examine this field from multiple perspectives. During the reception we heard about how isolated many scholars studying community and youth organizing feel on their campuses; that many scholars cannot find a space in the AERA schedule to present their work; what a unique opportunity it was to hear theories of the impact of organizing on education debated; and the sincere need to continue to find ways to meet and exchange ideas. All of these comments speak to the very real need that persists for an AERA SIG on community and youth organizing.

Research Concerns: The SIG will provide a forum for discussing the following kinds of research questions:

What are the impacts of community and youth organizing on the education system?

- In what ways do organizing efforts create political will and political coalitions for change in school systems and education policy?
- Does community and youth organizing create new forms of accountability for school reform, and, if so, how?
- Does community and youth organizing improve teaching and learning in schools and, if so, how?
- To what extent and in what ways does organizing engage families, community members and young people in meaningful and powerful forms of participation in schools and other organizations?
- In what ways do community and youth organizing impact individual student achievement?
- Which kinds of community and youth organizing initiatives effectively address racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and other institutions?

What are the impacts of community and youth organizing on connecting schools to the larger political economy of our democracy?

- In what ways does organizing connect schools to the culture and values of the families and communities they serve?
- How can school improvement through education organizing be connected to community development?
- To what extent can public schools serve as institutional sites for civic and democratic life?
- Do organizing efforts foster positive developmental outcomes for young people?
- What is the relationship between local organizing and efforts to build a national movement for educational and social justice?

What is the role of research in the growing engagement of community and youth organizers in school reform?

- What are the roles of researchers in community and youth initiated research projects?
- How do community and youth organizations use academic research to inform their campaigns?

Uniqueness: Most SIGs have some degree of overlap with other SIGs, and our proposed SIG would be no different. It does connect with issues that could be discussed in other SIGs. Nevertheless, organizing represents a set of enterprises that is distinct from the kinds of phenomena at the center of focus for other SIGs. In the following section we discuss the overlap our SIG would have with several others, yet argue that our concerns are unique enough to warrant a new SIG.

Family, School, Community Partnership SIG: Organizing groups are sometimes concerned with increasing family involvement in schools and with creating partnerships, so there would be some overlap with the Family, School, Community Partnership SIG. However, organizing efforts are essentially political initiatives that can lead to a variety of reform efforts, not just partnerships. In fact, sometimes organizing groups find themselves in conflict, not partnership, with educational institutions. With their orientation to collective power, politics, and social change, organizing groups are quite distinct from the kinds of initiatives that the Partnership SIG typically addresses.

Adolescent and Youth Development SIG: Of course, organizing efforts in the end hope to create the conditions for positive youth development. However, they are not developmental initiatives. Even the youth organizing groups whose efforts would be included in the proposed SIG are primarily oriented to building power to create change in schools and communities. They could be studied for their impact on the development of youth who participate, and in that case there would be overlap with the Adolescent and Youth Development SIG. But if one considers the list of research questions above, very few of them fit particularly in that SIG.

School Community, Culture, and Climate SIG: The focus of the School Community, Culture and Climate SIG is on the school. The focus of the proposed SIG lies outside of the school, in community and youth organizing groups. These groups interact with schools and sometimes have an effect on school climate and culture, but the locus of research for the proposed SIG will be quite different than the issues discussed in this SIG.

Educational Change SIG: Again, there would be some overlap between the proposed SIG and the Educational Change SIG, as the organizing efforts to be studied typically try to create change in educational institutions and policy. However, the focus of the Educational Change SIG is on educational systems, while the focus of the proposed SIG is on community-based actors outside of those systems. The range of issues we propose to address (see above) cannot be captured well in the Educational Change SIG

Politics of Education SIG: Organizing efforts are political initiatives, as we have stressed. In that sense, there would be overlap with this SIG. Some of the issues about which we are concerned to promote research could fit in this SIG. But many would not. Perhaps more importantly, the “politics of education” represents a very broad category. We hope to build a field of research around a particular phenomenon, grassroots community/youth organizing, and believe that the proposed SIG will allow us to focus on that goal. We fear that our concerns would get lost in the broader Politics of Education SIG.

In sum, grassroots organizing for education reform is a relatively new and emerging phenomenon, distinct from the central topics typically covered in SIGs, and not yet very well understood in the field of education research. We believe that a Grassroots Community and Youth Organizing SIG would engage a wide variety of scholars across disciplinary boundaries, from political science, sociology, anthropology, social work and others, and would increase the multidisciplinary knowledge base of educators. Our two hundred AERA members feel such a new SIG would be important and are prepared to join it. Given the widespread persistent inequities in American life and culture, and the emergence of community and youth organizing as potentially powerful countervailing efforts driven by grass-roots civic mobilization, we are hopeful that this SIG will be approved. It will provide a valuable forum for a rising generation of scholars to present papers, circulate research, build an intellectual community around this issue and to advance long-needed educational changes.

References

- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical possibilities : Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Gold, E., Simon, E., Mundell, L., & Brown, C. (2004). "Bringing community organizing into the school reform picture." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 33(3), 54S-76S.
- Mediratta, K. (2004). *Constituents of change: Community organizations and public education reform*. New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, Steinhardt School of Education, New York University.
- Mediratta, K., & Fruchter, N. (2001). *Mapping the field of organizing for school improvement: A report on education organizing in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, the Mississippi Delta, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Washington D.C.* New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University; California Tomorrow; Designs for Change; Southern Echo.
- Oakes, J., & Rogers, J. (2006). *Learning power: Social inquiry, grassroots organizing and educational justice*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Shirley, D. (1997). *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Shirley, D. (2002). *Valley Interfaith and school reform: Organizing for power in South Texas* (1st ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Warren, M. R. (2001). *Dry bones rattling: Community building to revitalize American democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

