

# Parents Building Communities in Schools

Joanna Brown

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*An effort to engage parents in Chicago schools results in benefits to both the schools and the parents.*

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**O**n any given day, in nine public schools in Chicago's Logan Square community, about 170 parent mentors and parent tutors are in elementary school classrooms tutoring children; every evening two or three teams of parents and teachers make Literacy Ambassador home visits; about eighty mentors and several hundred other parents are attending school-based community centers to learn English or learn skills, while another sixty parents are in college classes to become bilingual teachers.

Most of these parents are immigrant mothers or the daughters of immigrants. Their schools are part of a network of schools serving low-income, largely Latino children, brought together by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) to create schools as centers of community – and serve the needs of the immigrant students.

Enter an LSNA school and you see mothers sitting in hallways with small groups of students who are intently reading out loud. A mother comfortably enters the principal's office to remind her of a meeting. Mothers meet in a corner of the cafeteria to plan a family reading night for all. As a teacher passes

by she calls – “Cati, your son was looking for you upstairs.” In the evening, 1,000 families participate in classes and activities held at the schools and managed by parents.

LSNA is the forty-five-year-old community organization of Logan Square, a mixed-income, majority Latino immigrant neighborhood of 84,000 residents on Chicago's northwest side. LSNA has forty member organizations, including churches, social service agencies, block clubs, and nine large public schools (two K–8, four K–6, one 7–8, and two high schools.) Some 8,300 students, 90 percent of whom are from low-income Latino families, study in these schools.

For more than fifteen years, LSNA has been organizing community members around education issues. In doing so, we started with some basic principles. First, as part of the 1989 Chicago school reform movement, which established elected parent-majority Local School Councils (LSCs), we knew that the Councils needed an organized community in order for their formal

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authority to select and hire principals on four-year contracts to be meaningful. Second, as the community group for a particular neighborhood, we had a vision of opening the doors of fortress schools and helping them function as centers of community. Third, as organizers, we were committed to listen to and value what residents wanted and to build on community strengths.

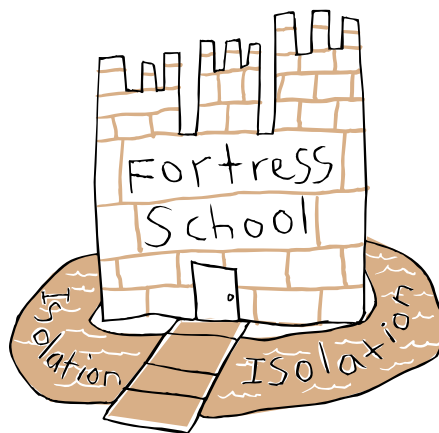
We also suspected that disparities of education, language, and income were only some of many factors that created barriers to parent involvement in schools. And we believed that transformational learning happens through experience, by doing. We also knew that we would have to raise the money to pay for whatever we built.

However, we never imagined the full results that could be achieved by deeply tapping into the strengths and skills of parents.

### ***Building a Successful Collaboration between Schools and Parents***

In the early 1990s, LSNA built a coalition of principals, teachers, and parents to address school overcrowding. This coalition represented an early version of the shift in strategy more community organizations are making – from confrontational organizing against school administrations to a sometimes complex but highly productive inside-outside collaboration in which ideas, buildings, and power are shared by the schools and the community, particularly parents.

LSNA's new school-community collaboration was successful. By 1996 LSNA had won five large building additions and two new middle schools. At the coalition's insistence, the buildings were built so that they could be used as community centers in the evenings.



The social trust built by common struggle and victory laid the basis for the collaborative community-building efforts that followed.

### ***Parents as Leaders: The Parent Mentor Program***

The Parent Mentor Program was launched in 1995 and has served as the open door for many parents, particularly mothers, to become involved in their children's schools. It began in one school, Frederick Funston, a pre-K through grade 6 school. Principal Sally Acker, who had been active in the overcrowding campaign, asked LSNA to develop a "parent mentor" internship program to involve non-working mothers and help them further their education and find jobs.

Fifteen Funston mothers were recruited into the program, trained, and placed in classrooms to work two hours daily with students under the direction of a teacher. LSNA's initial one-week training helped mothers to see themselves as leaders, reflect on their skills, set personal goals, and commit to achieving them. It also provided the space within which to develop strong cohorts; mothers, isolated by such factors as their immigrant experience, lack of English, and small children shared common experiences and found personal support from each other.

Every applicant was accepted, regardless of education or language (many spoke only Spanish), and each was placed in a classroom where she could be helpful. They attended weekly workshops on a variety of topics and reflected together on their classroom experiences. They wrote journals. They held potlucks. They helped each other pursue their goals, usually involving learning English or returning to school. At the end of 100 hours they received a \$600 stipend.

### ***Changing the Family-School Relationship: Community Learning Centers***

The parent mentors at Funston also helped plan the Community Learning Center (CLC) that was established as a result of the successful anti-overcrowding campaign. The mentors surveyed their neighborhood door-to-door, asking over five hundred families what programs they needed in an evening school-community center. LSNA raised funds to keep Funston open until 9:00 p.m. with adult education and children's programming and hired two parents to run the CLC.

The CLC helped change the way families and school staff saw the

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school. Not only was the center accessible to parents (the school was close to home; classes and childcare were free; and children were tutored while their parents studied), but parents who walked freely in and out of the CLC began to see the school building as partly theirs and education as something that united their family. The CLC held Thanksgiving and Christmas parties to bring participants together. Daytime teachers got to know parents by teaching English or classes to prepare for General Educational Development (GED) tests at night, and some of the most popular classes were taught by parent mentors – whether Mexican folk dance for children or sewing for adults. The CLC was overseen by advisory boards that included parents as well as principals.

### ***Expanding Parent Involvement Programs into More Schools***

Over the next few years, the process of establishing Parent Mentor Programs and CLCs was repeated in nearby schools as parents and principals asked for the programs. Today, LSNA has

CLCs in six schools and Parent Mentor Programs in nine schools; many other programs, activities, and organizing efforts grew out of these efforts.

The programs have reaped enormous benefits for the parents involved. Over 1,300 mothers have graduated from the Parent Mentor Program. The majority returned to school or got jobs. About fifty hold part-time jobs working for LSNA in schools running parent programs, tutoring, or working in community centers as childcare providers and security guards; ten have been AmeriCorps volunteers with LSNA; eight hold full-time jobs at LSNA as education organizers, community center coordinators, or health outreach workers; and two are teaching after graduating from LSNA's teacher training program. At the CLCs, thousands of adults have studied English, while 500 have earned their GED certificates. About 700 families participate weekly in activities that range from adult education and family counseling to tutoring, recreation, and music and art for children.

The Parent Mentor Program and CLCs have also proved highly generative. Parent mentors sought a way to involve parents who couldn't visit the school during the day and helped develop LSNA's Literacy Ambassadors program to bring parent-teacher teams to homes to read, share food, and build bridges with groups of families. Parents who surveyed neighbors became dedicated to block-club organizing and then health outreach, helping many uninsured families access affordable health care. When mentors found they loved working in classrooms, LSNA brought in experts from Chicago State University to create a bilingual teacher training program specifically for parent mentors. (It now serves as the model for a state-



funded, statewide Grow Your Own Teacher program initiated by a coalition of community organizations.)

The impact on the schools has been huge. “We add a lot of life to the school,” said parent Lucila Rodriguez. “We run all the activities. And the students don’t feel they are alone, because their parents are there too. And if it’s not their parent, it’s a neighbor, or the parent of a friend.” School climates have become more positive and welcoming, and standardized-test scores have tripled. After visiting one of LSNA’s centers in 2002, Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan called for 100 schools to establish CLCs, and many have done so.

### **Rules of Engagement**

Despite the interest in the concept, the value and function of deep parent participation in schools is less well understood, if only to judge from the many visitors LSNA gets (from as far away as the Philippines and Russia) who ask: “How do you get parents involved?”

What has LSNA done to bring parents into the schools and keep them involved over the years? Here are some simple guidelines.

- *Real work:* While schools have traditionally tapped parents – as outsiders – to help with fundraisers, costumes, and the like, there is nothing quite so empowering as becoming part of the educational process. Transformation at LSNA has come from involvement in the real, respected work of teaching and learning and parents consistently rise to the challenges and achieve success. When a parent mentor tutors a failing student and that student,

for the first time, learns how to read, the parent, like the student, is transformed and committed.

- *Respect:* Respect is a complicated idea, taking on new meanings as relationships deepen. We find out what the parents know and care about. We value their culture, language, and experience – and tap their knowledge (language, culture, life experience, and knowledge about children) for the curriculum and to connect to the students. Respect also means following the “iron rule” of organizing – don’t do for others what they can do for themselves. It’s important to challenge them to keep moving forward.
- *Reciprocity:* Respect requires reciprocity – mutual support and mutual learning. Parents learn how difficult a teacher’s job is, and teachers learn how much parents have to give, particularly their passion for children and strength in building relationships with them. Parents and students learn together and from each other.



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More specifically, here are some ways we operate:

- *Recruitment.* We recruit person-to-person, as well as by flyers. We take virtually every parent who applies, regardless of education or language; we have found from experience that everyone is useful in some classroom. We always look for new mentors and work to avoid cliques.
- *Stipends.* Money shows that work is valued. It is one way to tell mothers they are wanted and it is an extra incentive to overcome fears of the school or feelings that they have nothing to offer. For many mothers, the stipend is their only personal income, and legitimizes their work to their husbands.
- *Bridges and spaces.* A Parent Mentor Program graduate who runs the program can be the bridge across the school-community divide, backed by LSNA staff who help deal with cross-class or cross-cultural tensions. The initial training is a bridge and a space: on Day 1, mothers are shy and scared; by Day 5 they are ready, though a bit anxious, to meet their teacher and enter the classroom. The Parent Mentor Program creates a legitimate parent space inside the school, with its own rules and identities and its own cohort for support.
- *Apprenticeship.* We’re not against informational workshops, but we believe deep knowledge and commitment come from experience. The Parent Mentor Program structures experience to provide the learning. Teachers are told that parent mentors must work directly with children, not make copies or clean floors. Parent mentors learn about the school as they experience it every day.
- *Leadership development.* The theme of the parent mentor training is, “You are leaders in the home, school, and community.” Parents are challenged to be leaders – not clients. At every possible opportunity, LSNA is preparing parents to take on leadership roles – working as an “assistant teacher,” speaking in workshops or public meetings, telling their story to the press or to funders, recruiting new parents.
- *Community engagement.* Parents are always encouraged to take on new challenges and to organize together to improve schools and community. Some forty-nine LSNA parents sit on the school councils, where they help select principals and approve budgets. They participate in LSNA issue committees, community meetings,

campaigns, and marches – taking positions on immigration reform, affordable housing, safety, or health. They pass petitions, testify, and meet with aldermen and state legislators.

Parent mentors and Parent Mentor Program graduates have reciprocated by creating community schools where families feel at home. They have:

- organized hundreds of family reading nights in the community centers where mothers provided storytelling and reading games side-by-side with teachers;
- created school assemblies where mothers explained Mexican history, displayed various kinds of Guatemalan houses and food, and told the story of Puerto Rican baseball hero Roberto Clemente;
- built Day of the Dead altars to Mexican grandparents, Princess Diana, and Mother Teresa in their school library and explained them to classrooms of students who visited;
- created parent lending libraries where mothers with small children can bring them during school to take out books in Spanish and English, drink coffee with neighbors, and learn about the community;
- organized Mother’s Day assemblies and Children’s Day festivals to celebrate these highly popular Latin American holidays, which they felt were neglected in their schools.

These are only a few examples. The point here is not to provide a list of things that organizations and schools should do. The point is to emphasize that by truly welcoming parents, providing them a legitimate space within the school, and encouraging and respecting their knowledge, one opens the door to limitless opportunities.

At the core of the parent mentor experience is a personal transformation from a private, often isolated immigrant or welfare mother to a person who sees herself as a school or community leader. Parents have led the transformation of schools, teachers, and the community.

### ***Support and Challenges***

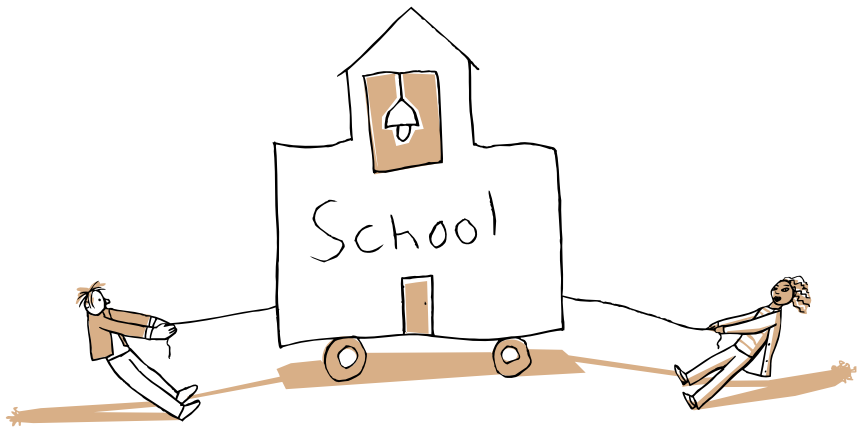
This work may sound simple, but in practice, LSNA has had to build a structure to provide support for the parents. Each parent mentor group has a paid half-time coordinator who is a former parent mentor, works out of the school, and attends biweekly meetings with the other coordinators at LSNA. Her supervisor is an LSNA education organizer who is responsible for both the Parent Mentor and Literacy Ambassador programs in four schools. These organizers spend quite a bit of time at each school, mentoring the coordinators, meeting with principals, and getting to know the parents. In two schools, the parent mentor coordinator is paid by the school system as a “school-community representative” and, therefore, does additional work for the school.

LSNA’s education organizers build bridges and trust in a variety of ways – from negotiating tensions, to inventing programs, to helping parents implement

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projects they create, to giving workshops about neighborhood issues and holding discussions to get people's input. At their biweekly meetings, coordinators exchange information, make joint decisions about the program, and solve problems.

At every level, people are mentoring each other and learning from each other. Supervisors try to take advantage of every leadership opportunity to help newer people develop while helping the organization thrive – running meetings, testifying at funding meetings, talking to the LSNA board, testifying at the Illinois State Board of Education. Technical assistance comprises everything from computer training to helping people write and practice their public speeches.

New ideas are always being implemented and can come from anywhere. For example, we developed a “mini-grant” program where a group of parents in a school could apply for \$300 to buy food or supplies for a parent-organized event that involved parents,

students, and teachers and had some educational or cultural purpose. We did that after various parents had said they would like to hold events in the school but had no resources to do it. Similarly, the Literacy Ambassadors program was created in response to parents in focus groups saying they wanted ways to help connect with the parents that never came to school.

Yet, as we move forward, we face challenges. The work of involving parents in schools is continually breaking boundaries and subverting the mainstream paradigm of schooling. Teachers visiting homes? Low-income parents tutoring students? Most teachers have not been trained to place a high priority on relations with parents, much less lean on them for academic support. Most new parent mentors don't believe they can really tutor. Both believe teaching is primarily a “technical” rather than a “relational” act. Many teachers are afraid to visit poor families. Families are afraid to invite them, and wonder what they can feed them and if they have enough chairs. Experience has changed these and other divisive assumptions.

But getting some people to take the first step has required belief and persistence by LSNA staff and parents.

Principals also balk initially at sharing their buildings. Community centers have raised turf and power issues. Disputes often arise from such minor concerns as missing chalk and toilet paper. Teachers and janitors may complain to principals, who are caught in the middle. And polite but empowered parents and principals sometimes disagree. In one case, a principal did not want to keep his building open in the summer for LSNA's community center. Finally, one LSNA staff person (a former LSC parent member who had hired that principal) suggested that the LSC parents meet with him to talk about it. He was cordial and agreed to open the school, given a couple of provisions – he wanted us to hire his assistant to be there while the building was open.

Logan Square schools have become more complex. They are no longer just places where professionals teach poor children and the lines of power are clear. Non-professional parents are more present, have more power, and are becoming more educated. Students feel more ownership. In this cross-class, cross-cultural, more-democratic community, conflicts and misunderstandings arise frequently. LSNA is a constant informal mediator, always clear that families are its main constituency but that the project requires full collaboration with the schools. One of LSNA's roles has been to build the social trust that supports the complexity inside the school and the political capital to support it outside – whether at the district level, in politics, or with funders.

Funding, of course, is another constant challenge. For twelve years, LSNA has pieced together public and private

funding to sustain its education work, now close to \$2 million a year. State funds, thanks to Latino state legislators, and federal funds, courtesy of the 21st Century Community Learning Center program, have been essential, as has support from the many private funders who value the marriage of education reform and community organizing that LSNA has modeled.

Today we face two specific funding challenges. First, under rules of the federal CLC program, our community centers will likely not be refunded if our schools improve too much and are no longer classified as low performing. The second is the short-term nature of funding from foundations, who expect our work to become “self sufficient.” Ultimately, to survive and become part of “what a school is,” these programs must receive permanent public funding.

### ***Changing the Paradigm of Schooling***

Logan Square schools – large, urban, low-income, immigrant schools – have moved part-way down the road to transformation, with organized mothers in the lead. Transformation of parents, teachers, and schools is possible, but the paradigm of schooling must change. Students must be seen not as blank slates ready to be filled by information, but as already partially formed cultural beings with their own cultural and social capital. Bilingualism and cultural complexity must be seen as assets, not deficits to be overcome. Parents are central to the educational system, not outsiders. And by treating them as partners and welcoming what they have to offer into the classroom, we can create schools that engage students and increase student achievement.