

Community Organizing for Reform at Scale: Balancing Demand and Support

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A community organizing strategy that combines collaboration with the district and other institutional partners with pressure when necessary to move reforms forward can be a powerful driver of school improvement at scale.

If reform efforts are to be sustainable at scale, schools must be deeply and authentically connected to the communities they serve. Parents, students, and community organizations play a fundamental role in building and maintaining this connection. Therefore, engaging students and their families and communities must be at the center of what the Annenberg Institute calls *smart education systems* – high-performing districts coupled with community partners in a web of learning supports and opportunities to educate all students to high standards. And that engagement must be meaningful – not just an exchange of ideas with communities, but also the opportunity for communities to actively participate in making decisions about what happens in schools.

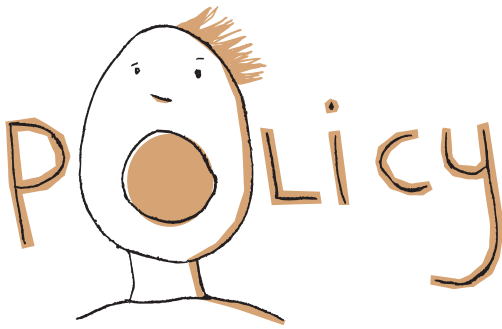
Most urban education systems struggle with defining who constitutes the community; they also struggle with how to include communities – both grassroots and elites – at the decision-making table. Inevitably, allowing the range of community voices to be heard entails rethinking power relationships and dynamics; this is the challenge of engagement in post-Katrina New Orleans as the school system and city

infrastructure are rebuilt. Some urban communities have addressed this challenge by using what we call a *demand-support* strategy. In New York City, for example, a coalition of community organizing groups has emerged as a powerful and valued reform partner with the school district, the teachers union, and city officials by balancing support for their institutional partners with pressure for change when necessary.

Last year, the Annenberg Institute spoke with parents and other stakeholders in New Orleans about community engagement to improve schools, as part of our Emerging Knowledge Forum. This convening brought together educators, researchers, community leaders, school administrators, and others from across the country to share best thinking and practice on creating smart education systems. We also conducted interviews and focus groups with a variety of stakeholders prior to the forum in four featured sites – New Orleans, New York City and the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, Boston, and Chicago – in preparation for a more in-depth case study.¹ This article draws on discussions at the

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¹ The full case study report is scheduled for release in fall 2010.



forum and data from the New Orleans and New York City research. Parents and community leaders – who are often left out of discussions on reforms – had much to say about their role in rebuilding public education.

New Orleans: The Desire for Meaningful Participation

In our work, we have found that parents, youth, and community members can become a compelling force for positive change when they build the capacity to join together around common ground, identify and articulate systemic problems, use their deep knowledge of the community to design sustainable solutions and assist with their implementation, and collectively hold a school system accountable for the education of their children.²

² See, for example, our series of case studies – Organized Communities, Stronger Schools – based on a six-year research study funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. This research found that community organizing for educational improvement had significant positive impacts on a range of student, school, and district outcomes. The case studies, tools, and more information are available at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>. See also the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) Web site at <www.nyccej.org/about> for a description of some of the improvements CEJ's organizing has brought about.

A fragmented system like New Orleans presents many barriers to this kind of parent and community involvement. Parents are often seen as individual consumers who have no collective common interest beyond the choice of schools for their own children and no role as decision makers. Problems are often seen as occurring at the school level rather than as systemic weaknesses, and the lines of authority and accountability are often unclear. In this environment, parents struggle to be heard.

Parents as Community Advocates Versus Parents as Individual Consumers

In New Orleans, we conducted forty interviews and eight focus groups, two of them with just parents. Many parents felt that they were discouraged from pursuing general advocacy for children in school, rather than limiting their interest to their own children's school performance. These parents shared that their attempts at being a “participatory parent” were negative experiences in both traditional and charter schools.³ In one instance, parents of a child who was considered “well behaved” were still concerned about what they described as a “punitive” discipline policy at a charter school – they felt that the policy as practiced was “counterproductive to the school's mission.” But the administration was unresponsive, the parents reported:

³ After Katrina, the Louisiana legislature authorized the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to create the Recovery School District, which would take control of more than 100 Orleans Parish schools deemed “failing.” See Alethea Frazier Raynor's article “New Orleans: The Challenges of Equity and Scale” in this issue of *VUE*.

“When you try to talk to them about that and suggest some other ways, they’re not open to that.”

In this way, some school leaders pushed parents towards an individual rather than communal understanding of involvement and engagement. One parent shared her experience at a recent meeting with a school administration.

I said, “I’m advocating, representing kids who don’t have anybody speaking for them.” In so many words I was told, “You’re a different kind of parent.” I suggested that we have a parent liaison or advisory committee of parents. They said it was a good idea, but “we don’t think parents should be a part of decision making.”

The collapse of viable community-based organizations, coupled with the dissolution of neighborhood schools (and new transportation challenges), left a vacuum in support for parents interested in broader advocacy for all children – not just their own. The ability to push back against the notion of parents as consumers has been limited by the lack of an organizing infrastructure.

This sentiment that parents should not be involved in decision making was echoed by a charter school principal:

Parents have less of an opportunity. I think it’s important for parents to have an avenue to influence decision making and give feedback, but I don’t know if they should be directly involved. I feel like the parents are the consumers that give feedback. Our management team is held accountable to meet their desires and needs. One of the things that is empowering parents right now is the freedom of choice they have to choose among public schools in New Orleans. I think it’s more productive for parents to leverage that power and communicate their feelings but not have them on a charter board or anything.

Generally, principals and civic and political leaders articulate the role of parents as exercising power because they can opt to move their children when they are not satisfied, since parents can choose their child’s school. As captured by the charter school principal above, the view is that parents should give feedback but not be directly involved. Thus, from this perspective, parents were seen as *consumers* of the educational goods and services that schools offer them through a system of school choice, but they were never characterized as collaborators or *producers* in the reform who participate in the decision-making process about what the educational system should look like.

Unclear Authority and Lack of Recourse

Several parents raised questions about who, ultimately, has authority over the schools, especially charter schools. One community leader explained:

Each school is required to have a parent complaint process. ... [But], are our boards as open and transparent as they need to be? Do parents know when board meetings are? Is there a complaint process? Are they published?

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One way parents could be involved in decision making is to serve on charter school boards. A charter school leader shared that “We have some parents on our board, but I don’t know if that is in our bylaws or just the way it occurred.”

Often, parents turned to OPSB with questions, needs, and frustrations regardless of whether they were in a school governed by the OPSB, RSD, or charter. According to one district leader, this was because OPSB was considered the only local authority that everyone was aware of, since it existed before the storm. The respondent went on to state,

Education is now to the point where people don’t have a point of contact for all these other services. It’s difficult for people to know, who do I get in contact with for what, and how do I contact them?

Finally, parents and community leaders expressed that state-level and, to some degree, system-level leaders were isolated from the everyday challenges (inaccessibility of charter school boards) and realities (such as transportation) facing parents who wanted to be involved. Specifically, parents

expressed frustration at the inaccessibility and disregard in which charter boards held parents. When asked about access to decision making, one parent leader stated,

I went to board meetings. I saw a bunch of men with no relationship to the school saying all the kids had ADHD. There was no opportunity for me to speak – I was not even introduced. The charter board did not have any attachment or relationship to our community and the children that they’re there to serve.

So, although there is an expressed interest in supporting parents’ access to information about charters, including parents having access to charter boards, in practice, this interest has not necessarily trickled down to the school level. Responses from a range of sources in New Orleans conveyed that charter school boards “vary in quality”; yet, mechanisms that seriously address the variability of charter board quality or the inaccessibility of charter school boards were not known.

NYC Coalition for Educational Justice: Balancing Demand and Support

When parent and community organizations bring assets to the table as they approach traditional power-holding institutions like school districts, teachers unions, and city and state agencies to advocate for school improvement, they often gain respect, appreciation, and collaboration. In the Annenberg Institute’s work around the country, we have seen more and more communities that gather credible data, design innovative solutions that would not have occurred to more traditional

reformers, build alliances, and secure resources independently. Districts, unions, and elected officials have credited such community organizing efforts with helping to achieve major educational improvements.⁴

At the same time, parent and community organizations that derive their power independently of their neighborhood schools and the district – unlike traditional parent organizations like the PTA – have the ability to put pressure on their partners to move forward if change gets bogged down. The sources of the potential power of these organizations are that they mobilize the people with the highest stakes in the quality of their neighborhood schools and who possess the deepest knowledge of their communities' assets and challenges. When they speak with an organized, unified voice, decision-makers are more likely to listen.

The New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), a citywide parent- and community-led coalition formed in 2006, was one of the sites discussed by the wide range of national and local stakeholders who participated in our 2009 Emerging Knowledge Forum in New Orleans. We gathered data on CEJ prior to the forum in New York City in twenty-one interviews with CEJ members, their partners, district and city officials, and funders, as well as a focus group in English and one in Spanish with parent leaders. We also attended a CEJ meeting and a CEJ event and reviewed relevant documents. From this discussion and research, a picture emerged of the

successes and challenges of a demand-support strategy.

Building Community Power to Participate in Policy Development: A Citywide Coalition

CEJ grew out of the work of three neighborhood-based collaboratives: the Community Collaborative to Improve Bronx Schools (formerly Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools), the Brooklyn Education Collaborative, and the Brooklyn-Queens 4 Education Collaborative. These collaboratives each include public school parents, union-led groups, community residents, and community organizations with long track records of strengthening their communities through organizing, social services, and housing development. CEJ has risen quickly to be the preeminent parent organization working for better public schools in the city's low-income and working-class neighborhoods.

The neighborhood collaboratives came together to form CEJ with the vision of a citywide parent organization with roots in low-performing districts and sufficient capacity to propose and participate in the development of systemwide education policy. By forming a larger-scale coalition, the neighborhood collaboratives were able to address both local and citywide issues. In a session on CEJ at the Emerging Knowledge Forum, a CEJ member-organization leader explained the importance of creating CEJ:

[My organization] started at the local level. When mayoral [power] was centralized, it became clear that we needed to work at a central level. We were one small organization and could win on one small issue... but not deeper issues... CEJ began to look at issues across the city.

⁴ See our case study series Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: The Impact of Community and Youth Organizing on Public School Reform at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>.

Working with Allies

CEJ's allies recognize and admire the organization's collaborative approach and advance preparation. One of CEJ's strengths, said one City Council staff member, is that they always arrive at meetings with a bargaining chip or an important piece of data:

The administration, once they feel like you bring nothing to the table – always complaining, no solutions – it's hard to get their attention. But if they feel like you have something to offer, are being transparent, sincere, genuine – that's a much better way to engage.

Just as important as their political skill and bargaining ability is the on-the-ground knowledge of CEJ and its member organizations, which is invaluable to those making governance and policy decisions. In our 2009 Emerging Knowledge Forum, an urban superintendent expressed the wish that there were a presence like CEJ in his city so that he would “know what the priorities of the community are.” He went on to say that in “a large, diverse urban school system,” like the districts in his city, New York City, and others, “so many people try to

PERSPECTIVES: Parent Organizing and Accountable Collaboration

CAROL BOYD
*Parent leader, NYC Coalition
for Educational Justice*

In 2004, parents in the South Bronx celebrated a historic victory when after an intensive campaign to improve teacher quality in their low-performing schools, the Lead Teacher Program (LTP) was launched. The LTP was unique in that the model provided for authentic collaboration, in both the planning and implementation processes, among all of the key stakeholders (parents, community organizations, the teacher union, and the Department of Education).

A report prepared by an outside evaluator, the Academy for Educational Development, highlighted the effect of the LTP collaboration in improving teacher quality and student achievement; the LTP model

was used for two successive school terms and the number of participating schools was increased. Credibility, sustainability, and scalability: we had achieved the ultimate recipe for success (or so we thought). But in year three, when the Department of Education decided to take the successful LTP citywide, they killed the collaborative process that was fundamental in yielding such positive outcomes and excluded the parent groups that had created the program in the first place. However, we as parents refused to be [excluded].

After much reflection, we came to the realization that parents needed to build citywide power in order to compel the Department of Education to work with us as equal partners. It was this thinking that led to the formation of the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), a citywide coalition of nine community groups working together

to organize parents to improve low-performing schools. CEJ is based on the premise of *accountable collaboration*, meaning that partners feel most accountable to each other when there is a recognition of each other's power. If parents don't have this power, many school districts will treat parents as fair-weather friends that they can invite to dinner when they want and kick out when their interests differ. CEJ continues to build a parent organization with the power to compel accountable collaboration towards smart education systems citywide, statewide, and across the country.

For more information about CEJ, see <www.nycccej.org>.

For more about the Lead Teacher campaign, see Williams 2004.

get your attention that it's overwhelming." He cited one of CEJ's strengths as their knowledge that "the district doesn't have the capacity to handle hundreds of separate requests." A New York City Council staff member said:

Elected officials are trying to do the right thing, but they get confused by different voices. It's hard to see the real path to education reform. You can't always bring everyone together, but the more you can have a singular, clear voice – CEJ can be a major part of that effort, which they have been – it would be beneficial to someone like my boss. . . . It's important in city government and politics to have something that speaks to people in the community and their concerns.

This knowledge of the community is also helpful when administrators and policy-makers need to effectively communicate with community members. In the lead-up to the a campaign for a comprehensive middle grades improvement plan, for instance, CEJ members worked closely with school staff and vetted the final report to make sure the report "wasn't too academic, but was meaningful on the ground," in the words of one interviewee.

CEJ's on-the-ground knowledge and community connections also translate into an on-the-ground presence, a valuable political resource to their allies. One CEJ member-organization leader said, "The [CEJ member] groups are a turnout machine – when there are passionate leaders, everyone steps up." Another valuable characteristic of CEJ activists is that as private citizens, they have a freedom to speak openly that the New York City Department



of Education and City Council staff do not. A City Council staff member said:

[CEJ] does things that we can't do. We can't be seen as organizing parents. . . . But if they say "We're going to organize a rally" on an issue that we believe in, we're, like, "Woo-hoo! Go ahead!"

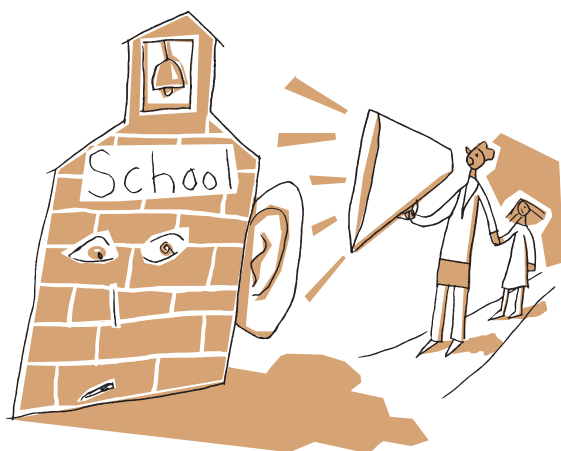
Parent Leadership and Capacity Building

CEJ's approach differs from other groups in several aspects. Two of the most important are its democratic, parent-led governance structure and its data-and-support partnership with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The combination of grassroots parent leadership and "grasstops" university research means that, in the words of an education foundation staff member, CEJ possesses both "user-friendly data" and parents who can "use the data for themselves, interpreting it and using it to build a case."

Having a strong constituency of citizens armed with solid data has proved invaluable to CEJ. One education reform advocate who has worked with CEJ put it this way:

Sometimes the intellectual community thinks that you can't use data, that parents of poor kids aren't going to be able to see through data. I learned that they can certainly figure it out and use it to their advantage. ... [It] makes them very strong – gives them the opportunity to say “I don't just *think* [schools] are bad, I can actually *prove* it to you.”

CEJ's internal governance structure reflects its focus on empowered parents, selecting two or three parents from each community-based organization and union in its membership to sit on the steering committee, alongside two executive directors. The steering committee leads and directs CEJ's campaigns from monthly meetings and makes all of CEJ's decisions. There are no permanent officers; CEJ is led by a rotating group of parents. The meetings are run according to basic principles of adult learning and are places of sharp strategic analysis, focused and realistic discussion, and a high level of mutual respect. Several interviewees mentioned that attendance at steering committee meetings has always been high, and the numbers of participants is growing.



Two CEJ parent leaders described the meetings:

Parents learn a tremendous amount about educational policy, about the politics of education, and power analysis, and they also have a space where people really get to know each other, build relationships of trust and make real decisions. CEJ . . . moves at a pace that is ambitious and, at the same time, is very respectful of people's growth and development.

Parent leadership is key – having parents facilitate meetings, making it possible for them to participate by providing childcare, food, and translation. It's different from the PTA-type leadership, which has a culture of “being true to the school” and not challenging the school.

This method of democratic leadership has proved effective. As one Annenberg Institute staff member who works with CEJ put it,

The people who are most affected by the inequitable outcomes in the school system have the capacity and the will to change that system.

When Support Doesn't Work, Pressure

At times, collaboration and support are not enough. Although CEJ works hard to keep interactions friendly and respectful so that partners are challenged but not alienated, CEJ members do not shy away from confronting decision-makers and putting them in uncomfortable situations if they feel they are not being heard. CEJ has conducted rallies and protests on the steps of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and City Hall, circulated petitions, released reports, called press conferences, and carried out other public actions over such issues as poor-quality middle schools, budget cuts, and school closings.

PERSPECTIVES: Youth Organizing and Smart Education Systems

ADOLFO ABREU, 17

Youth leader

Sistas & Brothas United/Urban Youth Collaborative

Developing smart education systems requires that all of the players who are involved or affected by the system are given the opportunity to make decisions. Students and parents are both affected by the policies that the Department of Education makes, but they have no say in what at the end of the day is affecting them. Youth organizations are the ones that give the youth a voice on the issues that are directly affecting them concerning their education.

The way the youth organizations give a voice to the young people is by building relationships with them and training them on the issues that are affecting them. The young people are the ones that are experiencing policies that at times are jeopardizing their future choices. They are the experts because they experience the flaws within the education system. Youth organizations give the youth the power to reform their lives. By building their base, the youth organizations are able to reform their lives by mobilizing people into action and applying pressure to their targets who have the decision-making power.

By applying pressure to the elected [officials], they then notice that the organization is powerful and has credibility in the community. Once there, a relationship can be formed with the elected [officials] in which the youth organization can apply pressure to the [official] to pass pieces of legislation. Reform can truly begin to be implemented once the elected [official] is pushed into convincing his/her colleagues into changing policies for the better.

Youth organizing can develop a smart education system with two things: extensive outreach to parents and engaging the youth in conversations about the education system. Currently in the system, the parents are not reached out to enough due to there being a lack of communication between them and the school. The majority of people that live in New York City do not speak English, or they do not have English as their primary language. A lot of documents are out there that do not have translation for parents who do not speak English, resulting in the parents not being informed on what is going on with their child's education.

Youth organizations can be the gateway into putting pressure on the Department of Education so that they could provide translation for the parents. They can also hold information sessions in which they explain to the parents what their child needs to do in order to excel in school and the role they play in their child's education. With this, the parents

are engaged in a dialogue where they are informed on what they can do to make sure that their child is having a good educational experience.

Students can also be engaged in dialogues where they are trained in certain skills and practices that they can use to succeed in their education experience. Once the school community is engaged in dialogues that are geared towards success, neighboring schools can then have the opportunity to learn from one another. The entire school district can then be positively impacted if all schools implement this grassroots change that is centered on the parents and the students. Once there, we can then develop smart education systems that have the people who are affected in the center being able to make decisions.

Demonstrating large numbers of mobilized community members and attracting media attention are powerful tools in CEJ's community organizing strategy.

Mostly, this type of pressure is respected and is often highly effective when combined with a commitment to collaboration whenever possible. Many of CEJ's partners with whom we spoke described CEJ parent activists – partly in admiration, partly in annoyance – as “relentless.” One NYCDOE staff member said, “I’ve referred to them [CEJ] as the thorn in my side, but it’s been a good thorn,” while another said, “Early meetings were not lovefests... [but we] push each other and come to a common vision.”

Community Organizing as an Asset to School Reform

A demand-support strategy, by its very nature, makes for a sometimes-bumpy ride. Although the Emerging Knowledge Forum research team found overwhelming praise for CEJ's approach among its institutional allies, some questioned what they perceived as CEJ's adversarial nature, or felt that the group gave up too quickly on efforts to cultivate relationships within the NYCDOE and city government when initial efforts were unsuccessful. One NYCDOE staff member said, “One of challenges...with community organizations is to draw a clear line between where it's collaboration and where you get to set policy.” Some of the parent and community leaders and their allies, on the other hand, felt that in negotiating with partners, CEJ sometimes ended up ceding more than it should have. One union activist said, “Once you get on stage with them [the

NYCDOE at public events], it becomes difficult to fight the next battle with them.”

But amid the acknowledgment of challenges, a clear message came through in our conversations with parents and other stakeholders in our Emerging Knowledge Forum research: an organized, independent community that balances collaboration and pressure and acts as an equal partner with the district and other institutions can be a powerful force for school improvement at scale.

Reference

Williams, Ocynthia. 2004. “A Community-Led Reform: Improving Schools in the South Bronx,” *Voices in Urban Education* no. 5 (Fall). Available for download at < www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/archives>