

Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition & Sistas and Brothas United

IMPROVING SCHOOLS THROUGH YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY ACTION

[The Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition] is the most instrumental community force I've seen function in New York City around the issue of school overcrowding. I think the results really underscore that to the point of making it indisputable.

— Bruce Irushalmi, assistant superintendent for school facilities,
Community School District 10, Bronx, New York

[Sistas and Brothas United has] been very instrumental in developing the leadership of students to take action in their community and participate in our democracy. These are the kind of leaders we want for our future.

— Yvonne Torres, superintendent, Region 1

In 1996, a small group of public school parents in the Bronx, New York, launched what became a ten-year struggle to improve overcrowded schools and aging school facilities in their community. They conducted walkthroughs of school buildings to itemize necessary repairs and brought politicians, parents, and the media on tours of overcrowded and poorly constructed facilities. They staged rallies with elected officials and held press conferences at the downtown headquarters of city and state agencies. They catalogued sites for new school construction, developed innovative strategies for new school development, and met with federal officials to discuss the importance of school-facilities funds.

High school students joined in the effort. Young people built campaigns to fight against widespread and severe overcrowding in local high schools. They also mobilized to address the ancillary issues that arise from congested schools: increased violence among students; tense relationships between teachers and students; curtailed student access to vital academic supports such as guidance and college counseling; and a pervasive disengagement and apathy among young people and adults on campuses. They worked

with educators and the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) to open a new school, the Leadership Institute, that would teach young people the skills of leadership and community action as part of the school's curriculum.

In this study, researchers at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform documented education organizing by the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC) and by Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s in Community School District 10 (part of Region 1 after reorganization), the local district that included their Northwest Bronx neighborhoods. Drawing on interviews with district and school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and community members, as well as publicly available quantitative data on school facilities utilization and student performance, the study describes the impact of the two organizations' work to influence district policy and increase school capacity and discusses the implications of their work for improved student outcomes.

This research found that organizing contributed to increased educational opportunities in several important ways.

NWBCCC's and SBU's organizing helped create more equity in the development of district priorities to reduce overcrowding and reallocate resources.

Study data show that NWBCCC's and SBU's organizing influenced the city's school-facilities priorities, producing a dramatic investment of resources in school facilities in Northwest Bronx communities. NWBCCC is credited with helping District 10 secure 14,000 new seats through new school construction and leasing. NYCDOE data show that elementary and middle school overcrowding in District 10 decreased from a 114 percent school utilization rate in 1996-1997 to 96 percent utilization in 2005-2006. Utilization rates in high schools in the same geographic area decreased from 135 percent to 110 percent during the same period.

NWBCCC's and SBU's organizing led to greater community engagement, student engagement, and school accountability to the community.

Educators believe the groups' willingness to use collaborative and confrontational strategies expanded school system responsiveness to the school-facilities concerns of families in the southern part of District 10, which had historically received little attention from local political leaders. NWBCCC's work on affordable housing, banking practices, and neighborhood redevelopment brought knowledge of local conditions and added professional expertise that helped the district to identify new school spaces and strategies for leasing school space.

SBU's high school reform campaigns heightened district awareness of the relationship between school overcrowding and the problems of school safety and

student access to counseling. Input from SBU helped district leaders to refine their strategy for siting multiple new small high schools on large, low-performing campuses.

For both groups, genuine engagement of parents and students added to the organizations' perceived legitimacy by school and system officials. SBU was particularly valued for bringing the voices of marginalized students – rather than the high-achieving students who usually populate student government – into conversations with educators.

NWBCCC's and SBU's organizing resulted in greater educational opportunity for students in the low-income neighborhoods they serve.

Local campaigns produced wide-ranging improvements in the climate of individual schools. NWBCCC and SBU won traffic safety improvements, cafeteria and bathroom improvements, and new policies on school communication with parents. SBU also secured changes to metal-detector policies and improved training for school safety agents in how to interact with students.

• • • • •

In spring 2009, the Leadership Institute graduated its first class of students. Like any new small school, the Institute is a work in progress, grappling daily with the challenge of building a strong and effective culture in which staff and students share a vision of academic success and young people's leadership. Yet, the school stands as a testament to young people's desire for quality education in the Bronx and provides evidence that when students are given support and respect, they can and will get engaged in a deep and sustained way in the work of education reform.