

# Chicago ACORN

## RETHINKING THE TEACHER PIPELINE FOR AN URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

*Without ACORN, I think you would have an isolated, insulated school system that's just moving along, doing what it thinks is best, without any checks and balances. . . . We definitely need an organization like that out there to push us and make us do our jobs better.*

— Chicago Public Schools official

Like many other large urban districts, Chicago Public Schools struggles to recruit and retain experienced and successful teachers in schools serving low-income communities. In 2005, the school system entered into an unusual partnership with community groups, university leaders, and the teachers unions to create a new teacher pipeline for historically hard-to-staff schools. The effort identified and trained community members to become teachers in schools with high rates of teacher turnover and persistently low levels of educational performance.

Since 1988, ACORN has organized to strengthen Chicago's neighborhood schools by training parents to participate effectively on local school councils; securing resources for school facilities improvements; and, most recently, by improving teacher retention. Beginning in 2001, ACORN conducted a series of data analyses and local campaigns that exposed teacher turnover as a severe problem in neighborhood schools. This work revealed that the cause of high teacher turnover stemmed from teachers' lack of experience with and sense of connection to the communities served by their schools.

Drawing on a successful teacher preparation program developed by the Chicago-based Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), ACORN called for creating a statewide "grow your own" teacher pipeline strategy to train teacher paraprofessionals and community residents to become teachers in their neighborhood schools. ACORN worked with LSNA and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform to assemble a coalition of community organizing groups, district officials, leaders from university

teacher preparation programs, the teachers unions, and elected officials to advocate for the statewide teacher pipeline program. This coalition secured passage of the 2004 Grow Your Own Teachers Act and, as of 2008, had won \$11 million in successive appropriations to support the program.

The statewide Grow Your Own Teachers (GYO) program is implemented by regional consortia of universities, school districts, and community organizations that work together to develop local teacher pipeline programs. These consortia recruit neighborhood residents to participate in the teacher pipeline program and provide a range of supports to help these teacher candidates complete the program successfully. The GYO program uses a cohort system to provide ongoing support to participants and offers forgivable loans, English classes, remedial coursework, daycare, and tutoring.

To examine the impact of ACORN's organizing on school improvement in Chicago, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform conducted a six-year research study, collecting data from multiple sources and analyzing these data, along with data from six other urban districts around the nation. The analysis included interviews, field observations, archival documents, and citywide media coverage. The study team's research found that ACORN's organizing enhanced equity in the school system, developed a teacher preparation program that took a new approach to addressing the shortage of qualified teachers in low-income communities, and established new roles for parents and community constituencies in improving their schools.

### **Community organizing in Chicago enhanced equity in the district**

---

District officials credited ACORN with focusing the district's attention on the needs of underserved schools and with helping to bring new state resources to address teacher quality through the GYO program. School principals credited ACORN with securing funds for facilities improvements under the district's capital budget process.

### **Community organizing led to the development of a new, funded teacher preparation program**

---

The GYO strategy of intentionally recruiting teachers with knowledge of and relationships with low-income communities of color presented a new approach to teacher preparation. As of November 2007, 545 candidates were participating in sixteen local consortia across the state; 1,000 teachers are projected to complete the program by 2016. A majority of candidates are people of color and hold full-time jobs while completing their coursework, often as classroom paraprofessionals.

### **Community organizing established new roles for parent and community constituencies in improving teacher quality in historically hard-to-staff schools**

---

ACORN's research and organizing campaigns influenced how district officials and leaders in institutions of higher education worked to address challenges of teacher preparation, placement, and retention. The Grow Your Own Teachers Act also positioned community organizing groups as key players in local consortia with responsibility for recruiting and supporting teacher candidates as they move through the pipeline program.

• • • • •

Though the study examines the education organizing of Chicago ACORN, the work described in the research report is now being led by Action Now. In 2008, Action Now, an independent, non-affiliated community organizing group, was founded by the board, staff, and members formerly associated with Chicago ACORN. This group is continuing the education and other organizing campaigns that were begun by ACORN.