

Securing a College Prep Curriculum for All Students



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

COMMUNITY COALITION ♦ LOS ANGELES



ORGANIZED
COMMUNITIES,
STRONGER SCHOOLS

Securing a College Prep Curriculum for All Students

COMMUNITY COALITION ♦ LOS ANGELES

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SECURING A COLLEGE PREP CURRICULUM FOR ALL STUDENTS



Overview: Community Coalition

I am pretty convinced that no amount of intellectual framing and data and research that we could have provided would have moved the district. We needed the 800-plus Latino and African American parents to mandate rigor. It was organizing unlike anywhere else I've seen in the nation.

— Russlynn Ali, executive director, The Education Trust–West

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second-largest school district in the nation, is plagued not only by insufficient educational resources, but also by vast disparities in how those resources are allocated. Students in South Los Angeles attend some of the most overcrowded and lowest-performing schools in the city. Community Coalition, an organizing group based in South Los Angeles, has confronted these realities with organized political action.

In 2000, after several years of focusing on facilities issues, Community Coalition initiated a campaign to increase student access to college preparatory coursework. The campaign responded to the concerns of area high school students that their schools did not provide the challenging coursework necessary for college. Community Coalition's youth leaders collected data on course offerings, using the master schedules at their high schools, and discovered that many South Los Angeles schools offered far more classes preparing students for low-wage jobs than for college. One student leader pointed out that his high school offered nine cosmetology classes but only four chemistry classes. The students' claims were supported by district data – large numbers of South Los Angeles students routinely dropped out of high school, and those who graduated lacked the required coursework to attain access to the state university system.

In 2004, after several years of “small wins” at local high schools, Community Coalition co-convened a broad-based citywide coalition, Communities for Educational Equity (CEE), to tackle the problem of

college access districtwide. Less than a year later, CEE's organizing led the LAUSD school board to pass a resolution mandating college preparatory courses as the default curriculum for all students in the district. Then–school board president José Huizar declared, “This is one of the most significant reforms this district is embarking on in the last twenty years. The payoffs will be huge; the impacts will be huge.” CEE continues to monitor implementation of the policy in Los Angeles.

In this study, we examined the impact of Community Coalition's organizing, based on extensive document analysis and interviews with youth, teachers, district administrators, and the organizers themselves. Our research found that Community Coalition's organizing contributed to increased educational opportunities in several important ways:

- ◆ *enhanced equity* in the district, both through Community Coalition's campaign to redistribute school construction funds and through its leadership in CEE to expand student access to college preparatory coursework;
- ◆ *increased district accountability to community constituencies* as community organizations continue to play a role in ensuring the quality implementation of the college preparatory policy in Los Angeles;
- ◆ *new political leadership* in Los Angeles: Karen Bass, founder of Community Coalition, was elected Speaker of the California State Assembly, and Mónica García, who served on the CEE steering committee, was elected president of the Los Angeles Board of Education.

Though it is too early to measure the impact of Community Coalition's work on student educational outcomes, the effects of their organizing on school district policy and the development of community power are clear. Community Coalition's efforts transformed the curriculum of a large urban school district and built new forms of parent, youth, and community power in one of the most economically and socially marginalized communities in the nation.

Community Coalition's work offers important lessons for intergenerational organizing. Organizing campaigns were rooted in the daily experiences of young people and leveraged the organization's political relationships and considerable strategic and data analytic capacities in ways that amplified young people's interests and demands. Community Coalition's campaign for rigorous college preparatory high school coursework demonstrates how young people's leadership brings essential and vital urgency to the task of improving urban public schools.

Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: An Introduction to the Case Study Series

Because good intentions are not enough, when not fortified with political will and political power.

— U.S. President Barack Obama

The opening quote, a reflection from Barack Obama on the lessons he learned during his post-college stint as a community organizer, cuts to the core of why organizing matters. Even the most well-intentioned of policies (and politicians) are often insufficient to bring about desired outcomes. Political will and political power are necessary forces to carry those good intentions forward and to hold political actors accountable when those intentions go unrealized.

In low-income neighborhoods like the ones on the South Side of Chicago where Obama organized, political power is not attained through wealth or status. Rather, power comes from numbers – from bringing together ordinary people to identify critical community concerns and to act collectively and strategically for improvements to their communities, neighborhoods, and schools.

This research follows the organizing efforts undertaken by residents of low- to moderate-income communities throughout the country, specifically in the arena of public school reform. In addition to documenting their campaigns, we aim to get underneath the organizing process to assess the tangible impacts of organizing on students and their schools. In other words, does the political will generated by organizing – in the arena of education reform – ultimately enhance the capacity of schools to improve student learning?

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

Neither community organizing nor public education activism is new in the United States. But increasingly in the last fifteen years, community organizations have used organizing as a focused and deliberate strategy for school improvement, particularly within low- and moderate-income communities.

Instead of relying on more traditional forms of parent and community involvement (getting involved in school activities or serving on district-sponsored committees, for instance), organizing groups mobilize parents, youth, and community members for local school improvement and districtwide reform, often applying pressure from the outside to generate the political will necessary to adopt and implement reforms. In the process, these organizing efforts aim to equalize power dynamics between school and district administrators and low-income parents and

Community Organizing for School Reform . . .

- Brings together public school parents, youth and community residents, and/or institutions to engage in collective dialogue and action for change
- Builds grassroots leadership by training parents and youth in the skills of organizing and civic engagement
- Builds political power by mobilizing large numbers of people around a unified vision and purpose
- Focuses on demands for accountability, equity, and quality for all students, rather than on gains for individual students
- Aims to disrupt long-standing power relationships that produce failing schools in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and communities of color
- Uses the tactics of direct action and mobilization to put pressure on decision-makers when necessary

community members, who may otherwise feel marginalized or powerless to challenge educational inequities.

Nationally, it is estimated that more than 200 community groups are engaged in organizing for better schooling (Mediratta & Fruchter 2001; Gold, Simon & Brown 2002). These organizing groups have responded to a variety of parental and youth concerns, including unsafe environmental and facilities conditions, overcrowded schools, dangerous school crossings, inadequate school funding, unresponsive administrators, and inexperienced teachers.

Many researchers have noted the failure of traditional approaches to education reform to bring about deep and lasting school improvement. Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton, for example, attribute the “sorry and familiar story of school reform gone awry” to educators’ singular focus on changing the internal “technical aspects” of schooling, without adequately attending to the political, social, and cultural dimensions of schooling. Oakes and Lipton argue,

The logic and strategies employed in social and political movements – in contrast to those found in organizational change models – are more likely to expose, challenge, and if successful, disrupt the prevailing norms and politics of schooling inequality. . . . Without attention to these dynamics, such reforms are abandoned entirely or implemented in ways that actually replicate (perhaps in a different guise) the stratified status quo. (Oakes & Lipton 2002, p. 383)

Oakes and Lipton’s analysis reflects an increased interest from both practitioners and researchers in understanding the potential role of community organizing in contributing to sustainable improvements in education.

¹ An eighth group, Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope, was involved at the onset of the study. Because they did not participate in the study across the whole six years, we have not produced a case study of their organization.

² The work described in this study was carried out by Chicago ACORN until January 2008, when the director, staff, and board left ACORN to start a new group called Action Now, which is continuing the education and other organizing campaigns initiated while they were affiliated with ACORN.

ABOUT THE STUDY

To date, research on community organizing for school reform has been mostly qualitative and includes numerous reports (Gold, Simon & Brown 2002; HoSang 2005; Zachary & olatoye 2001), as well as excellent and detailed book-length analyses of organizing efforts (Oakes, Rogers & Lipton 2006; Warren 2001; Shirley 1997). But comparatively few research studies examine the effect of these groups’ work on local schools and communities. How have organizing efforts influenced district policies and practices? In what ways does the culture of schools change because of involvement in organizing? And most important, are educational outcomes better for students when organizing is in the picture? This study, initiated in 2002 with funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, sought to address these critical questions.

The six-year, mixed-methods study – the first of its kind – followed the school reform campaigns of seven organizing groups nationally.¹ The study examined the impact of organizing on the leadership development of those involved and also assessed the impact of organizing on three critical indicators of education reform: district-level policy, school-level capacity, and student outcomes.

Organized Communities, Stronger Schools, the report of preliminary findings released in March 2008, measured and linked the impacts of community organizing to specific performance indicators (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2008). We found that sophisticated organizing at the grassroots level can indeed make major contributions to improving student achievement. Across multiple data sources, we observed strong and consistent evidence that effective community organizing:

- ◆ stimulates important changes in educational policy, practices, and resource distribution at the system level;
- ◆ strengthens school–community relationships, parent involvement and engagement, and trust in schools; and
- ◆ contributes to higher student educational outcomes, including higher attendance, test score performance, high school completion, and college-going aspirations.

THE CASE STUDY SERIES

Following up on *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools*, we offer a case study series that presents an in-depth look at each of the organizing groups in our study. The study sites are:

- ◆ Austin Interfaith (Austin, Texas), affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)
- ◆ Chicago ACORN (Chicago, Illinois), affiliated with the national network Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now²
- ◆ Community Coalition and its youth organizing arm, South Central Youth Empowered thru Action (Los Angeles, California)
- ◆ Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project and its youth organizing affiliate, Youth United for Change (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania); EPOP was affiliated with the PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing) national network until 2009
- ◆ Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and its youth organizing arm, Sistas and Brothas United (Bronx, New York)
- ◆ Oakland Community Organizations (Oakland, California), affiliated with PICO
- ◆ People Acting for Community Together (Miami, Florida), affiliated with the Direct Action and Research Training (DART) Center

Each case study traces the group’s education organizing campaigns and considers the impact of this work on promoting resource equity and district accounta-

bility for improved educational outcomes. In three districts – Austin, Miami, and Oakland – where the education reform strategy was in place at least five years, we also examine trends in school capacity and student educational outcomes. Though educators predicted gains in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia resulting from the organizing conducted by groups in our study, the reforms are either too new and/or do not integrate enough intensive school-based organizing for us to assess their school capacity and student outcome impacts through administrative or survey data. In these cases, we focus on documenting the group’s organizing efforts and examining preliminary indicators of impact.

The case studies in this series will be made available for download, as they are published, at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis of impacts both across sites and within sites is guided by a conceptual framework – or logic model – for how organizing leads to change in schools. The framework, presented in the 2004 publication *Constituents of Change* (see Mediratta 2004; Figure 1), provides a guiding theory of change for how community organizing stimulates improvements

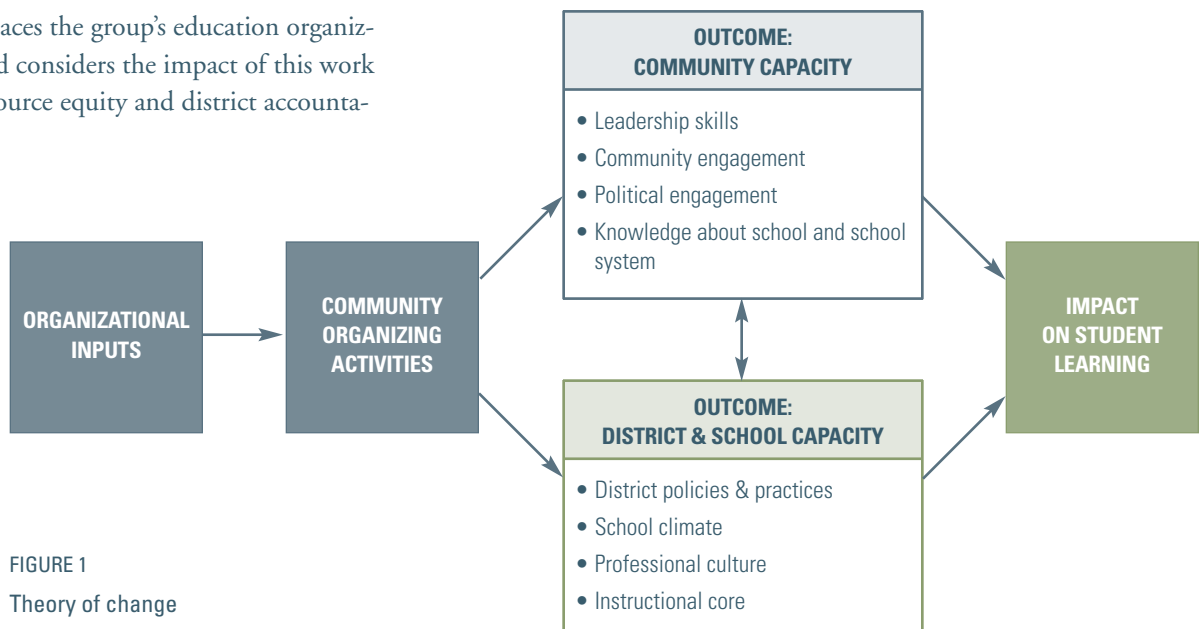


FIGURE 1
Theory of change

in both community capacity and district and school capacity. In the current series of case studies, we focus on how organizing influences district and school capacity and student learning.

We ground our assessment of district and school capacity outcomes in the existing educational change literature. We draw primarily from the seminal research on essential supports conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, which outlines five broad dimensions of school capacity (leadership, parent–community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, ambitious instruction) that are associated with better student outcomes (Sebring et al. 2006). We also pull from Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider’s work on trust in schools (2002), Richard Elmore’s writings on

teaching practice (1996; 2002; 2004), the National Center for Education Statistics’ articulation of school quality indicators (Mayer et al. 2000), and research on indicators of education organizing conducted by Eva Gold and Elaine Simon at Research for Action and Chris Brown at the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2002).

Based on the above conceptual framework, we would expect improvements on intermediate indicators of district and school capacity to produce a higher-quality learning experience. In turn, we would expect this stronger learning environment to result in improved student outcomes. Though changes in school and district capacity are important outcomes in their own right, they take on added significance because of their links to student achievement. Critical dimensions of district and school capacity are outlined in Figure 2.

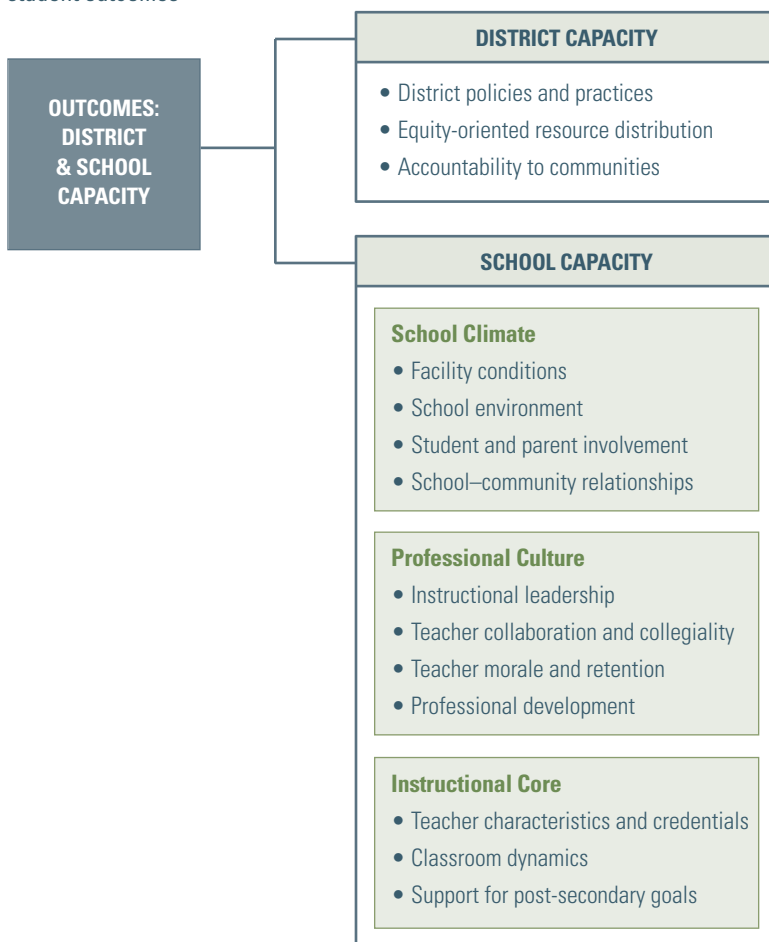
DATA SOURCES

Our study uses a rigorous mixed-methods design to understand the impacts of organizing on district and school capacity and student outcomes. We collected 321 stakeholder interviews; 75 observations of organizing strategy sessions, campaign activities, and actions; 509 teacher surveys; and school demographic and outcome data for each of the seven school districts.

We used interviews and observational data with community organizers and adult and youth members to clarify the theories of action and resultant educational change strategies guiding organizing groups’ work, and to assess members’ knowledge about education policy and their sense of efficacy in generating change within their schools and communities. Publicly available school-level administrative data, interviews with district and school leaders, and teacher surveys were used to analyze district-, school-, and student-level outcomes. Impacts of community organizing were thus assessed in three ways:

- ◆ **District and school leaders’ attributions.** We examined district and school leaders’ perceptions of the impact of organizing groups on district and

FIGURE 2
Dimensions of district and school capacity that lead to improved student outcomes



school decision making, capacities, and relationships with parent, youth, and community constituencies.

- ◆ **Teachers' attributions.** We assessed teachers' perceptions of a variety of school context indicators, and whether they believed that changes in school climate, professional culture, and instructional indicators had been influenced by the groups' actions.
- ◆ **Student outcomes.** We reviewed administrative data on student attendance, standardized test performance, graduation and dropout rates, and college aspirations in the schools targeted by groups in our study.

We also analyzed our data to understand how groups achieve their impact – that is, we identified the critical organizing processes and strategic choices that enabled organizing groups to effectively challenge the status quo and help improve schooling conditions and educational outcomes in their communities.

A detailed description of the data sources and methods of collection can be found in the Appendix.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Community organizing for school reform does not occur in isolation from the messy realities of communities, politics, and schools. Linking organizing strategies to change – either in the community at large or in complex institutions such as schools – poses critical challenges for research. Given the intricacies of schools, communities, and the dynamic contexts in which they are situated, it is neither feasible nor desirable to create an experimental research design from which causal inferences might be drawn between the activities of organizing groups and the schooling outcomes they hope to stimulate.

For example, because organizing groups make decisions based on the priorities of community members and the urgency of problems in their local schools, random assignment of schools as “treatment” and “non-treatment” is not a reasonable or appropriate strategy. Even if such a design were possible, it would be difficult to pinpoint organizing as the “cause” of

these changes, given the high turnover among superintendents, principals, teachers, and students that characterizes large urban districts, the presence of other reforms at the school, as well as the ebbs and flows of organizing itself that occur over time (Connell, Kubisch, Schorr & Weiss 1995; Berliner 2002).

To assess the schooling impacts of organizing groups, then, we employed a complex, mixed-methods design that assumes that community change efforts are multi-dimensional interventions that are evolving in response to constant changes in context. By using multiple data sources and carefully examining points of convergence and divergence within the data, we can contextualize and explain conclusions the data suggest about impact. Our ability to draw inferences in support of our research hypotheses is based on the consistency of evidence across these multiple data sources and forms of analysis.

In carrying out this research, we engaged in a collaborative research process with our sites, sharing preliminary findings at each stage of our analysis, so that their intimate knowledge of the school, district, and community contexts informed our interpretation and understanding of the data.

On almost any given day, Black and Latino students from across South Los Angeles gather at the offices of Community Coalition, a grassroots organization that mobilizes young people to fight for educational justice. Many of the young people refer to the Coalition as their second home; and, indeed, the atmosphere is warm, playful, and familial, punctuated by good-natured teasing between youth and staff and by animated chatter about *MySpace* pages or the latest music videos.

At the same time, these young people come to Community Coalition with a vision and a clear sense of purpose, one that is born out of indignation at the state of their schools. When asked to describe the conditions of their South Los Angeles schools, students recount a litany of problems: dirty bathrooms, gang violence, out-of-date textbooks, non-credentialed teachers, over-subscribed classes, an overabundance of vocational classes, and a short supply of college preparatory courses.

Perhaps the most passionate testimony comes from Julio Daniel, a senior at Manual Arts High School, whose soft-spoken voice and calm demeanor belie his fierce convictions. Julio, a lifelong resident of South Los Angeles, spent most of his elementary and middle school years bused to schools outside of his neighborhood, but as he entered the eleventh grade he made a conscious choice to transfer to a local school. He made the decision, he said, because, "I finally decided I shouldn't have to be taken outside of my community by a bus to receive the education that I need. It should be right here in my community." (KCET 2004)

Despite his principled stance, Julio expressed disappointment in his academic experience at Manual Arts:

I didn't expect it to be as bad as what it really is. I mean, I had a teacher who would talk about the reasons that students like me got sent outside of our communities because our schools aren't performing as well as others because they've got gangs left and right. One of the most shocking things that still stays with me is that the average reading level for the school is at fourth grade – so that means a majority of the school reads at a fourth-grade level! And that was shocking. I mean, that made me wonder – do I really want to walk the stage for graduation? Do I want to attend graduation because there are kids that are graduating who are reading anywhere from three to five years below grade level and people are allowing them to graduate? What kind of honor could that be?

Community Coalition

Julio Daniel is one of more than 700,000 students attending the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) – the second-largest district in the United States. While LAUSD as a whole faces many of the typical ills of urban school districts, schools in South Los Angeles are consistently among the district’s most overcrowded and lowest performing, reflecting the broader economic and social disparities between South Los Angeles and the city’s more affluent neighborhoods.

ABOUT LOS ANGELES

Clive Aden, a college student and alumnus of Community Coalition’s youth organizing program, keenly observed the differences between the predominantly Latino and African American neighborhoods of South Los Angeles where he was raised and wealthier, predominantly White communities like Beverly Hills:

We have a liquor store on every corner and in Beverly Hills, they have grocery stores. We got check cashing places; in Beverly Hills, they have banks. . . . We’ve got fast-food restaurants and they’ve got dine-in restaurants.

Shifting his focus to the schools, Aden pointed out that though *Brown v. Board of Education* called for an end to segregation in schools and for equal treatment of all students,

It’s fifty years later and things are still kind of the same. If you look at South Central [Los Angeles], African American and Latino students are receiving a poor education. You go to Beverly Hills [and see] predominantly White schools where 90 percent of their class is going to college and 99 percent is graduating. Out here it’s like 50 percent – and not even, sometimes – is graduating, [and] not even half of that is going to college.

District data bear evidence of Aden’s first-hand observations: graduation rates in South Los Angeles

Los Angeles Unified School District at a Glance, 2006-2007	
Total student enrollment	704,417
Black	11.2%
Latino	73.3%
Eligible for free/reduced-price lunch	73.2%
Limited English proficient	37.8%
Number of schools	878
Per pupil expenditure	\$4,370
Number of teachers	34,929
High school graduation rate	63%

Source: California Department of Education, <<http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>>

high schools hover around 50 percent. Not only are graduation rates for these high schools lower than the district overall, they have steadily declined for five consecutive years (see Figure 3 on the next page). As dismal as these numbers are, external research reports suggest that district and state numbers overestimate the actual graduation rate (Oakes, Mendoza & Silver 2004).³

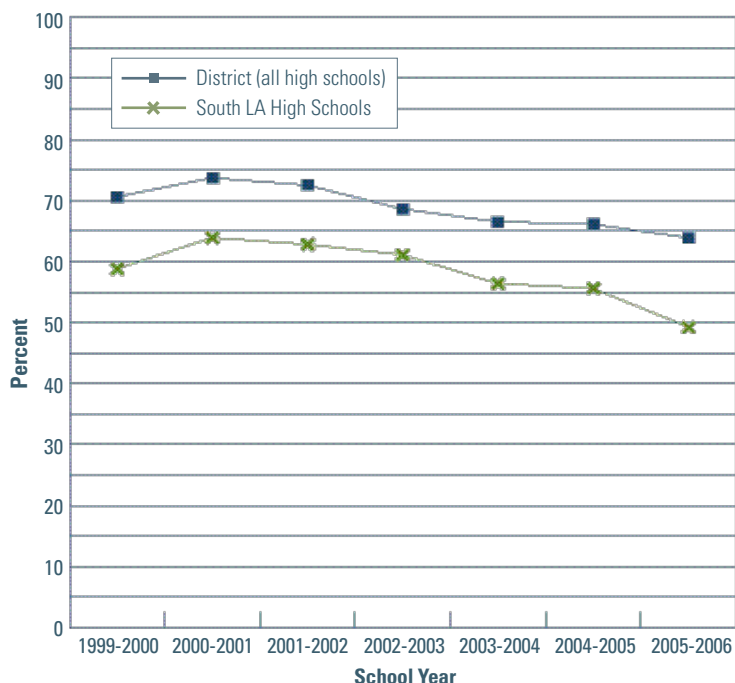
Similarly, scores on the Academic Performance Index, an indicator used by the state of California to assess a school’s overall academic standing, are consistently lower for South Los Angeles schools compared with the district (see Figure 4).⁴

In addition to poor academic outcomes, schools in South Los Angeles have been plagued by notoriously overcrowded and dilapidated school facilities, further com-

³ Graduation rates computed using enrollment-based data rather than dropout-based data suggest that graduation rates are considerably lower than the district’s estimates.

⁴ The API is calculated by converting individual student scores on a variety of weighted content areas into points on an API scale (ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1,000). Because the calculation of the API score changes from year to year, only within-year comparisons between South Los Angeles high schools and the entire district should be made. Comparisons should not be made across years.

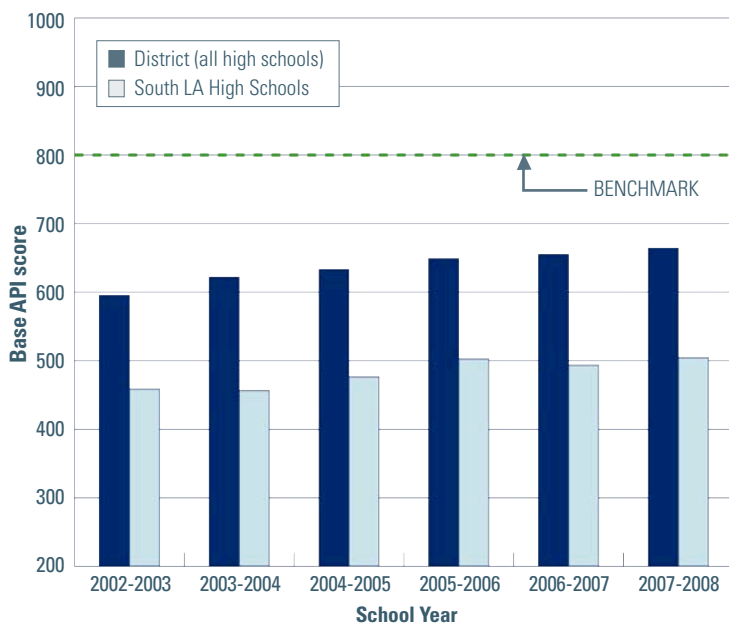
FIGURE 3
 Graduation rates in South Los Angeles high schools vs. district, 1999–2006



Source: California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Office, <<http://data1.cde.ca.gov/Dataquest>>

Note: Graduation rate formula is based on the National Center for Education Statistics definition: [number of graduates (year 4)] divided by [number of graduates (year 4) + grade 9 dropouts (year 1) + grade 10 dropouts (year 2) + grade 11 dropouts (year 3) + grade 12 dropouts (Year 4)].

FIGURE 4
 Academic Performance Index scores in South Los Angeles high schools vs. district, 2002–2008



Source: California Department of Education, DataQuest, Academic Performance Index (API) Report, <<http://api.cde.ca.gov/reports/API/APISearchName.asp?cTopic=API&clevel=District&cName=1964733>>

promising students’ educational opportunities and experiences. To alleviate overcrowding, many schools in South Los Angeles operate on a multi-track system.⁵ Schools are open year-round and students take their vacations at different points during the year, depending on their assigned track. Many students we interviewed reported disparities in course offerings among the various tracks and asserted that the system makes it even easier for students to “slip through the cracks.” Despite the track system, schools are still bursting at the seams and lack regular maintenance and upkeep. Both student testimony and media reports have documented the consequences – schools with falling ceiling tiles, graffiti-covered walls, filthy bathrooms, and dirty water fountains (Boyarsky 1998).

COMMUNITY COALITION’S EDUCATION ORGANIZING

The dire academic and physical state of schools in South Los Angeles, byproducts of low expectations and resource disparities, compelled Community Coalition to become a leading advocate for educational justice. Much of its activism over the last decade has focused on two efforts:

- ◆ pressuring the district to improve the physical condition of schools in South Los Angeles;
- ◆ fighting for more rigorous curricular opportunities so that all students are prepared for college.

On both fronts, the firsthand experiences of Black and Latino students in South Los Angeles have been the impetus for Community Coalition’s education campaigns. Lucy Castro, a Community Coalition organizer, explained, “Students of color are coming together to advocate for their own education because the school system has pretty much failed them.”

Although many of Community Coalition’s youth members involved in the charge to improve the quality of their schools will have graduated without reaping the rewards of their efforts, Tamara Jara, a high school senior and a youth leader with Community Coalition, described her motivation:

I know my little sisters are going to go to high school and I don’t want them to go through what I’m going through – the lack of books, the lack of [college prep] courses, the uncredentialed teachers, all of that stuff.

Through its education organizing since the mid-1990s, Community Coalition has won campaigns that will enhance educational opportunities not only for Tamara’s sisters, but also for thousands of other students. Their major victories include a reallocation of bond monies to fund needed repairs in South Los Angeles’s schools and a new districtwide policy that adopts the college preparatory curriculum as the basic curriculum for all LAUSD students. This report documents these campaigns for educational equity and describes the impact of Community Coalition’s work.

A New Model of Intergenerational Organizing

In 1990, several activists, led by Karen Bass (now Speaker of the California State Assembly), formed Community Coalition to combat the devastating effects of the 1980s crack epidemic on South Los Angeles’s neighborhoods. Believing that larger economic and social forces contributed significantly not only to the drug epidemic, but also to the general deterioration of inner cities, Bass and her colleagues sought to create an organization that would build a broad-based, large-scale movement for social and economic justice for communities of color in South Los Angeles (see sidebar). Said Bass: “We believe that social change takes place with the involvement of lots of people.” In that spirit, Community Coalition has made a concerted effort to build shared power and

“Students of color are coming together to advocate for their own education because the school system has pretty much failed them.”

— Lucy Castro, Community Coalition organizer

unity among the area’s African American and Latino populations, which have historically been pitted against one another in the city’s political landscape.

Since its inception, Community Coalition has made it a priority to build the next generation of leadership.⁶ Indeed, much of Community Coalition’s education organizing agenda is rooted in frustrations and concerns identified by its youth members. Disproving widely held beliefs about the apathy of Generation X, Bass created a youth service program called Helping Our Peers Evolve to engage young people in their community and develop their leadership skills. By 1993, the service program had evolved into Community Coalition’s youth organizing arm, South Central Youth Empowered thru Action (SC-YEA).

Community Coalition: Mission Statement

The Community Coalition’s mission statement reflects its overarching vision for social change:

To help transform the social and economic conditions in South Los Angeles that foster addiction, crime, violence, and poverty by building a community institution capable of involving thousands of residents in creating, influencing, and changing public policy.

— from Community Coalition Web site

⁵ Multi-track schools in LAUSD typically have three or four tracks.

⁶ Community Coalition also engages parents in organizing for school reform, but its youth component has been comparatively more active over the years and, thus, was the focus of our research.

“It took the whistle-blowing students to call attention to the failures of the adults who are supposed to be looking after their education and school environment.”

— Bill Boyarsky in the Los Angeles Times

Through SC-YEA, Community Coalition began developing a model of intergenerational organizing, one in which young people’s day-to-day experiences and struggles served as the impetus for the group’s organizing campaigns. Adult organizers and staff, in turn, helped young people utilize the resources of the larger organization – such as media training and data analysis – to advance SC-YEA’s organizing efforts.

After initially focusing on statewide criminal justice campaigns, SC-YEA started to tackle issues related to educational justice in 1996. Two years later, SC-YEA increased its capacity to build its membership base and produce changes in school when it set up local chapters in South Los Angeles’s schools called high school organizing committees (HSOCs). SC-YEA initially formed chapters in five of the eight large high schools in South Los Angeles and expanded to all of the area’s schools by 2006.⁷

Community Coalition envisioned that the HSOCs would serve as “political centers on campus,” essentially school clubs through which young people could learn to advocate for student rights and concerns. Leaders from each school-based chapter attended after-school homework sessions, followed by trainings and strategy sessions two to three times a week at Community Coalition. These meetings allowed time to discuss issues and concerns across schools in South Los Angeles. Simultaneously, the youth leaders worked with students in their own schools to develop school-based organizing campaigns.

The Campaign to Improve School Facilities

SC-YEA’s initial education organizing efforts focused on improving the area’s dismal school facilities. Eva Minott, an SC-YEA youth leader, described the conditions in her school as “horrible – the bathrooms were always locked or the toilet stalls didn’t have doors ... the tiles [would] come off the ceiling and hit my teacher.” At one South Los Angeles high school, SC-YEA members noted that only a single working bathroom was available for the school’s 3,900 students (Liberty Hill Foundation 2000).

About this time, funds were becoming available to make needed repairs and improvements via Proposition Better Buildings (Proposition BB), a \$2.4 billion school construction bond measure passed in 1997, which was, at the time, the largest school bond measure in the country’s history. But SC-YEA organizers and leaders believed that when the time came to allocate funds for specific projects, district officials short-changed South Los Angeles schools. For instance, some funds were earmarked for luxury projects in more affluent schools, such as a new swimming pool and a new stadium press box, while schools in South Los Angeles lacked decent school buildings (Foege & Sheff-Cahan 1999, p. 1). In response to these disparities, from 1997 to 1999, SC-YEA waged an intensive two-year facilities campaign centered on the reallocation of Proposition BB monies.

With the aid of disposable cameras, SC-YEA students documented the toll that chronic neglect had wreaked on their school buildings. Photos in hand, hundreds of students protested before the school

⁷ In 2002, SC-YEA began organizing in four middle schools in South Los Angeles. This program, known as SC-YEA Jr., aimed to build awareness of social, economic, and educational justice issues among middle school students whose schools fed into the South Los Angeles high schools where SC-YEA already maintained a presence.

⁸ A series of articles appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* between November 1997 and February 1998, documenting the efforts of SC-YEA youth to focus attention on the poor state of school facilities in South Los Angeles.

⁹ The *Williams et al. v. State of California et al.* lawsuit, filed as a class action in 2000, claimed that state agencies failed to provide public school students with equal access to instructional materials, safe and decent school facilities, and qualified teachers. The case, settled in 2004, resulted in the allocation of \$800 million for critical repair of facilities in low-performing schools.

board. Community Coalition supplemented the students' visual documentation with a data report that compared funds designated for schools in West Los Angeles with those in South Los Angeles. The report showed that district officials had allocated *eight times more* funding to schools in wealthier areas than it had to ailing schools in South Los Angeles (Liberty Hill Foundation 2000).

As the organizing campaign progressed, students also testified before the Proposition BB Oversight Committee and engaged the media in an effort to press on the district to reconsider its priorities.⁸ When SC-YEA members appeared before the Proposition BB Oversight Committee, they demanded to know how funding decisions were made, how inequities could be decreased, and how community members could have a voice in the process (Smith 1998).

SC-YEA's organizing led LAUSD to reopen repair and construction contracts granted by the Proposition BB school bond and to add \$153 million dollars for school repairs targeted specifically for high schools in South Los Angeles and other high-needs communities. In follow-up coverage, Bill Boyarsky (1998) wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that "it took the whistle-blowing students to call attention to the failures of the adults who are supposed to be looking after their education and school environment" and asserted that changes in the conditions of facilities "wouldn't have happened without the students."

Despite former superintendent Roy Romer's massive school construction and building repairs plan, many schools in South Los Angeles still educate students in run-down facilities. In recent years, Community Coalition has continued its fight for building improvements. Following the 2004 *Williams* settlement, which allocated state monies for repairs in low-performing schools,⁹ SC-YEA leaders raised awareness among students and teachers at their local high schools on ways to access available funds for needed repairs.

"If we change the curriculum, it forces the district . . . to ensure that what's being offered is done in a way for the students to succeed."

— Alberto Retana, Community Coalition's director of organizing

As Community Coalition's intense attention to the condition of school facilities in South Los Angeles demonstrated, the organization understood the need for persistent and continuous pressure on the district to ensure the equitable distribution of resources. Yet, as Community Coalition's education organizing evolved and its analysis of school reform deepened, the group realized that increasing resources for better facilities, more books, or even higher proportions of credentialed teachers would not be enough to transform educational outcomes for students. Alberto Retana, Community Coalition's director of organizing, argued for an analysis that went beyond resources:

There is no guarantee that once you get the resources, the rigor is going to be lifted or that anything else is going to change. Whereas if we change the curriculum, it forces the district . . . to ensure that what's being offered is done in a way for the students to succeed.

With this analysis, Community Coalition and SC-YEA have invested much of their organizing energy toward another signature campaign called Equal Access to College Prep Classes.

The California A–G Curriculum Requirements		
<p>The purposes of the A–G subject requirements are to ensure that students entering the University of California or California State University systems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can participate fully in the first-year program at the university in a broad variety of fields of study; • have attained the necessary preparation for courses, majors, and programs offered at the university; • have attained a body of knowledge that will provide breadth and perspective to new, more-advanced studies; • have attained essential critical-thinking and study skills. 		
California A–G Courses for UC/CSU Eligibility upon High School Graduation		Required Years
A	History/Social Sciences (U.S. history or U.S. history/civics and world cultures/geography)	2
B	English (includes reading of classic and modern literature and frequent writing)	4
C	Mathematics (minimum: Algebra I and II and two- and three-dimensional geometry)	3
D	Laboratory Science (includes fundamental knowledge of at least two: biology, chemistry, physics)	2
E	Foreign Language (same language both years, non-English)	2
F	Visual or Performing Art (dance, drama, music, and/or visual arts)	1
G	College Preparatory Elective (additional A–F course or approved elective)	1

Source: University of California 2008

The Campaign for a College Preparatory Curriculum

In 2000, youth leaders from SC-YEA, with assistance from Community Coalition’s organizing staff, surveyed more than 1,000 South Los Angeles high school students to learn more about what students perceived to be the most pressing problems in their schools. Staff organizers expected the poor condition of school facilities to continue to rank at the top of the list. Instead, students pinpointed the lack of challenging curricular options, specifically the tracking of students in “dead-end” classes, as a core issue.

School district data confirmed their concerns. In 2001-2002, only 39.5 percent of South Los Angeles high school graduates had completed the college preparatory coursework required for admission to the University of California and California State University systems, known as the A–G curriculum (see sidebar). With a graduation rate hovering around 50 percent, that meant only about 20 percent of South Los Angeles’s high school students were enrolled in A–G coursework.

SC-YEA’s youth leaders began collecting additional data to investigate the extent of the problem. After they researched course offerings using the master schedules at their own high schools, they discovered that many of their South Los Angeles schools offered far more classes preparing students for careers in low-wage labor rather than for college. An independent analysis by researchers at UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access found similar results – schools in Los Angeles’s low-income neighborhoods offered 20 percent fewer A–G courses than schools in higher-income areas. SC-YEA leader Eva Minott explained the implicit message conveyed by the lack of rigorous course options: “They expect us to go and clean their cars, fix them, work in McDonald’s or something. They don’t expect us to become anything.”

Another youth leader, Marcus McKinney, said,

We learned that at Fremont they had nine cosmetology classes and four chemistry classes. We wanted to point stuff like that out and let them know that it should be reversed.

In February 2001, SC-YEA members met with the regional superintendent and four other school district officials to present their concerns. District officials agreed to three key SC-YEA demands:

- ◆ to provide every student with an academic transcript;
- ◆ to refocus counselors' priorities on increasing college preparation;
- ◆ to hold school assemblies informing students of the college preparatory requirements.

Meanwhile, SC-YEA leaders continued to work with their local high school organizing committees to raise awareness among students about the A–G requirements. SC-YEA leaders educated their peers with creative outreach efforts, such as a fashion show where students dressed up in outfits contrasting different occupational opportunities available to those who go on to college and those who do not.

Influencing Statewide Policy

Despite these local successes, Community Coalition had not yet had an opportunity to influence systemwide policy; that opportunity came in 2004. Independently of Community Coalition's organizing, state senator Richard Alarcón (D-Los Angeles) introduced SB 1795, a bill that called for all students statewide to complete the A–G curriculum. Community Coalition viewed the bill as a chance to inject youth voice into the critical debate. Partnering with The Education Trust–West, a policy research and advocacy organization, SC-YEA members traveled to Sacramento to provide testimony supporting the legislation.

In the ensuing hearings, some legislators balked. In the context of districts like LAUSD, where less than a third of the students met the state reading standard, legislators worried about potential negative

repercussions of setting the bar too high. Some legislators argued that a more rigorous curriculum would not only increase the dropout rate, but also reduce the labor pool for low-wage jobs.

Ravaut Benitez, an SC-YEA leader who went on to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, recounted her testimony before the state legislature:

The [legislator] who was against it started speaking and I remember him making a comment about what's going to happen when [his] car breaks down, who's going to fix [his] car? I really felt like . . . he was saying that because he thought that's where we belonged. We belong working for them, fixing their cars, doing their hair, stuff like that. I really felt hurt, because I felt that it's not for him to make that decision, it's for the students to make that decision.

The legislation never made it out of committee, in large part because vocational lobbies and the state teachers union strongly opposed the measure. Though unsuccessful, the proposed legislation spurred increased commitment and excitement about the issue of college access.

Realizing that the campaign for equal college access and increased rigor in curriculum would be difficult to win at the state level, in May 2004, The Education Trust–West, which had been developing data reports on the A–G issue for a number of years, convened educational justice organizations and advocacy

“We learned that at Fremont they had nine cosmetology classes and four chemistry classes.”

— Marcus McKinney, youth leader

groups from around the state. Even as the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* was being celebrated, the disparities in educational opportunity were deepening, an irony that heightened the sense of urgency among the organizations convened by The Education Trust–West. Collectively, the groups decided to shift away from a statewide strategy and to continue their local policy campaigns with renewed vigor in hopes of generating bottom-up change.

Communities for Educational Equity: A New Grassroots Coalition in Los Angeles

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, a confluence of events created an opportune moment for precisely the kind of grassroots organizing called for at The Education Trust–West convening. United Way of Greater Los Angeles and Alliance for a Better Community, an advocacy organization, had released the *Latino Scorecard 2003: Grading the American Dream* (United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2003). The *Scorecard*, which examined the social and economic conditions of Latinos within Los Angeles County, created a buzz by assigning the district a D on public education because of its low graduation and college-going rates (United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2007).

Charged with developing an action agenda based on the *Scorecard* findings, Alliance for a Better Community met with Community Coalition to discuss priorities for local education reform. They identified the problem of college access as a critical concern. In June 2004, the two groups co-convened a roundtable of Los Angeles–based organizations to discuss how the district could be held “accountable” for providing students with optimal supports for continuing their

education after high school (United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2007, p. 1).¹⁰ Thirty-five organizations attended the event, including research organizations, advocacy groups, community organizing groups, parent organizations, student organizations, universities, and legal institutions.

The roundtable led to the formation of a grassroots coalition, which eventually became known as Communities for Educational Equity (CEE).¹¹ In just a few months, the coalition reached consensus on a shared vision, conducted additional research on A–G, held community forums, built new alliances, and assessed the political landscape through a power analysis.¹² CEE members met with key stakeholders, including the vocational lobby, the teachers union, and school board members. One district official noted that CEE’s efforts to engage these different constituencies were unwavering: CEE provided “proactive, organized, strategic leadership in education . . . [and] was very clear about their desire to impact policies and help improve the service delivery.”

The A–G Campaign: A Mandated College Preparatory Curriculum across the District

At a retreat in February 2005, CEE’s member organizations decided to focus their campaign on getting the LAUSD school board to pass a resolution making A–G the standard curriculum for all of the district’s students. The coalition began collaborating with then-school board president José Huizar, who already had a strong working relationship with several CEE organizations. Huizar became a powerful ally and was reportedly moved by students who shared their stories of being diverted to dead-end classes because more demanding classes were oversubscribed (Hayasaki 2005).

Maria Casillas, executive director of Families in Schools and a member of CEE’s steering committee, explained why the group believed a fundamental change in policy was necessary:

[In the past], it was discrimination, discrimination, discrimination, which you could see. You don’t see that anymore. Now you are talk-

¹⁰ Inner City Struggle, an organizing group based in East Los Angeles, also played a leading role in the coalition.

¹¹ Originally known as the High School for High Achievement Task Force, the coalition adopted the name Communities for Educational Equity in February 2005.

¹² A power analysis is an organizing tool that maps out key stakeholders, their respective power in the political landscape, and their positions on the issue that the organizing group is trying to influence. A power analysis can help groups develop their strategy.

ing about equity. Equity is not as visible as discrimination based on race, color, or creed. While it means the same thing, equity is about the type of policies that are created, [which] are very subtle, the way people implement policy, [and] the way resources are allocated.

In the proposed resolution, the coalition argued that a college preparatory curriculum policy had important implications not only for educational equity, but also for the city's economic future. The twenty-first-century workforce, CEE asserted, requires students to possess high-level math, science, and technology skills. For example, many representatives of the building trades in Los Angeles were reporting that prospective candidates were failing the math exam needed to qualify for their apprenticeship program. Thus, increased rigor was not simply about college prep, but about "work prep" and "life prep." (Communities for Educational Equity 2005, p. 1–10).

The formation of CEE took the A–G campaign to an entirely new scale (see sidebar). For Community Coalition, the campaign had started with a relatively small group of SC-YEA leaders working with several loosely allied organizations to demand increased educational opportunities in their local schools. Five years later, the fight for A–G involved a broad-based coalition of constituencies across the city of Los Angeles – a rarely seen occurrence – and aimed to generate a major change in districtwide policy.

Despite the increasingly expansive scope of the effort, many observers pointed to CEE's deep and authentic connection to its constituency – parents and young people – as a critical factor in the coalition's ultimate success, one that distinguished CEE's work from more traditional advocacy efforts. Community Coalition, along with Inner City Struggle, had particularly deep roots in the community and helped

The A–G Campaign: Critical Components of Communities for Educational Equity's Organizing Strategy

Mobilizing students, parents, and communities

The campaign gave students, parents, and the community a chance to voice their opinions and make their concerns known to key district officials.

Using data to dictate action

Data was used to build a compelling case for reform. Among other things, Communities for Educational Equity (CEE) used the data to describe the institutional barriers to A–G education.

Committing to new levels of collaboration

CEE created a forum for all community organizations to come together and fight to make the A–G requirements available to all students.

Active media engagement

Effective talking points were submitted to the media so that they would discuss educational equity as a key issue.

Targeting decision-makers and compromise

Key district officials needed to maintain their enthusiasm in order to negotiate terms of an A–G curriculum that the LAUSD school board could support.

Understanding future challenges to A–G implementation

Understanding that the sustainability of the effort will rely heavily on funding, continued engagement from stakeholders, and training for practitioners.

Source: *United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2007*

“It was kind of nerve-racking . . . because this was it, this was what everybody had been working on for so long, for five years.”

— Jesse Fernandez, SC-YEA youth leader

catalyze much of the community-based support for the resolution.

Youth from SC-YEA, some of whom had been involved in the fight for A–G for four or five years, received ongoing briefings about CEE’s efforts and worked tenaciously to build grassroots support for the proposed A–G policy in their schools and communities. Young people not only made classroom presentations to raise awareness about the A–G resolution; they also staged a cultural arts production featuring visual and digital art, music, theater, and poetry to educate their peers on the need to improve the quality of their schools. SC-YEA members collected roughly 5,000 of the 13,000 signatures for a petition supporting the A–G resolution and served as key media spokespersons on the need for increased rigor in the curriculum.

To demonstrate the depth of grassroots support, CEE organized three mass mobilizations during the month and a half prior to the final school board vote. Jesse Fernandez, a SC-YEA leader, described the push he and his fellow SC-YEA leaders made to ensure that the mass mobilizations were a success:

We’d just start talking to students about what was going on. . . . I was going through summer school at the time, so I started harassing people in summer school. . . . [Other SC-YEA leaders] on the MTA bus home, they were talking to people, just trying to muster up support, and trying to get people to commit to showing up on the days of the rallies.

The resolution was slated for a vote during the May 2005 school board meeting, but board members decided to postpone a vote until the June 14, 2005, meeting in order to have more time to consider the merits of the resolution. In the weeks leading up to the vote, CEE won support for the resolution from superintendent Roy Romer, state superintendent Jack O’Connell, and key leaders from the Los Angeles Trade Tech and Building Trades Council. The Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously in support of a symbolic A–G resolution. Meanwhile, CEE’s aggressive media outreach resulted in more than 100 published stories in the local media and editorials in all of the major newspapers (some in favor, some against).

Despite the intensive organizing effort, prospects for passage looked uncertain a week before the vote. The vote had already been postponed once, and as Alberto Retana, director of organizing for Community Coalition, noted, only three of the seven board members had pledged their unequivocal support. In the words of school board member Marlene Canter, there were concerns about “unintended consequences” (Rubin 2005). Not all the board members were comfortable with the language of the resolution, which mandated A–G for all students, rather than giving them a choice to opt in. Following the initial postponement of the vote, José Huizar acknowledged that the majority of the board was not in favor of the resolution (Rubin 2005). Similarly, Retana said he felt “pessimistic” about the outcome and predicted an “uphill” battle.

On the day of the vote, June 14, 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that hundreds of students had gathered outside the school board building “wearing

T-shirts that read ‘Let me choose my future’ and chanting ‘Give us life prep, not a life sentence’ ” (Hayasaki 2005). SC-YEA youth leader Jesse Fernandez, who observed the proceedings from inside the school board meeting hall, recalled the tense atmosphere:

We went inside to the back of the big conference room where all the board members are. And there was a lot of talk going on about A–G and the wording that . . . board members weren’t clear with. It was kind of nerve-racking hearing all this talk, because this was it, this was what everybody had been working on for so long, for five years. And the vote’s going to happen, it’s going to happen any minute now, so people are talking about it, trying to change the wording, trying to figure things out at the last minute. But it passed, it passed – and it passed by a six-to-one vote. . . . It was wonderful. . . . It was just unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. And everybody was so happy about it, [people were] yelling. . . . It was really cool.

The new policy phased in the A–G requirements and stipulated that A–G would become the default curriculum by the 2008–2009 school year, meaning that all LAUSD students would be expected to complete a college preparatory curriculum in order to graduate. Eva Minott reflected on the long journey she and her fellow SC-YEA leaders had taken from their initial days of calling attention to the issue at their local schools and five years later, to the realization of their demands:

You do something and then it’s like all the hard work that you do pays off. In the end, we won A–G and there was just so much work we did for about five years, working on A–G, everyone working on A–G and then we won. It wasn’t just us, the Community Coalition, but we had a bunch of other groups and a bunch of other people coming and supporting us to say our kids want to go to college, too.

“This is one of the most significant reforms this district is embarking on in the last twenty years. The payoffs will be huge, the impacts will be huge.”

— José Huizar, LAUSD school board president

The importance of CEE’s grassroots support cannot be underestimated. Russlynn Ali, executive director of The Education Trust–West, asserted,

I am pretty convinced that no amount of intellectual framing and data and research that we could have provided would have moved that district. We needed the 800-plus Latino and African American parents [and youth] to mandate rigor. It was organizing unlike anywhere else I’ve seen in the nation.

José Huizar, LAUSD school board president, said:

This is one of the most significant reforms this district is embarking on in the last twenty years. The payoffs will be huge, the impacts will be huge. . . . Really what this is about is providing thousands of students an opportunity to attend college – an opportunity denied to them with the current policies and practices.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY COALITION'S EDUCATION ORGANIZING

This study explored the impact of Community Coalition's organizing and, because Community Coalition was a co-convenor of the CEE, the impact of CEE at the district level. Specifically, we were interested in the following question:

- ◆ In what ways has Community Coalition's organizing influenced district capacity, particularly in bringing new policies and resources to the district and in creating an increased sense of accountability between the district and its community constituents?

Data Collected

Our analysis drew primarily upon qualitative data. These data included interviews, archival documents, and citywide media coverage on education. Demographic and student-performance data were used to analyze the context for education organizing in Los Angeles.

Interviews

The study team conducted forty-two interviews with Community Coalition organizers and youth leaders to learn more about the organization's methodology and to follow the progress of their education campaigns. Six interviews were conducted with allies and education stakeholders to assess perceptions of Community Coalition's effectiveness. In addition, four

“I think they got their facts right, they had the right coalitions behind them and they did a lot of the right things.”

— Sylvia G. Rousseau, former LAUSD regional superintendent

interviews were conducted with district administrators and school board members to obtain their perspectives on the impact of Community Coalition's work.

Document Review

The education organizing that led to A–G was well chronicled in local media reports and in a report written by the United Way of Greater Los Angeles. We also reviewed documents produced by the group and kept abreast of the changing education context in Los Angeles.

Analytic Approach

Our conceptual framework posits that community organizing leads to improvements in the capacity of schools and that these improvements, in turn, support improved student outcomes.

Drawing on our initial year of fieldwork, we defined indicators of change in school capacity for Community Coalition. However, since the A–G curriculum had not yet been implemented as the default curriculum when our study ended, we were unable to assess the impact of this policy victory on school capacity outcomes. Instead, we focused on the qualitative data to understand the ways in which Community Coalition's organizing influenced district policy and community accountability.

FINDINGS

For Community Coalition, co-convening CEE was a natural and critical next step in its ultimate aim of transforming the district's high school curriculum. The diversity of stakeholders within CEE helped Community Coalition coalesce the power necessary to fight effectively for a districtwide policy change. As a part of our analysis of Community Coalition's impact on public school reform, we were interested in understanding its role within CEE, as well as the ways in which CEE served as a vehicle for advancing Community Coalition's educational justice agenda on a larger scale.

Building Power through a Citywide Coalition

Virtually all the community stakeholders and district officials we interviewed recognized Community Coalition's longstanding commitment to increasing student access to the A–G curriculum years before CEE was established. Sandy Mendoza, United Way's director of special projects and a member of the CEE steering committee, said:

Community Coalition had been pushing this issue with LAUSD for quite a while. Parents, student leaders, Community Coalition, they were all from the South Los Angeles area, making this a big push.

Sylvia G. Rousseau, a former LAUSD regional superintendent, noted:

Community Coalition has been working consistently over a period of time on the issue of A–G requirements. And I think they got their facts right, they had the right coalitions behind them and they did a lot of the right things.

Community Coalition's consistent focus on A–G over the years positioned the organization to provide credible leadership within CEE. They brought a clear vision and consistent strategic leadership to the A–G campaign. Members of CEE observed Community Coalition's role in defining CEE's vision, crafting its organizing strategy, and mobilizing parent and community members in support of the school board resolution. Mónica García, José Huizar's chief of staff and a member of the CEE steering committee, noted that Community Coalition's ability to organize effectively for the resolution was rooted in its long history of activism and relationship-building in Los Angeles: "It was very clear that we weren't starting from, 'Hey, let's get to know each other – let me introduce myself.' These were relationships that had been developed." In addition, the shared vision of Black and Brown unity among CEE's founding members paved the way for a unique collaboration that spanned both African American and Latino communities.

"They put their stuff on the line. You can't fake that. And they've turned that into power."

— Mónica García, LAUSD school board chief of staff and CEE steering committee member

Community Coalition leveraged its relationships, reputation, and power to propel the A–G campaign forward. García offered a frank analysis of why Community Coalition could do these things so effectively:

Community Coalition is seen as a hard-line, grassroots powerhouse. . . . They all really believe in the work. They all bring their own personal experience to their professional work. They have an identification with our kids and with our community that is not shared by all organizations. And so they put their stuff on the line. You can't fake that. And they've turned that into power. . . . They will get up, expose a reality, and then provide what they think is their solution and then include folks in that. I know that of Community Coalition and that was certainly one of the elements of the culture of CEE.

In the midst of its alliance-building work, Community Coalition consistently engaged the constituency it claimed to represent and continued its high-quality work with young people. Rousseau praised Community Coalition's work with SC-YEA:

The coalition . . . really does teach kids how to articulate their concerns. They educate them on the issues. So, when these young people come present to the board, they're not just a ranting group – boards dismiss kids like that in a minute – just a ranting group shouting, 'I want this!' I mean, these kids are well-informed; they understand the issues, and they are able to articulate them powerfully.

“Our job is not to figure out every detail of how the district is going to do this. . . . Our job is to maintain the pressure and also to make recommendations on what the community thinks is especially important.”

— Joanne Kim, Community Coalition organizer

Influence on District Capacity

While it was too early to measure the impact of Community Coalition’s work on student outcomes or capacity at the school level, the impact on district policy and accountability to the community has been dramatic.

Policies and resources

Before the A–G resolution passed, Rousseau predicted the A–G policy would have far-reaching impact:

[A–G] has so many other issues tied to it. If they remain focused on this, this will have tremendous impact on the whole system of things. . . . I mean, this involves parents; this involves the union; it involves not only the high schools, but how our middle schools are preparing students to meet the rigors of A–G.

Indeed, the A–G resolution, which CEE helped draft, underscores the importance of ensuring that “necessary learning supports” are in place for student success and notes that this may require the district to realign its current resources or to allocate new ones. The resolution calls for particular attention to be given to the “critical transition years of fifth and eighth grades.”

Rousseau’s prediction proved to be correct. Curricular changes mandated by the A–G resolution have prompted the district to retool its policies and practices on a broader scale. Bob Collins, a senior district

official involved in implementing A–G, described “dramatic and extensive” efforts to ensure proper and timely implementation. LAUSD’s strategic action plan, developed in September 2005, listed twelve broad steps for implementation and numerous specific ones. Among other things, the strategic plan called for:

- ◆ developing collaborative relationships among various departments and divisions within LAUSD, as well as with external stakeholders, to coordinate effective implementation;
- ◆ creating specific measurements of accountability to track the progress of schools on A–G;
- ◆ developing parent engagement strategies to educate parents about A–G requirements, including mandatory parent orientations and the development of new, individualized graduation report cards for parents;
- ◆ promoting career-tech and multiple pathways to graduation, including a reorganized career-tech unit;
- ◆ providing a new, expanded professional development model for secondary school teachers;
- ◆ establishing a new middle school accountability policy, including a redesign of the middle school curriculum;
- ◆ implementing new learning supports for students, including summer transition programs.

Three years later, these ambitious initiatives had been implemented to varying degrees. Ramon Cortines, then the district’s senior deputy superintendent, continued to profess a commitment to providing the necessary resources to principals and administrators to move toward full A–G implementation in the 2008–2009 school year (Song 2008).

Accountability to community

CEE and Community Coalition anticipated they would have to shift their approach from building political support for a school board action to ensuring accountability for full and effective implementation of the new policy. As Russlynn Ali, executive director of The Education Trust–West, observed, school board members – who are elected to their

positions – felt accountable to the large numbers of parents, community members, and youth who communicated their support for the resolution through petitions, rallies, and press conferences. In contrast, the central office, responsible for implementation, was widely viewed as a vast bureaucracy, difficult to penetrate.

CEE knew that if the A–G resolution passed, it would be important to create a formal mechanism for community voice and accountability, given three major factors:

- ◆ the lack of meaningful portals for parent and community engagement within the district;
- ◆ the well-documented, oft-cursed nature of LAUSD’s behemoth bureaucracy;
- ◆ the district’s history of poor implementation.

Thus, the resolution stipulated an implementation committee established by the superintendent that would include “CEE, employee and employer organizations, post-secondary institutions, and other stakeholders to incorporate community involvement in the development and implementation of the district’s strategy.” Since the resolution’s passage, CEE members have worked with district staff on the A–G implementation committee to ensure that the necessary resources and supports are in place for the reform to be successful. Explained Joanne Kim, an organizer at Community Coalition:

Our job is not to figure out every detail of how the district is going to do this. That’s what they get paid for. But our job is to maintain the pressure and also to make recommendations on what the community thinks is especially important, instead of bureaucrats dictating what they think is important in student achievement and what they think will be important measures of success.

Stakeholders within the district acknowledged that the outside pressure from CEE not only helped propel the policy forward more quickly than it might have otherwise, but that such pressure was crucial to keeping the district accountable for quality implementation. Collins noted at the time, “I think if you

“Whole-school change is . . . not just about curriculum and books and schedules. It is also about a culture shift . . . that . . . can only come about by mobilizing all the forces within a city around the children.”

— Bob Collins, senior LAUSD administrator

don’t have external groups moving, prodding the system, the system doesn’t move as fast as it should.”

Much of CEE’s ability to serve as an effective agent for change and accountability is a product of the diverse constituencies represented within the coalition. By bringing together a broad base of stakeholders, CEE effectively bridged different political interests and groups across the city, a feat that others had not previously been able to achieve. Collins observed the importance of community engagement in catalyzing sustainable school reforms:

Everything we know about whole school change is that it’s not just about curriculum and books and schedules. It is also about a culture shift. And that culture shift can only come about by mobilizing all the forces within a city around the children and the educational programs we have. When we do that, the curriculum and the professional development make sense and become highly effective. Kids become engaged. It is that coalition of forces, of which community groups are a critical factor, that will move an urban school district forward, and unfortunately in past years those forces have never been brought together effectively in cities.

*“You can’t possibly have a vibrant economy
with such a poorly trained work force.*

There’s only so many McDonald’s jobs to go around.”

— Maria Casillas, CEE steering committee member

Community Coalition and CEE have been catalysts for increased district accountability to community interests, working to make certain that their voices are represented in positions of power. For example, Mónica García, who represented Huizar’s office on the CEE steering committee, subsequently ran for the school board and won a seat (she now serves as school board president). As she assembled her staff, she recruited several others who had histories of working with education organizing efforts in Los Angeles. She stated, “My election to the board is a direct result of the [A–G] movement.” At the time of García’s interview, the district was searching for a new superintendent. She indicated that prospective candidates’ commitment to A–G and their ideas for successful implementation would be important considerations for selection.

Similarly, Community Coalition’s founding director Karen Bass left her position in 2004 to run for the California State Assembly. Not only did she win the election, but in March 2008, she also became the first African American woman to become Speaker of the California Assembly. Karen Bass and Mónica García are potent examples of the larger vision of organizing efforts in Los Angeles – to create unity among African American and Latino communities and to build power both inside and outside the system. García and Bass, among others, have brought new voices to the political discourse in Los Angeles and are fundamentally changing the nature of representation in the city’s political landscape.

REFLECTIONS ON FINDINGS

Implications for School Capacity and Student Learning

The passage of the school board resolution was widely heralded as a momentous and historic victory for Community Coalition and other community groups across the city. Yet, despite the incremental steps outlined in the district’s strategic action plan and CEE’s participation on the implementation committee, the fight for A–G continues. Before the start of the 2008-2009 school year, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the district’s efforts had fallen short (Song 2008). While the percentage of college preparatory courses districtwide inched up 4 percentage points between 2004 and 2007, the percentage of college prep courses at some South and East Los Angeles schools – the schools the A–G policy was designed to improve – had actually declined. José Huizar, the resolution’s co-sponsor and now a member of the Los Angeles City Council, asserted, “The district has failed the test” (Song 2008).

Despite these disheartening initial indicators, it is too soon to assess the impacts of Community Coalition’s work on school capacity and student learning in South Los Angeles schools. The A–G resolution not only mandates increased rigor within the instructional core, but also stipulates corollary increases in professional development resources for teachers, as well as learning supports and resources for students. In addition, the resolution calls for particular attention to the middle grades so that students are better equipped to undertake the A–G curriculum once they enter high school. As researchers track A–G implementation, it will be important not only to assess student achievement indicators, but also to examine indicators related to professional development, parent and youth engagement, and teacher expectations for student learning.

Acknowledging some of the critiques of the policy, including a fear of increased dropout rates, CEE steering committee member Maria Casillas observed:

You can’t possibly have a vibrant economy with such a poorly trained work force. There’s only

so many McDonald's jobs to go around and those keep our people in suffering and anguish and pain. So we have to do something. I am willing to give it a chance and then say, four or six years later, it worked or it didn't work. But I am willing to take a chance that it might just alert people something different is in the air. Maybe we'd better pay attention. Maybe after all, we should be educating these kids, maybe we ought to stay after school and really work with them and not just send them off.

Though the impact of the A–G policy on student learning outcomes in Los Angeles remains to be seen, the results in other California districts have been promising. In San Jose Unified School District, which implemented a similar A–G policy, the achievement gap decreased. Furthermore, the percentage of students taking the A–G curriculum and earning a C or better increased from 37 percent to 65 percent, the number of Latino students enrolled in AP classes doubled, and the four-year graduation rate saw a slight increase (Education Trust–West 2004). Comparable trends have been observed in Chicago, Texas, and Indiana after measures to increase rigor in the curriculum were undertaken (Achieve, n.d.).

Lessons for Organizers

Community Coalition's work on facilities and college access issues offers multiple lessons for organizers, particularly in the arena of intergenerational organizing. From its origins, Community Coalition has been committed to youth voice and developing youth leadership. Indeed, as a member-driven organization committed to long-term community transformation, its organizing campaigns are firmly rooted in the lived experience of young people. Community Coalition has carried out a model of youth organizing in which the organization's political relationships and considerable strategic and data analytic capacities are continually brought into youth-organizing campaigns to amplify and support young people's interests and demands.

“The students are demanding it. . . . [They] make a very strong case and a list of arguments for why the focus needs to be on curriculum and tracking through their daily experiences.”

— Alberto Retana, director of organizing, Community Coalition

Alberto Retana, Community Coalition's director of organizing, said:

The students are demanding it. There's just no way of us getting around it with our youth. We can tell them, “Well, why don't we focus on something else or why don't we look at other things?” but they'll just make a very strong case and a list of arguments for why the focus needs to be on curriculum and tracking through their daily experiences.

As the A–G campaign progressed from local, school-based work that was led by young people to a coalition-driven initiative for systemwide policy change, the way in which Community Coalition negotiated the involvement of young people required a shift in leadership. As this shift occurred, Retana noted the importance of

keeping parents, students, and residents connected. Because otherwise we're just another advocacy institution speaking on behalf of parents and youth and it's absolutely critical that they're at the forefront. . . . SC-YEA leaders need to be pushing this fight, not the staff members.

CEE meetings, populated by adults well versed in formal meeting-going culture and accustomed to discussing the minutiae of policy and strategy, did not constitute a youth-friendly space. Retana observed,

The major challenge for this alliance is that creating space for [the youth] at the meeting is just funky because they're just, like, “What the hell, we're not going to waste our time.”

Clearly, the active participation of SC-YEA leaders in A–G outreach demonstrated that they were well versed with the campaign and the relevant issues. On the flip side, their relative lack of involvement in strategy and negotiation sessions highlights the complexity of young people’s participation and role in organizing. How do organizations strike a balance between investing the time and creating the space for deep and authentic youth engagement while also attending to the real-time political dynamics of creating substantive policy change?

The compressed cycle of leadership among youth (who age out of high school within a few years) makes this balance even more challenging. There are no easy answers; different groups have addressed this dilemma in their own ways. In the case of Community Coalition, the formation of CEE required adults to eventually take the lead in strategy development and policy negotiation. At the same time, Community Coalition helped create an environment within CEE in which adults felt deeply accountable to the demands young people were making for their own education.

The education organizing efforts documented in this report also reveal the ways in which even the most successful campaigns are laden with challenges once the work moves to the implementation phase. To what extent do groups stay involved long term to monitor progress and collaborate with the district to ensure quality implementation, particularly as meetings move to increasingly opaque issues that are laden with technical jargon? And to what degree must organizations move on to other issues of concern to their members? The coalition structure can make ongoing involvement particularly fragile as member groups are pulled away by competing priorities.

One response to these challenges has been to create local collaboratives that focus on developing a college-going culture in their neighborhood schools. This idea gained the support of the James Irvine Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. These foundations have funded the collaboratives to continue the fight to support quality implementation for the A–G curriculum in LAUSD.

APPENDIX

Data Sources for the Case Study Series

Over the six-year study, the study group collected and analyzed a total of 321 stakeholder interviews; 75 observations of organizing strategy sessions, campaign activities, and actions; 509 teacher surveys; and school demographic and standardized test score data.¹³

INTERVIEWS

Our research team conducted 321 open-ended, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders across the seven sites. Between January 2003 and September 2006, we conducted 160 interviews with organizing staff, 77 interviews with parent and youth leaders, 56 interviews with educators, and 28 interviews with allies. We also conducted 15 interviews with national network staff.

In the initial phase of the study, we interviewed organizing staff and leaders and focused on organizational characteristics – including each group’s mission, theory of change, strategy, capacity, and leadership development activities. Early interviews also aimed to understand the impetus for and strategies underlying groups’ campaigns for school improvement. To follow campaign developments, we interviewed organizing staff multiple times over the course of the study.

Interviews with allies, principals, teachers, district administrators, superintendents, and other key stakeholders elicited perceptions of the groups’ power and reach and the ways in which the groups’ organizing efforts may have impacted school, district, and community capacity.

OBSERVATIONS

During multiple site visits to each of the groups, we observed committee meetings, trainings, negotiation sessions, and public actions. More than seventy-five field notes written by research team members document these observations.

DOCUMENT REVIEW

We reviewed documentation and archival materials produced by the groups, including newsletters, organizational charts, and training materials, across five years of the study.

CONTEXT REVIEW

In addition to conducting extensive background research on the local and state context for each group (e.g., defining the critical policy reforms, state-level issues, governance structure for each school system, political landscape), we followed the local media coverage of education issues in all of our sites. Our database includes more than 1,700 articles. These articles, combined with the interview data, provide a picture of the shifting context for reform in each site.

TEACHER SURVEYS

We administered online teacher surveys in three sites – Austin, Miami-Dade, and Oakland – where organizing groups had used an intensive, school-based strategy of organizing and had mounted signature campaigns for several years. The survey explored four critical areas of school capacity: district support, school climate, professional culture, and instructional core. Survey questions were drawn from a variety of established measures, but primarily from scales developed by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. Appendices in the Austin, Miami, and Oakland case studies include a description of survey measures and their psychometric properties.

¹³ We also collected 241 adult member surveys and 124 youth member surveys to understand how involvement in community organizing influenced members’ leadership skills and their community and political engagement. However, the case studies focused on school and district outcomes and do not include analysis of these parent and youth survey data. Results of these surveys will be presented in future publications.

Surveys were administered to teachers at schools where the group was highly engaged in organizing efforts, as well as in a set of comparison schools. A total of 509 teacher surveys were collected from the three sites.

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

We also examined publicly available teacher and student data from all districts. Data vary from district to district but include measures of teacher and student race/ethnicity, years of teaching experience, dropout rates, graduation rates, student performance on standardized tests, and a range of other variables. To assess indicators that did not have corresponding data for publicly available download, data requests to the district were made. In Austin and Oakland, these publicly available data included district-administered parent and teacher surveys.

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Further Resources

California State Senate, “California State Senate Legislation,” <www.legislature.ca.gov>

Education Data Partnership, “District Reports,” Ed-Data, <www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/Navigation/fsTwoPanel.asp?bottom=%2Fprofile.asp%3Flevel%3D06%26reportNumber%3D16>

Families in Schools, “Communities for Educational Equity (CEE) and the Education Collaboratives,” <www.familiesinschools.org/site/content/view/196/153>

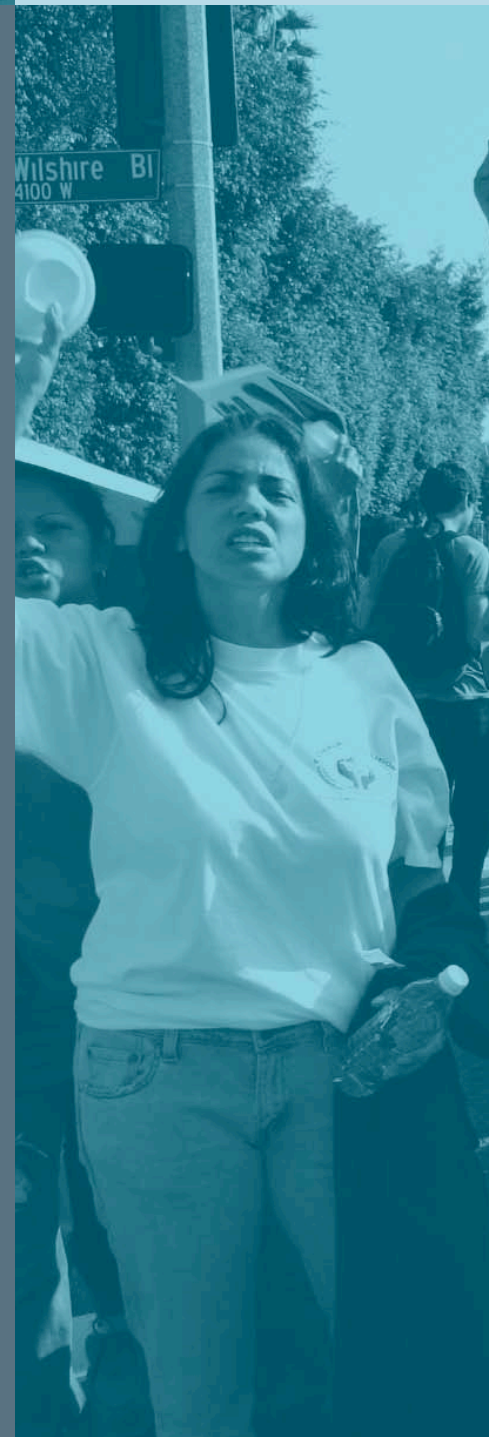
Families in Schools, “Schools We Deserve,” <www.familiesinschools.org/site/content/view/197/154>

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