

# People Acting for Community Together

## BUILDING A CAMPAIGN FOR READING REFORM IN MIAMI

*Seven years ago, if we had two children in every classroom reading on grade level, it was a lot. Now, probably seventy-five or eighty percent of the children in my school are reading on or above grade level.*

— A Miami-Dade principal, elementary school involved with PACT

**P**eople Acting for Community Together (PACT) led a successful campaign to implement a new literacy program in low-performing schools serving the poorest neighborhoods in Miami and acted as the program's champion for ten years. In response to immigrant parents' alarm that their children could not read, PACT organized parents, community members, clergy, teachers, and principals to implement a literacy curriculum called Direct Instruction and build intensive community engagement in twenty-seven Miami-Dade County district elementary schools. PACT's efforts not only enhanced the implementation of Direct Instruction, but also developed stronger school–community relationships. As a result, reading achievement in PACT schools rose at a faster rate than in matched comparison schools and across the district as a whole.

In the end, a new superintendent discontinued the program, not from disagreement with the highly scripted instructional model, but from a desire to establish greater uniformity in literacy instruction across the district. The story of PACT's organizing demonstrates both the role that community groups can play in identifying and supporting major reforms and the difficulties community constituencies face in responding to changes in district leadership.

To capture the impact of PACT's organizing, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform conducted a six-year research study, collecting and analyzing a wide range of data that included interviews with district and school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members; teacher surveys; and publicly available school data. The study showed that PACT's organizing had a substantial positive impact on district policies and resource allocation, school climate and instruction, and student outcomes.

### **PACT's organizing influenced the district's policies and resource allocation to benefit the lowest-performing students in the poorest neighborhoods and increased accountability to the community**

---

Educators at all levels of the system credit PACT with directing resources to improve reading instruction for low-performing students. Not only did PACT persuade the school board to adopt Direct Instruction, but it also secured nearly \$3 million in new funds to implement the program in twenty-seven of Miami's poorest elementary schools. PACT's ongoing involvement of community members in schools and accountability sessions with district leaders changed the nature of interaction between the district, schools, and communities. PACT's efforts to increase district accountability provided a mechanism for problem solving in district schools.

### **PACT's organizing resulted in improvements to the schools' instructional core, school climate, and professional culture**

---

In PACT schools, teachers and staff consistently reported greater improvements than comparison schools in school climate and professional culture in areas such as a culture of staff collaboration, teacher commitment, and collegiality. Teachers also credited PACT with having high levels of influence on their schools' instructional core, as measured by their ratings of teacher expectations for student achievement, classroom resources, quality of curriculum and instruction, and teaching effectiveness.

### **PACT's organizing to reform the district's literacy instruction produced measurable gains in student outcomes**

---

District data showed that the PACT schools made steady improvement in third- and fourth-grade performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test between 2001 and 2005 (the years consistent data were available). Gains made in PACT schools during this period exceeded those in matched comparison schools as well as in the district as a whole, especially for students scoring at the lowest performance level.

Despite the ultimate fate of Direct Instruction in Miami, PACT's organizing demonstrated how community engagement strategies can create shared and focused conversations on student learning, identify new and effective programs, and support and strengthen the work of teachers and principals. PACT's organizing also proved to be a highly cost-effective intervention. PACT was able to leverage an organizational budget of less than \$300,000 per year (in which education was only one of the organization's activities) to achieve substantial gains for the district's lowest-performing students.