

Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project and Youth United for Change

KEEPING PARENT AND STUDENT VOICES AT THE FOREFRONT OF REFORM

Whether it's issues in schools or housing or anything else, there's what the very well-intentioned, capable, and in some cases extraordinary policy and program folks do in government. But you also then have to hear how it's really playing and working at the grassroots, whether it's the classroom, the street corner, whatever. So I think that [groups like EPOP and YUC] always help shape the discussion, add insights that people in government or in businesses or anywhere else can't have, don't have. That back and forth is really critical.

— Debra Kahn, former Philadelphia secretary of education

Challenges and change have been the constants defining the Philadelphia public school system. Successive waves of districtwide reform, takeover, privatization efforts, and ongoing reorganization strained an already thin civic and educational infrastructure. In this context, two community organizations – Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project (EPOP) and Youth United for Change (YUC) – emerged as key voices in the struggle to ensure that low-income neighborhoods would benefit from reform. Their organizing efforts included engaging in intensive leadership development with high school students and public school parents, building relationships with education leaders and public officials, conducting research on school reform strategies, and maintaining a long-term commitment to improved educational outcomes in the midst of major systemic upheaval.

EPOP's and YUC's education campaigns succeeded in keeping the voices of parents and students at the forefront of reform. School campaigns pushed district officials to respond to concrete and immediate needs: old facilities, violence in and surrounding schools, outdated and insufficient library materials. Both organizations also pushed for districtwide

reform. In collaboration with Research for Democracy, EPOP published a research report that brought visibility to parents' and teachers' concerns about transparency in the wake of the state takeover of the district. The report provided district leaders with concrete strategies for communicating more effectively with parents. Likewise, YUC's extensive research on small schools and ongoing surveys of high school students positioned the group to influence the district's high school reform strategy, ensuring that reforms reflected both students' interests and best practices for effective small schools.

In this study, researchers at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform documented EPOP's and YUC's education organizing across the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Drawing on interviews, field observations, archival documents, and administrative data, the study describes the impact of the two organizations' work to influence district policy, increase school capacity, and improve student outcomes.

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

EPOP’s and YUC’s organizing helped create more equity in the development of district priorities and the allocation of resources.

The study data showed that EPOP’s and YUC’s organizing influenced district priorities and resource allocations, particularly in parent involvement, small high school reform, standardized testing, school discipline, and distribution of federal Title I funds. The organizations secured funding for vital classroom resources, such as computers and books; new reading, math, nutrition, college-counseling, and after-school programs; and a wide range of school facilities improvements.

EPOP’s and YUC’s organizing led to greater parent engagement, student engagement, and school accountability to the community.

District leaders reported that EPOP’s advocacy pushed the district to create school-based parent support rooms and help desks, provide information to parents, and implement a new system to facilitate ongoing teacher–parent communication. YUC’s work to maintain a consistent presence in district-level arenas by speaking at district meetings and in private sessions with regional and district officials created constructive opportunities for district leaders to interact with students from low-performing high schools. In both instances, genuine engagement of parents and community members added to the organizations’ perceived legitimacy by school and system officials.

EPOP’s and YUC’s organizing resulted in greater educational opportunity for students in the low-income neighborhoods they serve.

The district’s embrace of YUC’s plan to replace a large, failing high school with four new schools of 400 to 500 students was a major achievement amid budget cuts and a district policy of creating larger schools of 800 to 1,000 students. New small schools on the Kensington High School campus, where YUC concentrated its small-school efforts, showed higher rates of student attendance, decreased dropout rates, and increased numbers of students who identify as college bound than in the large high school that the small schools replaced.

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EPOP’s and YUC’s evolving school reform analysis, strategies, and tactics trace an arc from school-level organizing to a district-level strategy and, ultimately, to a combination of both, as the two groups grappled with how to catalyze and sustain reform. The result is a grassroots process in which young people and parents are deeply engaged in the struggle to improve the quality of public education in Philadelphia.