

# Engaging Cities

*How Municipal Leaders Can  
Mobilize Communities  
to Improve Public Schools*

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# Developing Community Leadership around Education Reform: A Bronx Tale

*New Settlement Parent Action Committee, part of the CC9 coalition, marches for safety in the public schools*



In December of 2002, a coalition of six Bronx community groups, calling themselves the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools (CC9),<sup>1</sup> met with members of the New York City teachers union to discuss the implementation of a four-point platform for school improvement developed by the coalition. CC9 had prepared the platform to lay out a vision of what the education system needed to do to provide an excellent education for all children, but particularly those children attending schools in District 9, a chronically underperforming district in the Bronx.

There was great hope on the part of attendees at the meeting that, together, the twenty-five assembled individuals could forge a shared vision of education reform for local schools. At the same time, participants were anxious and uncertain, because this kind of meeting had never before taken place. There had been numerous attempts by teachers to engage parents and community members in the typical roles of volunteer and homework tutor, and there were opportunities for individual parents to meet with their child's teacher. But rarely had

organized groups of parents, community members, and teachers met with one another to explore the possibility of partnership.

## From Contention to Cooperation

Earlier that year, most of the meeting participants and their constituents had attended a series of organizing events and smaller gatherings with CC9, followed by rallies that signaled shifts in perspective and an expansion of the possibility of change where little had previously existed. Some of those assembled felt intuitively that collaboration had the potential to impact teaching and learning in the district, but few were certain of anything other than the dire need to do something powerfully different and innovative. CC9's platform contained a number of contentious proposals, including parental observation of classroom practice

<sup>1</sup> Following the events described in this narrative, the collaborative's name was changed to Community Collaborative to Improve Bronx Schools (CCB), reflecting a commitment to expand to other areas of the Bronx.



### Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools (CC9)

CC9 is a community-led collaborative of parents, community members, community-based organizations, and other partners that organizes parents and neighborhood residents for school reform in the South Bronx, with support from New York University's Community Involvement Program. CC9 has successfully combined community organizing with the development of collaborative relationships with New York City government and institutional partners, working with the New York City Department of Education and the teachers union to design the Lead Teacher program and transform the district into one that will serve as a model for how to improve a low-performing urban school district.

▲ CC9 mission statement, background documents, and articles are available on the Emerging Knowledge Forum Web site, Annenberg Institute for School Reform):

2005: [www.annenberginstitute.org/EKF/2005/Bronx.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/EKF/2005/Bronx.html)

2004: [www.annenberginstitute.org/EKF/2004/SessionH.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/EKF/2004/SessionH.html)

▲ Ocyntia Williams, "A Community-Led Reform: Improving Schools in the South Bronx," *Voices in Urban Education* no. 5 (Fall 2004). Available for download at:

[www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/fall04/Williams.html](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/fall04/Williams.html)

## ■ *Place a high priority on public education*

and a shift in the roles of parents and community members to becoming formal partners in education policy and program development. However, the importance of these issues seemed small in comparison with the challenge of working and learning together.

There was a shared feeling that it would not be enough to simply identify a series of problems and potential solutions. Participants in the meeting felt that this time around, things could be different – maybe through a project that would focus not on placing blame, but on improving teaching and learning. Perhaps it was just a function of timing, the uniqueness of the gathering, or the tug of urgency that gave them hope; at the outset of the meeting, no one could say. However, as those who were there that night will attest, over the course of a few hours, minute by minute, point by point, it became clear to everyone that change was in the air.

“Mutual blame shifted to mutual support,” recalls Eric Zachary, the coordinator of CC9 and a senior project director of the Community Involvement Program at New York University, which provides support to the collaborative. Though they may not have realized it when they agreed to attend the meeting, he adds, “everyone was at a place where they were ready to listen, help, support, and change.” An emerging awareness of the promise of working together and a sense of possibility quickly came to distinguish both that initial meeting and the

present work of the collaborative. What brought them to this pivotal moment?

### **A System Resistant to Change**

Public education in New York City, as is the case in many large urban areas, had long been characterized by high teacher and administrator turnover, insufficient student progress, ever-increasing tension and suspicion between unions and district leadership and between unions and parents, and the general disengagement of individual teachers, parents, and students. In an effort to address these issues, in the mid-1960s New York moved to a decentralized administrative structure with control split between local community school boards and the board of education.

Despite the best intentions over a forty-year period, decentralization failed to produce desired gains in student achievement, public will and support, teacher performance, compensation, or professional satisfaction. For a number of reasons, such as the short tenure of chancellors and the inherent conflicts over local control and centralized authority, the structure seemed especially resistant to meaningful reform and systemic change. To the five men who were elected mayor of New York City from 1973 until 2001, only one solution would work. To bring about lasting change and create excellent educational opportunities for all of New York City’s children and youth, the mayor had to have substantial, if not complete, control of the school system.

- *Focus on a systemwide instruction approach, meaningful partnerships with families, leadership development for principals, and a streamlined and centralized system*

## What the Mayor Did

After years of negotiation and lobbying, the New York State Legislature decided to end local community control of schools and districts in New York City, shifting the responsibility for schools to the mayor's office. In 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg was granted full control of New York City schools, calling education "the number one focus of my administration."<sup>2</sup> Mayor Bloomberg, along with Chancellor Joel Klein, launched the Children First initiative

<sup>2</sup> Gail Robinson, "Improving The Schools," *Gotham Gazette*, July 29, 2002. Available online at: <http://gothamgazette.com/article/20020729/200/266>

as the central component of his education reform efforts (see sidebar).

Children First centers on four core elements designed to fulfill the promise of public education for New York City students and families. Children First mandated the adoption of

- a single, coherent, systemwide instruction approach to math, reading, and writing, supported by strong professional development;
- the establishment of a parent support system that facilitated the meaningful partnering of families and schools in the education of children;



*New Settlement Parent Action Committee members and their children participate in the March for Safety in Schools*

### Children First Reform Agenda

The New York City Department of Education's Children First Reform Agenda grew out of a citywide series of community engagement meetings between Chancellor Joel Klein and his staff and thousands of parents, students, teachers, principals, department staff, community groups, education experts, faith-based leaders, and business groups. From the information and suggestions gathered and an analysis of best practices in New York City and other urban districts, the chancellor and mayor developed core proposals designed to give all New York's schools, teachers, and principals the resources and support they need to improve teaching and learning in individual schools and classrooms.

▲ More about Children First:

[www.nycenet.edu/Administration/Childrenfirst/CFagenda.htm](http://www.nycenet.edu/Administration/Childrenfirst/CFagenda.htm)

## ■ *Engage parents through parent liaisons and community-wide educational councils*

- the development of principals as key instructional leaders in schools through leadership development programs; and
- the reorganization of the system from a board-appointed chancellor and thirty-two community boards to a centralized system led by a chancellor selected by the mayor.

The reorganization of the system is the element that most directly embodies the mayor's leadership in the district. It has created powerful supports for reducing bureaucratic inertia and advancing a reform agenda through a renewed focus on accountability and innovation.

Two aspects of the mayor's Children First transformation provided a fertile context for the growth and success of the collaborative work between CCG, the New York City United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). First, the plan eliminated community district offices and boards and created a region-based structure, with each of ten districts led by a regional

superintendent. The plan also eliminated the board of education and replaced it with a panel appointed by the mayor and borough presidents. Second, Children First called for substantial parent engagement by establishing a parent liaison in each school and creating community-wide educational councils.

These provisions created both the space and the support that allow innovations to flourish, notes Vincent Gaglione, a UFT representative from a District 9 school. "District 9 was in serious trouble," he says. "Both the parents and teachers were under siege by the decentralized structure. The shift in structure created the opportunity to trust. There was an incredible sense of timing. The centralized system has less of an ability to ignore and put off collective action. The collaborative filled a vacuum that school boards were supposed to fill, yet hadn't for decades." The newly centralized administrative structure removed barriers to reform by simplifying the decision-making process and building upon the extant successes of CCG and district educators and leaders. Clear lines of potential support created a context in which innovations might flourish.

## ■ *Create the space and support that allow innovations to flourish*

## ■ Nurture community ownership of school reform

### What the Collaboration Accomplished

One aspect of Children First – the reorganization of community school districts into larger regions – created a potential problem for CC9. The coalition – which included New Settlement Apartments, ACORN, the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, the Northwest Bronx Community Coalition, the Highbridge Community Life Center, and the Mid-Bronx Council – had been formed around the schools of District 9. Subsuming them into a larger structure threatened to undermine the sense of ownership the collaborative members felt for their schools. This concern was reinforced by teachers and administrators, who viewed the emerging

relationships and the development of a network in District 9 as key to the success of the collaboration.

Yvonne Torres, local instructional superintendent for the targeted schools, states, “Basically, it was about sharing ideas and coming together to work. I thought it was important and lobbied hard to maintain the district network to continue and nurture what we had.” The schools of District 9 were theirs, despite any shortcomings in performance or achievement. For community members, parents, funders, teachers, and administrators alike, it was clear that any interventions had to both capitalize on and further develop that burgeoning sense of ownership.

CC9 (now CCB) parent leaders envision the future of education organizing at a planning retreat



### *Created Relationships That Made the Difference*

While the Children First agenda provided opportunities for the collaboration between CC9, the UFT, and the NYCDOE, the development of relationships – with the teachers’ union and the department of education, in particular – made it happen.

Jacqueline Elias, Vice President at JP Morgan Private Bank and member of the Donors’ Education Collaborative, one of the earliest and key sponsors of CC9’s work, explains that relationships are at the heart of the collaborative’s strategy. The collaborative “is not built upon overnight change,” she says, “but, instead, is founded upon the notion of incremental changes in policy, practice, and interactions through mentoring and relationship building.”

One of the most significant relationships was between CC9 and the UFT. “We sat down after creating the platform and realized that teachers were at the center of the vision,” says Ocyntia Williams, a CC9

organizer. “We asked for and gave support. It was reciprocal between the community and teachers. No change could happen without everyone, but especially without teachers. We decided to stop the blame games. Of course, we wouldn’t and couldn’t agree with everything, but still we have to come together.”

As they developed and refined the CC9 process, forging new relationships and recasting existing ones lay at the heart of CC9’s capacity building. First and foremost for CC9, that meant grounding their arguments in facts. “We knew it had to be different, so we came prepared with information, data, and some knowledge about what was going on,” Williams says. “We presented data as a part of our approach, not emotionally or negatively. The dialogue was data focused.”

From the beginning, the collaboration has faced a number of challenges, the most daunting being early attempts to negotiate the relationships. As Herb Katz, a UFT



CC9 meets with Michele Cahill (front row, in center), senior counselor for education policy of the NYCDOE, to develop the Lead Teacher Program

leader from District 9, recalls, the participants were able to work through their differences in a spirit of cooperation, rather than confrontation.

The first test was to tweak the platform that they created and presented to us. There was no resistance, just people listening to each other – really listening – and sharing their concerns. Parent access to classrooms was a big issue and that showed something. It couldn't happen immediately, but no one panicked as we explained why and how we saw it. We needed to pilot it and work out a process. The answer wasn't "no," but there were some issues that need to be worked out. Ultimately, it was a question of trust and respect – another step in building our relationship.

### *Learned to Dialogue*

CC9's approach also requires shifting the traditional organizing paradigm from a confrontational stance to one much more heavily invested in dialogue. Before inviting all constituent groups to rallies, CC9 began by holding meetings with officials where they presented their platform, not as a list of demands, but as a starting point for a real dialogue. The hope was to create a shared vision of education practice in District 9 through dialogue, trust, and negotiation. "Their work goes far beyond rallies and protests but navigates the support-versus-demand tensions beautifully," says Elias. "There are no ultimatums, just a promise to always work for something better. It seems as though the best form of behavior modification is good communication – reciprocal and respectful communication between parents and schools."

Herb Katz describes the working relationships of CC9: "There is a mutual sense of accountability and responsibility. That is what *collaborative* means. Relationships are defined by their barriers, sustainability, mechanisms, and structures. The collaborative provided the UFT and individual teachers with a way to engage and involve parents in a meaningful way with mutual respect."

### *Moved toward Change*

Once differences in perspective were resolved through dialogue with individual teachers in District 9 and the larger UFT, negotiations began in earnest with the NYCDOE to fulfill the promise of the collaborative through changes in policy and practice, specifically the development of a Lead Teacher program focused on providing additional supports to new teachers in District 9. Negotiations centered on teacher selection, pay differentials, and stipends – sensitive and explosive issues that had the potential to cripple the budding relationship in its infancy.

Under normal circumstances these would be tense negotiations, but both the circumstances and composition of the negotiation table were far from routine. While both the DOE and the UFT had long advocated and sought substantive parental involvement in schools, UFT President Randi Weingarten used the negotiations to further that principle to levels of unprecedented breadth and depth. By inviting members of CC9 to sit at the negotiation table around the project, she clearly and forcefully signaled the seriousness and distinctiveness of the new relationship to district officials, members of her union, and CC9 members as well.

## ■ *Recognize the potential of an innovative program*

Around the same time, CC9, in turn, testified before the city council during hearings on teacher labor issues. “We didn’t compromise ourselves at all, because we felt they were being unfairly attacked,” says Zachary of New York University. “We testified on behalf of our relationships and their commitment to the work, not on specific provisions of the contract.”

### *Created the Lead Teacher Program*

In addition to the successful development of a shared vision and commitment to support each other and work cooperatively, the collaboration between CC9 and the UFT also produced a concrete outcome: a pilot project to establish the position of *lead teacher* in District 9 schools. The goal was to enhance teacher retention and improve instruction by enabling experienced, master teachers to serve as mentors and supporters of both newer and veteran teachers. By working half-time in their own classrooms and half-time outside, the lead teachers provide direct instructional and curricular support through extended visits to other teachers’ classrooms and by offering their classrooms as laboratories in which less-experienced teachers can observe and learn.

The collaboration behind the Lead Teacher program also strengthens the link between schools and the community by building upon the CC9 practice of “community walks,” which pair teachers with youth and parents for neighborhood tours. In addition to helping teachers get to know the community better, such walks help maintain the relationships that make CC9 possible, says

Ernesto Maldonado, a parent leader with CC9. “It was time to incorporate the teachers back into the community,” he says. “They are, and needed to see themselves and be seen, as important to the community as the corner store. That was the only way this could work.”

A crucial next step was securing additional financial support from the philanthropic community and, perhaps more important, securing policy, financial, and administrative support from the NYCDOE. When compared with the amount the nation’s largest school system spends on teacher salaries and related expenses, the Lead Teacher budget was relatively inexpensive. The main cost of the program would be the salaries of the proposed lead teachers – an additional thirty-six positions for the district. These teachers would earn approximately \$10,000 more than other teachers with similar education and tenure, with the additional requirement of four hours of training per month during the school year (after school) and one week of additional training during the summer. Nevertheless, any additional expenditure is hard-fought at a time when New York, like most states, faces a financial crunch.

Early support of, and faith in, the work of CC9 in the form of a \$400,000 grant from the Booth Ferris Foundation to pilot the project allowed the collaborative to leverage an additional \$1.6 million in 2004 from Joel Klein, chancellor of the NYCDOE, for the Lead Teacher program. The chancellor recognized that the Lead

## ■ *Be open to structural changes when needed*

Teacher program held enormous potential as a retention strategy and as one of a number of models for reshaping professional development citywide. As he commented later on the appeal of the Lead Teacher program, “Talent draws talent. . . . Talent attracts talent. . . . Talent can train and support talent” (see sidebar).

After some negotiation, he approved the plan, but the details of the project went unresolved for two months as final negotiations continued. With the boundless commitment and energy of CC9 members and the willingness of both the NYCDOE and UFT to continue bargaining, ultimately a deal was reached to launch the project.

In a significant gesture, the NYCDOE also agreed to keep the District 9 schools together as an instructional unit – the only network formed on the basis of the schools’ relationship with a community-based organization. “Basically, it was about sharing ideas and coming together to work,” says local instructional superintendent

Torres. “I thought it was important and lobbied hard to maintain the network to continue and nurture what we had.”

The relationships that contributed to the adoption of the Lead Teacher program continued in its implementation, as well. Lead teachers were first screened by UFT, CC9, and regional personnel, ensuring they met qualifications such as a minimum of five years of teaching experience and demonstrated teaching excellence. The screening was followed by a hiring process directed by a representative panel of teachers, parents, and the principal from each District 9 school.

Today, the project has thirty-six lead teachers placed in ten Bronx schools. A project evaluation report by the Academy for Educational Development found that the first year was a successful one:

- The Lead Teacher program was successful in developing a model that can be expanded to other districts in New York City.

### **Fact-Finding Panel Recommendation to Accept Lead Teacher Program**

When the current collective bargaining agreement between the New York City Department of Education and the United Federation of Teachers was being negotiated in 2003 and 2004, an impasse was reached. In response, the New York Public Employment Relations Board appointed a fact-finding panel, which recognized the success of the Lead Teacher program in the Bronx and recommended expanding it into a citywide program.

▲ State of New York Public Employment Relations Board. Findings of Fact and Report and Recommendations of the Fact-Finding Panel. Report M2004-253, 268-279 New York (September 2005), p. 50. Can be downloaded at:

[www.perb.state.ny.us/pdf/m2004-253.pdf](http://www.perb.state.ny.us/pdf/m2004-253.pdf)

- The Lead Teacher program resulted in a higher teacher retention rate among teachers supported by the program.
- Those teachers experienced the Lead Teacher program as helpful to improving their practice.
- The significant increases in student achievement in the schools may have been aided by the Lead Teacher program.
- CCB (formerly CC9) played a critical leadership role as part of the Lead Teacher Coordinating Committee in guiding the first year of implementation.

According to Herb Katz, “We have developed or have, as part of who we are and what we care about, an ability to work through fights, both major and minor. Our motto is ‘Can you live with it?’ It’s simple and down-to-earth, and it works.”



*New Settlement Parent Action Committee leaders speak with the media at the March for Safety in Schools*

## Looking Ahead

The CC9/UFT/NYCDOE collaboration has emerged as an important model for community and parental engagement in New York City, but it is not without critics. For example, CC9 members report that some educators and policy-makers outside of District 9 have been slow to embrace the level and kinds of participation demonstrated in the Bronx. There is no clear understanding that they have to collaborate to bring about educational success through the use of all resources and constituencies. As the engagement model spreads to other parts of New York, there remains a danger that the collaborative will continue to be seen as an aberration or a small pocket of innovation.

There is also skepticism about whether CC9 will shape education reform efforts and relationships in the philanthropic community. The skeptics see this limited impact not as a reflection of CC9’s work but, rather, of the difficult history reformers have had with collaboration, as opposed to competition.

However, a number of communities and community-based organizations in the city have begun their own reform and development processes informed by the CC9 model. Over the last two years, the Brooklyn Education Collaborative (BEC) has focused its organizing on improving middle-grade education in East Brooklyn, beginning with science education (see sidebar on page 63). In the fall of 2005, BEC won a commitment from the NYCDOE to provide science supplies to all forty-five schools with middle grades in the BEC districts. Currently, BEC is working with elected officials and foundations on an initiative to fund state-of-the-art science labs in the twenty-nine middle-grade schools in BEC districts that have no labs.

## ■ *Expand a successful engagement model to other parts of the city*

Veronica Rivera, a CC9 parent leader, explains that the collaboration is a way of channeling parents' aspirations for their children into meaningful action. "The system frustrated me. I felt alone and isolated," she says. "There are millions of parents who feel the same but have to realize that they are not alone and they are not powerless. Your child deserves the best. As a parent, you are unsure who is responsible and how to become responsible yourself. We do want to help other communities to empower themselves by seeing that it can be done. Parents can lead. Parents and teachers can work together. All they have to do is identify their own issues and work with others to develop solutions."

While the success of the initiative will ultimately be measured in student outcomes, changes in relationships and structures are also important to consider. However, members of the collaborative don't see their work as a reform model. Rather, they see it as a return to the ideals set forth at the founding of public schools. UFT representative Vincent Gaglione summarizes it this way: "This isn't reform. It is what school is supposed to be. It is idealized, but this is what was intended when we created public education. Everyone involved. Everyone invested. Once we get them out there, the barriers go down. Again, personal relationships are key. Familiarity eliminates contempt. Our work is only possible because you have a critical mass from each group willing to take the next steps."

Those steps will not always be visible to those outside of the engagement process, but they are substantial nonetheless. In response to critiques and questions about any lasting or far-reaching impacts of CC9, Herb Katz emphasizes the palpable sense of community and trust that has developed for members over the past two years and the ways the feeling continues to grow and become institutionalized in spite of the challenges. "You know how I know there's trust? There has been a flip in attitudes, because the UFT members, in negotiations with the NYCDOE, ask, 'How will this impact CC9?' That is a key shift."

### **Brooklyn Education Collaborative**

The Brooklyn Education Collaborative is an advocacy coalition for middle school reform, representing parents and community groups from three school districts and the UFT.

▲ Bell, Natalie, "Brooklyn parent group to DOE: Move Forward on Middle School Reforms," *New York Teacher*, March 17, 2005. Available online at:

[www.uft.org/news/teacher/reforms](http://www.uft.org/news/teacher/reforms)

▲ United Federation of Teachers, "Silent Concert Is Loud and Clear about Missing Courses," April 28, 2005. Available online at:

[www.uft.org/parent/concert](http://www.uft.org/parent/concert)

Recent events suggest that the shift has already produced tangible results, not just for the individuals involved, but for the larger education system in New York City. Recently concluded contract talks between the UFT and the NYCDOE demonstrate that the collaborative has already had a long-term impact on the system. After two and a half years of contentious negotiations, the new contract expands one of the collaborative's predominant innovations, the Lead Teacher program.

Beginning in fall 2006, the NYCDOE will be hiring at least two hundred lead teachers to serve in struggling schools across the city at the chancellor's discretion and with input from school principals. As a result, the promise of the program has a chance to be more fully realized over the next two years. It remains to be seen the extent to which the change in attitudes, relationships, and structures will outlast the individuals involved and become part of the common culture in New York City schools, but the planned expansion of the project is strong evidence that the Lead Teacher program has gained purchase as a high-quality, high-impact reform in the city's leadership.

Beyond the spread of the program, for many who have been deeply involved in the collaboration, success is already at hand simply because people are invested in the success of all children. Veronica Rivera says, "We will get something done in the end. Not just *talk about* getting something done, or *plan* to get something done. We'll get it done. We want to change the system. That just propels and inspires you. There is a remarkable dedication and support that leads to a reinforcing of faith. Beyond differences in language, culture, and role, there is one agenda: the success of our kids."



Photos courtesy of New Settlement Apartments' Parent Action Committee (7)

*CC9 (now CCB) leaders discuss proposals for action at a planning retreat*