

# Organized Communities, Stronger Schools



Annenberg  
Institute for  
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

## A PREVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Executive Summary

#### Background

For the past six years, the Community Involvement Program, now part of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, has been studying the impact of community organizing for school reform on student outcomes, with funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. In this research brief, *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools*, we present a preview of the findings from this study.

Because community organizing for school reform operates in a complex and fluid context of schools and communities, a multifaceted, robust research approach is necessary to assess the processes and impacts of this work. Our study draws on multiple research traditions, using a multi-site case study design, theory of change methodology, and quantitative and qualitative methods.

*Constituents of Change*, our initial study report issued in 2004, described the study sites; analyzed each group's school reform goals, strategies, and methods; and provided descriptive data on the urban schools and districts the study sites are organizing to improve (Mediratta 2004). The study sites are:

- Austin Interfaith (Austin, Texas)
- Chicago ACORN (Chicago, Illinois)
- 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)
- Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and its youth organizing arm, Sistas and Brothas United (Bronx, New York)
- Oakland Community Organizations (Oakland, California)
- People Acting for Community Together (Miami, Florida)

Education organizers, researchers, and funders have long debated the impact of community organizing on student educational outcomes. Across multiple data sources, our six-year study found strong and consistent relationships between community organizing and policy and resource decisions, school-level improvements, and student outcomes. Interviews, surveys, and school-level administrative data analyses suggest that organizing helps expand the capacity of urban public schools to support student success by building support for reform alternatives, increasing equity in the distribution of resources, and generating meaningful parent, youth, and community engagement focused on improved student learning.

## Key Findings

Data suggest that organizing is contributing to school-level improvements, particularly in the areas of school–community relationships, parent involvement and engagement, sense of school community and trust, teacher collegiality, and teacher morale.

Successful organizing strategies contributed to increased student attendance, improved standardized-test-score performance, and higher graduation rates and college-going aspirations in several sites.

Our findings suggest that organizing efforts are influencing policy and resource distribution at the system level. Officials, school administrators, and teachers in every site reported that community organizing influenced policy and resource decisions to increase equity and build capacity, particularly in historically low-performing schools.

Data indicate that participation in organizing efforts is increasing civic engagement, as well as knowledge and investment in education issues, among adult and youth community members. Young people reported that their involvement in organizing increased their motivation to succeed in school.

Our research suggests that organizing groups achieve these schooling and community impacts through a combination of system-level advocacy, school- or community-based activity, and strategic use of research and data. Continuous and consistent parent, youth, and community engagement produced through community organizing both generates and sustains these improvements.

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