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Author: Giles, Hollyce C.

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A growing number of urban school reform initiatives seeking to transform failing schools engage significant numbers of parents. The initiatives strive to change a school's culture; the quality of relationships among educators, parents, and children; and students' educational outcomes. The initiatives work toward effecting systemic change in a school, and they situate their reform efforts within the context of the surrounding community. Further, since schools alone cannot solve the problems imported into them from society, some projects reach beyond schools; they draw upon the power of community institutions, such as churches and civic groups, to improve schools and aspects of life in the community that impact education. Successful systemic initiatives usually result in an increase in the quantity and quality of the various forms of parent involvement identified by Epstein (1995), such as parent volunteers in the school, and parents helping their children with homework.

Many such initiatives have succeeded in improving student academic achievement and transforming the culture of schools (Lewis, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996). This digest describes the common characteristics of such projects. While the best among the projects is James Comer's School Development Program, another example is highlighted here: the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a national organization that operates locally in many communities around the country, and whose successes to date in low-performing schools are encouraging. Begun over 50 years ago by Saul Alinsky, IAF is a national network of broad-based multi-ethnic interfaith organizations in economically poor and moderate-income communities. IAF works with communities to gain the power to improve the lives of their members, including the education of their children.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES

The most successful reform initiatives are collaborations between parents and schools. Typically, a group of local institutions, sometimes with the aid of foundation funds, hires an organizer--possibly from an organization like the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)--to initiate and facilitate the reform process. Through conversations with many individuals and groups, the organizer helps to identify a core organizing team of 8-15 parents and educators that usually coordinates the work of the others involved. Such

collaborative initiatives share certain characteristics, described below.

VIEWING THE SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY AS AN ECOLOGY

The initiators of collaborative reform projects tend to view a school and its surrounding neighborhood as a part of an interdependent social ecology that must be understood as a whole in order to identify problems and develop solutions (Heckman, 1996a; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Lewis, 1997). They address the ways that the strengths and difficulties in a school and neighborhood can affect each other and the children in both contexts. The projects often marshal the political strength of the residents and the institutions in a community, such as churches and civic organizations, to obtain needed reforms and resources for the school. For example, parents and faculty at Zavalla Elementary School in Austin, Texas, worked with a local IAF organization to obtain funding and cut through bureaucratic red tape to establish a health clinic at the school. Children had often missed school because of illnesses and long waits for appointments at community health clinics. Once the school clinic opened, attendance increased significantly (Murnane & Levy, 1996).

Projects also work to make the values, cultures, and languages of the various components of a child's ecology--home, school, and neighborhood--more continuous. In the Educational and Community Change Project (ECC) in Arizona (which joined forces with a local IAF organization), the staff altered the curriculum of the project's schools so that economically poor Latino and Native American parents and students join together with middle-class teachers of diverse ethnic backgrounds to study issues of concern to the community. Their joint inquiry permits the worlds of the school, home, and neighborhood to come together (Heckman, 1996a; Lewis, 1997).

Attention to the social ecology of a school and its neighborhood responds to the important concerns raised by Lareau and Shumar (1997) about the individualist approach to family-school relationships pervasive in educational policy. The authors note that most schools attempt to engage individual parents without considering how differences in education, income, social networks, and positions of power can affect their ability or willingness to participate. The result is that parents from working and lower class groups are less likely to become involved in school-related activities.

The projects described here, however, invite groups of parents to reflect critically upon the education of their children, and to take action as citizens to make needed changes in their schools and communities. Such an approach can be affirming and can increase participants' awareness of their collective power. It contrasts significantly with the strategies of other parent involvement projects which invite the participation of individual parents as consumers of education (Vincent, 1996), or in some cases, as "at-risk" parents, which implicitly suggests a view of parents as patients in need of treatment by educators and school mental health professionals (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON COMMON CONCERNS

The foundation of the work of successful initiatives consists of building relationships among parents, educators, community leaders, and public officials. Such relationships foster increased involvement, and create resources such as trust, information channels, and shared norms among people that are essential to transforming schools (Coleman, 1990).
SHARING CONCERNS. Organizers of community-school initiatives spend considerable time talking with parents and educators to learn about their personal concerns for their children's school. It is an effort to develop trust and build a culture of conversation that leads to action as people form relationships based on common concerns. IAF organizers, for example, conduct a "situational audit," which gives everyone in the school the opportunity to identify its positive and negative aspects. They identify areas of overlapping self-interest with other parents and, if possible, with educators at a school. Organizers also sponsor "neighborhood walks," in which parents and educators gather at a school and then go out to visit parents at home; the aim is to engage families in conversation about their concerns for the school and community (Cortes, 1994).

Organizers foster relationships in group forums as well. For example, voluntary weekly dialogues among teachers, teachers' aides, and the principal of a school are at the heart of the work of ECC. Participants discuss their beliefs and ideas about their work, and initiate efforts to co-create the curriculum with parents (Heckman, 1996a).

Parents and educators also meet together to identify common concerns, decide which to focus on, and develop a strategy for addressing them. IAF calls these sessions "house meetings." ECC calls this process "indigenous invention," explaining that "teachers, parents, children, and other community members must be the inventors of their social worlds" (Heckman, 1996a, pp. 52-53).

TAKING ACTION. Next, action committees develop strategies to address specific concerns. Members first meet with public officials, academics, business leaders, and others who have information about the issue on which they are working. They then develop plans of action to resolve problems, and present them at a neighborhood meeting for ratification by the larger community. They may also hold accountability sessions, where a large number of parents and educators meet with public officials to ask for their support or action on a particular issue.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE OF POWER IN SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

An understanding of the complex ways in which power, or "the ability to act," influences education is central to the approach of a successful collaborative initiative. Diverse projects, including the School Development Program, IAF, the Family Matters Project (Cochran & Dean, 1991), and ECC, acknowledge the influence of power relations on the way children are educated. Some focus more on the dynamics within schools where parents often are marginalized (Comer, 1980), while others examine the impact of the social and political context of the schools as well. IAF conducts a formal "power analysis" that identifies the self-interests of the different groups and individuals in a particular education bureaucracy and the relative power that each has over educational policy and practices. The purpose is to understand how to influence these various groups to make decisions beneficial to students in their schools.
Power analyses frequently reveal parents' absence from the processes of educational decision-making. Thus, many initiatives work with parents to develop their power, which they can use in school reform collaborations. IAF, along with several other initiatives, promotes the goal of changing the culture of schools from one of "unilateral" or "command and control" type of power, which they see as predominant in today's schools, to one of "relational power" among educators, parents, and community members, which grows out of collaboration and conversation (Comer, 1980; Cochran & Dean, 1991; Heckman, 1996a).

A key to parents' development of personal power in the work of IAF is the "iron rule": "Do not do for others what they can do for themselves" (Cortes, 1994). The rationale for the rule is that parents become aware of their own capabilities as they assume responsibilities, and develop the confidence to take on increasingly challenging tasks to transform their children's schools. ECC and IAF have observed that when parents demonstrate their power in achieving positive changes for a school, teachers view parents with greater trust and respect (Lewis, 1997).

FOSTERING THE COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP OF PRINCIPALS

As the chief executive officer of a school, a principal's willingness and ability to engage in a collaborative process of reform is essential to the success of the initiative (Cortes, 1994; Heckman, 1996a; Smylie, Crowson, Chou, & Levin, 1996). Since educational bureaucracies typically are more conducive to unilateral, command-and-control leadership than collaborative leadership, reformers usually must seek out and cultivate principals who are open to examining and changing their style of leadership. IAF has found the greatest success with principals who "do not want to be compliance officers, but who want instead to be educational leaders and entrepreneurs" (Cortes, 1994, p. 13).
Being an educational entrepreneur involves creating an environment where teachers and parents feel safe enough to take risks, and even to fail, in an effort to create positive change (Cortes, 1994; Heckman, 1996a; Murnane & Levy, 1996). One risk that

runs counter to the socialization of principals and to the culture of most schools, yet is crucial to collaborative reform, is sharing information about the school with parents. Although there exists a fear that parents might be troublemakers who would make decisions that teachers oppose (Heckman, 1996a), in fact, if parents do not know about a school's problems they cannot contribute their considerable energy and resources--their power--to resolving them. At the same time, trust must be developed between parents and educators to reduce the likelihood of each blaming the other for the problems.

Collaborative leadership also involves principals' sharing the responsibilities of leadership with teachers and parents who have been identified as leaders. Such a shift from wielding unilateral power to building relational power may not be easy for principals, but can provide them with support and relief.

A reform-minded principal must also be able to work effectively in two very different cultures: the ongoing hierarchy of the broader educational bureaucracy in which the school is embedded, and the evolving collaborative activities in the school. Thus, the principal needs to know how to negotiate the bureaucracy to attract and keep resources, such as skilled, dedicated teachers and funds, and, also, how to prevent institutional regulations from interfering with the process of school change.

DEVELOPING AND TRAINING PARENTS AND EDUCATORS AS LEADERS

Creating systemic change in a school is labor-intensive, and requires the sustained efforts of many people: parents, teachers, administrators, community members, and the staffs of outside organizations. For this reason, projects spend significant time and energy on identifying and nurturing leaders, defined by IAF as people with a following who can build networks of relationships and are able to motivate and recruit people to accomplish a task (Cortes, 1994).

TRAINING PARTICIPANTS TO IMPROVE EDUCATION. Projects also devote considerable time to training and mentoring to ensure that all participants develop the skills needed to reform education. IAF offers national 10-day training sessions three times a year, where participants develop their skills as leaders and organizers of change in communities. In these sessions and in local training events, IAF helps participants develop organizing skills, such as recruitment of new leaders, team building, and effective conversation, negotiation, and compromise (Cortes, 1994). Training focused on education organizing covers additional material on what students need to learn in schools in order to become productive citizens in today's economy, how the educational system works, what characteristics define a good school, and how to create a collaborative culture in schools.

TRAINING PARTICIPANTS TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS. This training, in the context of

ongoing mentoring relationships in local schools and communities, develops the skills to negotiate and compromise when the self-interests and values of parents, educators, members of the community, and public officials conflict. For example, a conflict arises when administrators are reluctant to publicize negative information about their school's performance, such as low achievement scores, or present it in a way that only the most highly-educated parents can understand, even though the information is crucial to parents' meaningful involvement in school change (Murnane & Levy, 1996). The collaboration of a large number of parents and teachers who trust each other and have been trained in negotiation also mitigates concerns that one group of parents may come to exert absolute control over a school, overruling educators and other parents on issues such as grading, classroom placement, and curriculum (Casanova, 1996).

MONITORING AND EVALUATING PROGRESS

Unfortunately, a prevalent pattern in schools in low-income communities is a lack of accountability for poor educational achievement (Public Education Association, 1997). Parents and, in many cases, teachers and school counselors often do not even know the achievement data for their schools. If they know the data, they often do not understand their significance for students' future educational and employment options. A cornerstone of the work of successful collaborative reform projects is to increase parents' and teachers' awareness and understanding of educational outcomes such as achievement scores, attendance, and dropout rates, and to enable them to monitor the impact of their reform efforts on these outcomes (Lewis, 1997). IAF also suggests monitoring less tangible indicators such as attitudes toward teaching and learning, and the social climate at a school, by listening to the tone and content of people's conversations in the hallways and classrooms.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

It is important to recognize the impact of the local educational bureaucracy on a reform initiative. Though educational bureaucracies tend to be resistant to widespread and active parent involvement in educational decision-making (Cibulka, 1996), some locales are more resistant than others. Organizations which can establish a collaborative relationship with higher levels of the educational bureaucracy, such as state or city departments of education, usually have an easier time gaining entry into a local school and beginning the process of collaboration (Murnane & Levy, 1996). Also, initiatives involving a university-school partnership, such as the School Development Project and ECC, begin inside of schools, and so do not have to fight to gain entry (Comer, 1980; Heckman, 1996a, b). Conversely, initiatives located in settings that are highly resistant to parent involvement tend to rely on strategies of confrontation to have an impact on schools (Ross, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The mixed results of the plethora of reform initiatives implemented over the past several years suggest that urban schools alone cannot solve the societal problems imported into them, nor can they alone address the daunting obstacles often presented by educational bureaucracies. However, the process of reform described in this digest, as exemplified by the Industrial Areas Foundation, has had a significant positive impact on schools. In Texas, two years after the IAF's Alliance Schools initiative began, three-fourths of the schools increased their scores on the state assessment test (Lewis, 1997). In New York, IAF organizations have created three new public schools with more collaborative approaches to education, have mobilized large numbers of parents to participate in and lead reform initiatives, and have had an impact on city-wide educational policy through a media campaign to publicize the retention of superintendents and principals in "Educational Dead Zones," with years of poorly-performing schools.

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