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## ABSTRACT

This paper documents how a group of concerned parents and the New Settlement Apartments (NSA), a unique housing development group in New York City that manages 900 units of low to moderate income housing, used community organizing to try to raise academic achievement in their neighborhood elementary school. It discusses why schools in low-income neighborhoods so often perform poorly, locating as the root cause the lack of political will to ensure that all children receive the quantity and quality of educational resources they need and deserve. This case study of the New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee illustrates the opportunities and challenges that result when a community-based organization extends its work of rebuilding a low income neighborhood by organizing the community's political will and capacity to improve its public schools. The group ultimately succeeded in removing the school's principal because they held him responsible for student failure to learn. The paper narrates the development of NSA's Parent Action Committee, the organizing strategies they employed in their efforts to improve the school's outcomes, and the assistance provided by the Community Involvement Program of New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy. (SM)

A Case Study:

# Community Organizing for School Improvement in the South Bronx



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## **THE NYU INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION & SOCIAL POLICY**

Founded in 1995, the Institute for Education and Social Policy of New York University works to strengthen urban public schools, particularly those serving low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Through its policy studies, research, evaluations and technical assistance, the Institute seeks to build capacity for school improvement among policy-makers, educational practitioners, parents and community-based organizations. From its inception, the Institute's work has been shaped by its core belief that significant improvement in poorly performing schools in low-income urban communities requires a combination of system-wide policy reforms, capacity building at the school level, and the development of political will to ensure equitable resource allocation and accountability.

The Institute's Community Involvement Program focuses on strengthening the capacity of community-based organizations to organize parents and neighborhood residents to hold the school system accountable for providing effective education. CIP provides neighborhood-based technical assistance to individual CBOs on school improvement and parent organizing strategies, and also supports the development of citywide campaigns that bring groups together to work for system-wide education policy reform.

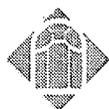
CIP's technical assistance takes the following forms:

- 1. Convening and facilitation of meetings to assist groups in exploring schooling problems and possibilities for working together;*
- 2. Training on schooling issues and organizing/leadership development strategies;*
- 3. Data analysis and presentation on school performance and expenditures;*
- 4. Policy analysis and development of reform proposals;*
- 5. Strategy and organizational development consultation to assist organizations in carrying out the organizing work;*
- 6. Brokering relationships to other sources of information and support;*
- 7. Assessment and feedback on progress, barriers and overall strategy; and*
- 8. Coordination and administrative support for citywide organizing activity.*

The authors of this paper are staff members of the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy. The Institute has provided intensive technical assistance to New Settlement Apartments (NSA) to support the organizing work described in this case study. For this paper, the data collected through the authors' role as technical assistance providers was supplemented by interviews with parents and NSA staff, as well as analysis of NSA documents. By request, all quotations from parents are anonymous.

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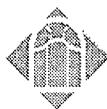
**A CASE STUDY:**  
**COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL  
IMPROVEMENT IN THE SOUTH BRONX**

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COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM

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## FOREWORD

First, this is a great story. When poor parents in the Bronx realize their children's school is one of the worst in New York City, they seek advice from the community group that rebuilt their housing development. Armed with data that only a small fraction of students have learned to read, they organize a parent base and learn how to take action. For the first time, perhaps in history, the school board and superintendent are compelled by their organization and arguments to listen. The principal is replaced, and new programs come in. End of story? Not quite....

Not only do the authors tell the story well; they ground it in strong theory. Why do schools in low-income neighborhoods so often perform poorly? Zachary and Olatoye locate the root cause, as the lack of political will to ensure that all children receive the quantity and quality of educational resources they both need and deserve. Study after study has documented how students in the urban core are shortchanged: lower-level programs; teachers poorly prepared or teaching out of field; weak, drill-based instruction; fewer resources and materials; and low expectations.

In middle class districts, we don't find schools that fail to teach 80% of their students to read, because the people who live there have extensive social networks and political skills. In low-income areas, not only are social connections depleted, but there is little political capital, which the authors define as "the clout and competence a community can wield to influence public decisions." Community organizing aims to rebuild both social and political capital, and to restore a healthy balance of power.

Power tends to corrupt, as Lord Acton famously noted. But so does lack of power. In this paper, the point is that power well distributed is a positive force. School officials acted as if they could do, or not do, whatever they wanted because no one would challenge them. But the problems in schools developed in part because no one from the community had challenged them. For far too long, parents believed that nothing they would do would make any difference, so why bother?

The authors note, astutely, that rebuilding power in our low-income communities could be a viable alternative to free market solutions (like vouchers, tax credits, and charter schools) for holding public schools accountable. Public education works well in communities where families whose children go to the public schools have as much power -- connections, access, political skill -- as the officials who run the schools. Public education is faltering in distressed, low-income communities, where the people who run the schools are perceived to be of a "superior" social status, race and/or culture, than the families whose children attend the schools. Teachers and principals feel accountable to the officials who sign their checks, not to the families of their students. Furthermore, educators tend to blame the families for their children's plight. The result is that families feel and seem powerless.

In situations like this, traditional methods of engaging families not only do not work. They are inappropriate. The language of community organizing uses a vocabulary that does not appear in the PTA manual or "family-school partnership" workshops. What did the New Settlement Apartments staff do to help the Parent Action Committee organize and have an impact? Parents began observing the school and classrooms. Together they analyzed school-wide student achievement data and research on good educational practice. They compared their school's data with others in the city, visiting schools that serve a similar population, but where children's achievement is high. They formulated proposals, and engaged in collective actions to move them forward. When the community school district stonewalled them, they presented their demands to the Board of Education.

This is an entirely new model for parent involvement, and it is gathering speed. In New York City, the number of groups organizing around education issues has quadrupled in the past seven years. A recent study of education organizing done by Research for Action found 150 urban and rural community organizing groups across the country, some affiliated with national organizations like ACORN and the Industrial Areas Foundation, and others more homegrown.

The traditional approach to parent involvement developed in largely white, middle class neighborhoods, where teachers and administrators lived and sent their kids to the same school district where they worked. Out of this arose the concept of a parent-teacher association, where parents placed themselves at the service of the school, trusting in the expertise of the educators.

As our nation became more urbanized and culturally diverse, the forms and trappings of school-based parent involvement did not evolve accordingly. The dominant model is still the parent-teacher association or its variant. At the beginning of the 21st Century, active PTAs are largely found in the suburbs and in elementary schools. In the cities and diverse inner-ring suburbs, parent-school organizations, where they exist at all, tend to be small, dominated by an in-crowd of middle class parents, and avoided by families of color and with lower incomes. Not surprisingly, when polled, teachers and principals invariably identify lack of parent involvement as “a serious problem.”

Since the 1960's, activists, progressive educators, and parent-community organizations have been working on new models. The basics of standard parent involvement – parents helping their children at home and volunteering for tasks defined by the school – continue, but with advocacy and power-sharing elements added. Advocacy is encouraged through processes like personal learning plans jointly developed with families, student support teams, study circles, and discussions of student performance data. Limited power sharing is arranged through familiar devices like school governance councils, advisory committees, and school improvement teams.

Traditional parent involvement and its upgrades are based in schools and depend on their approval and support. The language is one of partnership, collaboration, accommodation and creating a shared culture. In the traditional model, power-sharing (usually called shared decision-making) means that parents and families should have some influence over what happens to their children in school, but that educators remain firmly in charge.

In contrast, the community-organizing model talks unabashedly about building power and changing the culture of schools. When collaboration fails, confrontation takes its place. Accountability, not accommodation, is the watchword. The parents' base is a community group outside the school. This last point is key. School-based parent groups are generally too weak to mount a serious challenge over a complex issue like low student achievement. Creating a base outside the school by allying with a community group that has organizing and political skills triangulates the situation. Head-to-head with a school or district, parents usually lose. But coupled with the community sector, parents get respect.

This work is young and evolving. Although building political power in low-income communities is an essential condition for change, more infrastructure is often required to make that change happen. Some urban school districts have the capacity to educate all children, if they feel enough effective pressure. Other districts must develop that capacity, or lose students to the streets, or to charter schools and privatization schemes. The second act, how community organizing can support the development of district capacity and negotiate to become part of the reform process, is now being written. It's going to be another fascinating story.

*Anne T. Henderson  
Washington, DC  
March 2001*

## **A Case Study: COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN THE SOUTH BRONX**

*How can a community organization, dedicated to neighborhood revitalization, help parents improve their local public school? This paper documents how a group of concerned parents and New Settlement Apartments (NSA), a unique housing development group in New York City that manages 900 units of low to moderate income housing, used a community organizing methodology to try to raise academic achievement in their neighborhood elementary school. The group ultimately succeeded in removing the school's principal because they held him responsible for student failure to learn. The paper narrates the development of NSA's Parent Action Committee, the organizing strategies they employed in their efforts to improve the school's outcomes, and the assistance provided by the Community Involvement Program of New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Several years ago, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York City called for blowing up the Board of Education. While he was criticized for the harshness of his rhetoric, the comment resonated with many of the parents whose children attend public schools in the city's low-income neighborhoods. While most of those people did not vote for Giuliani, his statement reflected *their* frustration from seeing too many of their children fail to master basic academic skills and, therefore, face a future of limited options. It also reflected their cynicism that the schools in their neighborhoods have been allowed to fail for years with no consequences. The school system heralds a new set of reforms every few years, but the reality for the parents in these neighborhoods is that "the more schools change, the more they stay the same."

The current discussion about the failure of public schools in low-income urban neighborhoods is the latest chapter in an historical debate as to what role public education should play in making our society a more equal one. On the one hand, public education is supposed to function as the gateway to equal opportunity for all citizens; accordingly, a family's social and economic

position should bear little if any "relation to the probability of future educational attainment and the wealth and station it affords" (Kozol, 1991, p. 207). On the other hand, the resources devoted to public schooling, including financial, human and curricular, have never been distributed equitably; instead, resource distribution has always been highly correlated with the class and racial composition of local communities. In our inner cities, schools in low-income and working-class neighborhoods "have traditionally been the basements of opportunity in American schooling, catchbasins to which the sons and daughters of waves of immigrants, as well as migrants from the black South and Puerto Rico, have been assigned" (Fruchter, 1998, p. 11). Largely as a result, public schools have never successfully prepared all groups of students, particularly children of color and children in low-income communities, with the skills that would enable them as adults to access a broad range of productive roles in the economic, social and political spheres of our society.

While the current debate over how to improve public schools in low-income urban communities includes differences over educational philosophy, it also embodies fundamental political differences. The political side of the debate has great urgency at the present due to the vigorous attack by

conservative forces on the very nature of public education. Many conservatives argue that the public monopoly over education, and its accompanying bureaucratization and lack of competition and innovation, is the root political cause of its poor quality. Their alternative paradigm posits market mechanisms, including vouchers and privatization, as the key instrument for organizing schools for improved student outcomes (Chubb and Moe, 1990).

For those who are committed to preserving public education and making it more of an equalizing force — in this paper, they will be referred to as progressives or the Left — perhaps most disturbing is the increasing tendency of conservative forces to frame their effort as a response to the abysmal performance of schools in low-income urban neighborhoods and communities of color in particular. Their indictment of public education as well as the solutions they present use the rhetoric of equal opportunity and social justice. If the polls are correct, their position is gaining support in those communities. As one African-American supporter of vouchers put it: “It’s one of the last remaining major barriers to equality of opportunity in America, the fact that we have inequality of education. I don’t want to necessarily depend on the government to educate my children — they haven’t done a good job in doing that...” (Wilgoren, p.1). The future of public education may well be fought on the terrain of urban education.

The challenge for progressives is, without defending the performance and practices of inner city public school systems, to present a compelling paradigm of how to transform them so that all children receive a high quality education. A progressive analysis of the failure of these schools locates the root cause in the lack of political will to ensure that the children in low-income inner city neighborhoods and communities of color receive the quantity and quality of educational resources necessary to implement what we know will transform learning and achievement. Recent research demonstrating that class size reduction, particularly in the early grades, and improving the quality of a school’s teaching staff increase student achievement is a

significant addition to our knowledge base (Education Trust, 1998; Ellmore & Burney, 1997). It is also further demonstration that “money matters for students from less advantaged backgrounds and minority students...” (Grissmer, 1998, p.1). This does not deny, however, the impact of the social problems that poor children bring to school. Nor is it meant to deny the pernicious role that low expectations, racism and burnt-out teachers play in developing dysfunctional school cultures. Rather, it means that “we have to improve the quality of instruction in urban schools and we have to increase their funding; both are essential and neither will happen without the other” (Connell, 1998, p.24).

The development of the political will necessary to transform urban schooling involves multiple constituencies and strategies, and may vary by city (Gittell, 1994; Orr, 1999; Stone, 1998). This paper will focus on one element: the efforts of parents and residents in low-income urban neighborhoods to develop sufficient political will, through community organizing, to hold the school system accountable for improving the educational outcomes of local public schools. Over the past decade, this work has grown significantly, with community-based organizations (CBOs) playing a leading role. In New York City, for example, the number of CBOs engaged in this work has grown from three in 1994 to more than a dozen today. These groups represent an alternative to both the traditional bureaucratic parent involvement mechanisms established by school systems that have failed to serve as meaningful voices for parents, as well as conservatives’ emphasis on *individual* parental choice as the primary accountability mechanism for improving schools.

The following case study of the New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee illustrates the opportunities and challenges that result when a community-based organization extends its work of rebuilding a low-income neighborhood by organizing the community’s political will and capacity to improve its public schools. The implications of this study, however, extend beyond the issue of schools. By utilizing a community organizing strategy to build the *collective and independent* power of parents and residents to influence the practices and outcomes of

## **COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND SCHOOLS**

Over the last twenty years, "school/community collaborations have expanded greatly..." (Cahill, 1996, p.1). Most CBO involvement in schools has focused on providing supplemental educational, recreational, and social services to children and their families. Typically, this has meant enrichment and after-school programs for youth. CBOs have traditionally been reluctant to mobilize their communities to demand better schools for the same reasons that parents have been hesitant to organize — a sense that the school system is virtually unmovable and highly suspicious of "outsiders," and that given the complexity of the school system, they lack the expertise to change it.

Increasingly, however, CBOs engaged in the comprehensive rebuilding of poor urban neighborhoods are recognizing that the long-term health and stability of their communities requires successful schools. Additional services provided by a CBO do not automatically lead to improvements in the quality of education that children receive during the school day. More CBOs, like NSA, are

concluding that they can ill afford to ignore the quality of their local schools or expect them to be transformed through the existing school bureaucracy or the market (Zachary, 1999).

These community-based organizations, including housing/community development organizations, youth agencies, immigrant service and advocacy groups, and community organizing groups, combine the following elements of practice that we believe are necessary to support and sustain independent, effective school organizing:

**Roots** in a particular neighborhood and a sustained commitment to serve and develop it;

**Relationships** with parents and residents, the constituencies critical to community-based school improvement efforts; and

**Resources**, including trained staff and an administrative infrastructure, necessary for the labor-intensive and skilled work of community outreach.

their local schools, New Settlement Apartment's work intersects with the larger discussion about how to rebuild the civic capacity and sense of community within low-income urban neighborhoods.

### **NEW SETTLEMENT APARTMENTS**

#### **Background**

Opened in 1990, New Settlement Apartments (NSA) is a housing development of nearly 900 families in the Mount Eden section of the southwest Bronx. It is composed of 14 fully-renovated, previously-abandoned buildings

within an eight square-block area that had "...experienced the destruction of inner city America that went largely unchecked from the 1950's through the early 1980's" (Walsh, 1996, p.6). Its intentionally diverse mix of residents include a very substantial core of working people as well as 30% who were formerly homeless. The surrounding neighborhood is part of one of the poorest areas in New York City. In 1996, more than 40% of the households had incomes below \$10,000, and 93% of the children in the local school district were eligible for free lunch (Citizens Committee for Children of New York, 1999).

From its inception, NSA's mission has been not only to rebuild and maintain a significant

portion of the neighborhood's housing stock, but also to provide education programs and community services to all area residents. By 1996, NSA was able to cite a range of accomplishments, including:

- *providing decent and safe housing to 893 families at affordable rates, typically less than 25% of income;*
- *enticing the first bank to relocate in the community since the 1970s;*
- *building and maintaining the only playground for children in the area;*
- *establishing and staffing a community computer lab;*
- *implementing a program to combat domestic violence through the training of peer counselors; &*
- *developing a comprehensive set of youth development programs focusing on arts, academic enrichment, the environment, and recreation.*

### Getting Started: Entry Points

The condition of the local public schools surrounding the NSA development stood in sharp contrast to the physical and social rebuilding of the community that NSA was spearheading. NSA's surrounding school district, Community School District 9, had earned a reputation as one of the most corrupt and poorly performing districts in the entire city. In the early months of 1996 several parents with children in District 9 schools, who were involved in NSA activities and had learned about yet another scandal involving the members of the local school board, approached the leadership of NSA to discuss what could be done to improve local schools. With the election for the school boards in all thirty-two community school districts scheduled for May of that year, a small group of parents, with NSA staff support, launched a voter registration drive in District 9. While that effort lasted only a few months and ended up having little impact on the outcome of the election in the district, it did lead to NSA's involvement with the School Board

Election Network, a citywide effort of the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP) to support CBOs' engagement of their constituencies in the school board elections.

The election experience piqued NSA's interest in exploring what role it could play in improving the neighborhood's public schools. While NSA had no prior experience with the schools, its interest was a reflection of its philosophy, as outlined in a funding proposal, that "...housing is not just bricks and mortar.' ...Our mission is not only to rebuild and maintain a sizeable portion of the housing stock in this impoverished neighborhood, but also to support the rebuilding of the social capital of this neighborhood." The organization began a dialogue with IESP about what NSA could do and how it might get started. Going door-to-door to recruit parents, an initial technique often used in community organizing to begin building a base of members for subsequent activity, was too far outside NSA's repertoire (see box on p. 10). As with most CBOs that provide services and manage housing, NSA was used to engaging residents as clients who visit its office to access services. NSA realized that its clearest link to schools resided in its after-school program, which was housed in NSA's community center and served 60 children, most enrolled in local public schools. Why not start with the parents of those children and work to identify their specific concerns and their interest in banding together to improve the schools?

The next question NSA faced was how to engage those parents in a discussion about their schools. As part of the after-school program's effort to involve parents, a requirement for admission was a commitment from each parent to attend monthly workshops on parenting and education. Since the workshops were an ongoing program component, they represented a safe first step for NSA. Staff from IESP and NSA collaborated on designing and facilitating two workshops in the Winter of 1996. The first workshop focused on the rights of parents in the NYC public schools and the second on how parents can advocate for their children's needs in the schools. Both NSA and IESP hoped that

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL IS NOT ENOUGH TO CHANGE SCHOOLS**

The last 30 years has seen an explosion of community-based organizations providing services and rebuilding the housing stock in low- and moderate-income urban neighborhoods. Over the last ten years, some of those CBOs have been engaged, with support from foundations, in what is often referred to as community building or comprehensive community initiatives. These initiatives are based on the premise that rebuilding those communities requires not only strengthening their economy and infrastructure, but the quality of relationships among residents as well. It is supported by the research of Robert Putnam and others who have documented the value of social capital, which Putnam defines as "connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19).

What receives considerably less attention in the discussion of rebuilding low-income urban neighborhoods, however, is that a community's stock of social capital — as reflected in residents' participation in voluntary tenant and block associations, community gardens, and mentoring programs in schools, to name a few examples — does not automatically translate into the political capital necessary to hold public institutions, including schools, accountable. Political capital can be defined as "the clout and competence a community can wield to influence public decisions in order to obtain resources,

services and opportunities from the public and private sectors. Political capital requires deliberate activity to engage community members in collective action generated and controlled through their own strategic thinking and reflection" (Mediratta, 1995, p.6).

Given how deeply public schools are impacted by political processes, from the allocation of financial resources to the election of school boards and the appointment of superintendents, can a low-income community leverage significant school improvement without political capital? As one analyst of school reform efforts in Baltimore puts it, "schools are not islands unto themselves. School districts interact profoundly with their social, economic, and political environments" (Orr, 1996, p.315).

While they are distinct entities, social and political capital are powerfully connected. If residents feel a strong sense of community and reciprocity with one another, they are more likely to risk engaging in collective political action. Conversely, when a community uses its political capital to achieve improvements in the neighborhood, people's sense of hopefulness and trust in one another will likely deepen. The capacity of low-income urban neighborhoods, like the one in which NSA is located, to bring about change in local schools requires the development of both social and political capital.

some of the parents would want to use the knowledge they acquired from the workshops to explore the possibility of taking collective action to improve their children's schools.

The workshops were designed to provide concrete and useful information to parents. Recognizing that the school system did not provide meaningful opportunities for parents to talk with one another and identify common

problems, the sessions were also designed to encourage dialogue among parents. For many of the 35 parents who attended, the workshops were the first time they learned of their rights as parents and participated in small group discussions with other parents about their children's performance and experience in the neighborhood's schools. The workshops generated considerable enthusiasm among the parents. At the end of the second workshop, 20 parents volunteered to participate in

a follow-up meeting to explore taking action together to improve their local schools. The Parent Action Committee (PAC), a name the parents gave the group several months later, was born that night.

### The Parent Action Committee is Born: The Role of Training and Data

When this group of parents began meeting together during the Winter and Spring of 1997, they faced the challenge that every group engaged in organizing faces—making choices about where to focus their energies. Do they focus on one school? If so, which one and on what basis? Several schools? The entire district, composed of 35 schools? Of all the problems they identified, which should they work on first? Given the complexity of the educational process and the structure that governs it, what do they need to know to make effective strategic choices?

After several meetings in which they brainstormed and categorized problems and discussed the criteria for prioritizing them with IESP staff in attendance, PAC members decided to focus on the district's efforts to promote literacy. Clearly, by traditional organizing criteria — is the issue concrete, specific, urgent and winnable? — literacy was not the usual starting point. Moreover, the PAC could not act without first conducting research. As part of their investigation, they discovered that a central strategy employed by the district was the *Golden Hour*, a 90-minute reading period that every classroom in every school was expected to implement daily. From their own observations inside the schools and from stories they heard from their children and other parents, PAC members began to suspect there was a significant gap between the district's design and the schools' implementation of the reading period.

In response to this finding, the PAC made its first organizational request. They asked for, and were granted a meeting with district personnel to discuss the *Golden Hour*. For most if not all of the parents, this was the first time they attended a meeting with district officials. The meeting, which was held at NSA, was a major

disappointment for the group. Not only did the district officials not provide direct answers to the parents' questions; they completely dominated the meeting. The district personnel defended the district's programs without acknowledging any validity in the concerns raised by the PAC. There was no effort to understand the parents' concerns and experiences; instead, the district staff conducted a monologue. PAC members were not ready to take the bold step of interrupting the "authority figures." But they left the meeting feeling disrespected and angry.

Unlike the situation that a traditional parent association would face under similar circumstances, the PAC was not dependent on these administrators or the system they represented (see box on p.8). The PAC did not depend on the school system for its organizational infrastructure — meeting space, copying machine, computer, and telephone. Nor was the PAC alone in figuring out the next steps. Its independence of the system, combined with the staff and infrastructure support that NSA and IESP provided, enabled the PAC to avoid the two extremes that parents often get mired in, demoralization and despair about changing schools at one end and lashing out in anger resulting in non-strategic actions at the other.

The PAC went back to the research IESP staff had provided to identify more precisely the *right* questions to ask, the ones to use as levers to hold the school and district accountable. At this point, the PAC consisted of about 15 core members. The group had not yet reached out to other parents because the core members felt they needed to bolster their own understanding first. For example, the PAC had not yet examined the quantitative data IESP had assembled about the schools that would enable them to move beyond anecdotal evidence of school dysfunction. Additionally, because PAC members felt overwhelmed with trying to understand what was happening in schools across the district, they decided for the time being to focus on the school closest to NSA, PS 64. The school's composition reflected the demographics of the community; 80% of the students were Latino and 18% were African-American, and 93% were eligible for free

lunch. The PAC asked IESP staff to design and facilitate a four-week training series during the summer of 1997 to assist PAC members in understanding PS 64's Annual School Report, the NYC Board of Education's school "report card" that contains demographic and outcome data, as well as the school's Comprehensive Education Plan for improving student achievement.

It was during the training that PAC members learned the astonishing fact that proved a turning point in the PAC's development: only 17% of the children at PS 64 were reading at grade level. This statistic proved critical in several respects. First, it legitimated parents' personal frustration and anger with the school because it elevated the anecdotal to the quantifiable. This piece of data also served as a bridge to settle the ongoing and emotional debate within the group about who was responsible for the poor performance of the school: put simply, parents or the school system? Was the failure a personal or political one? From the data IESP presented, parents discovered that:

- *83% of the students were not reading at grade level,*
- *PS 64 ranked 657 out of 674 city elementary schools based on the results from the citywide reading test,*
- *the school received almost \$500,000 per year in Title I funding, an allocation to help schools in low-income communities improve their student outcomes,*
- *the school had made virtually no progress in reading over the last three years, and*
- *compared to schools with similar rates of poverty and students with limited English proficiency, PS 64 performed at a much lower level.*

The data ended the debate. It was clear to PAC members that while parents were certainly responsible for preparing and supporting their children's learning, the school system was responsible for providing a quality education. The target for parents' anger was clearer now. Those elected and appointed officials who ran the school system, and were paid with residents' tax money,

were accountable to parents and the community. The 17% figure proved to be a powerful tool for recruiting parents. Its simplicity and power made it an effective rallying cry.

Armed with this new consensus about who was ultimately accountable for PS 64's ongoing failure, the PAC organized a meeting with the school principal and the district superintendent to discuss their concerns. PAC members were angry but still hopeful they could establish a working relationship with the school to improve student achievement. A PAC leader summed it up this way: "We were trying to be as fair as possible." Once again, the response of the system's leaders astonished the parents. The principal and superintendent were unfamiliar with the data the parents presented, all of which were taken from publicly available Board of Education documents. The superintendent actually asked, "where did you get these numbers?" As in the earlier meeting with the district officials, the principal and superintendent defended their performance and programs and, even in the face of the data, never acknowledged there were serious problems at the school. The parents were particularly struck by the lack of urgency expressed. To the PAC, there was an educational crisis at PS 64. How could the school officials responsible for their children's education not recognize that? The meeting concluded with the principal and superintendent refusing to meet again with the PAC, and directing PAC members to join the parent association.

What they didn't know was that PAC members already had experience with the parent association (PA). Members found the monthly PA meetings to be tightly controlled by a few people and not focused on the issues connected to student achievement that motivated PAC. One PAC member said "the PTA didn't know the information that we needed to hold the schools responsible." Moreover, the PA leaders assumed a defensive posture similar to the principal and superintendent whenever parents asked challenging questions about school practices and outcomes. In sum, the behavior of the leaders of the school system, not an ideological predisposition, pushed the PAC into a more confrontational posture with the school system.

## THE FAILURE OF TRADITIONAL PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The traditional vehicle for parents' voice in public schools is the parent association or parent-teacher association. In most cases, these official all-volunteer parent groups lack the capacity to function as independent voices questioning how schools are organized to provide instruction to students. This is a result of several factors, including: their "insider" status deriving from being established by and ultimately accountable to the school system; having no staff trained in organizing parents; possessing limited resources, especially in low-income communities; and lacking power or authority over what happens in the school, particularly in the area of instruction.

These groups are most active in organizing activities like bake sales to raise money, volunteering in classrooms and for field trips, and participating in endless meetings that rarely focus on core teaching and learning issues. While fundraising and volunteering can be important parent roles in effective schools, in failing schools these roles support an educational program and culture that are ineffective and often dysfunctional. Not surprisingly, the parent

organizations often mirror the larger dysfunctional school culture. They end up focusing more on compliance with the system's regulations than on school accountability for student outcomes. Internally, they conduct limited outreach to the broader parent community and then blame other parents for not getting involved. The parent leaders exhibit the traditional authoritarian approach to leadership, with a small clique making decisions and the absence of a sense of community within the association.

As a result, the official parent groups in poorly performing schools are too often extremely small in numbers, unrepresentative, and largely controlled by school administrators. Moreover, because membership in these groups is restricted to those with a parental relationship to a child in the school, community residents who are not parents of children attending the school are excluded. Groups like the PAC represent an alternative vehicle, independent of the school system and open to residents who live in the community but don't have children in the school(s).

### The PAC Moves Outside the System, While Reaching Inside the Community

Participation in the training and in the meetings with school officials resulted in PAC members feeling more knowledgeable, confident and determined. At the start of the 1997-98 school year, the PAC felt it was time to reach out to the community to broaden its membership base and demonstrate its power to influence the district. There was no longer any question about whether the PAC had a right and responsibility to raise school performance issues. If the PAC didn't, who would?

This turn outward triggered a significant expansion in the PAC's work. The group began meeting on a weekly basis, with IESP staff participating as a resource on educational issues

and sharing with PAC members the organizing experiences of other CBOs engaged in similar work. NSA provided space, food, childcare, and verbal and written Spanish translation at every meeting. Up to this point, NSA staff provided these and other forms of organizing support to the PAC in addition to their regular full-time duties. Because it was becoming almost impossible to continue this arrangement, NSA's executive director took the important step of assigning a new social worker with community organizing experience to support the PAC. Although the PAC's work was supposed to take only 25% of her time, this was a major step forward and would lead inexorably to a full-time position.

With the added NSA staff support, the PAC set out to organize a community forum to share what it



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