DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 469 534 UD 035 320

AUTHOR	Mediratta, Kavitha
TITLE	Community Organizing for School Reform in New York City.
INSTITUTION	New York Univ., NY. Inst. for Education and Social Policy.
SPONS AGENCY	Edward W. Hazen Foundation, Inc., New Haven, CT.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; New World Foundation, New York, NY.; Rockefeller Bros. Fund, New York, NY.; Surdna Foundation, Inc., New York, NY.
PUB DATE	2001-07-00
NOTE	51p.; For other reports in this series, see UD 035 321-323. Study also funded by the Tides Foundation, the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program, and the Wendling Foundation.
AVAILABLE FROM	New York University, Institute for Education and Social Policy, 726 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10003, Tel: 212-998-5880; Fax: 212- 9954564; Web site: http://www.nyu.edu/iesp.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Community Involvement; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Empowerment; High Risk Students; Leadership Training; *Parent Participation; Politics of Education; Poverty; Public Schools; *Racial Relations; *School Community Relationship; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	Achievement Gap; Low Performing Schools; *New York City Board of Education

ABSTRACT

This paper examines school reform via community organizing in New York City's lowest performing public school districts. It summarizes findings from a national study on community organizing for school reform, profiling 10 community organizing groups. In 2000, researchers conducted surveys of and interviews with all NYC groups currently engaged in school reform organizing. Groups included the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN); Central Brooklyn Churches; Community Action Project; Community Advocates for Educational Excellence; Industrial Areas Foundation-Metro; Mothers on the Move; New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee; Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition; Queensbridge Community in Action; and Youth Force. Results indicate that power and accountability are central themes in these groups' missions and goals. Most focus specifically on public school parents and community residents. All groups attempt to influence decision making processes and structures within schools and districts, drawing on school performance data to raise members' awareness of school failure and confront schools about patterns of poor performance. Leadership training is an important goal for within the groups. Groups assess the impact of their organizing in various ways and report considerable achievement despite limited time and often volatile relationships between school systems and political leadership. A directory of organizations is appended. (SM)

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

IN

NEW YORK CITY

Institute for Education and Social Policy
New York University
July 2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by Kavitha Mediratta of the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy's Community Involvement Program. The report is based on data gathered by Barbara Gross, Sherry Giles, Norm Fruchter, shola olatoye, Mili Bonilla and Juan Echazarreta. Christine Donis Keller assisted with the data presentations included in this report.

We wish to thank the staff of the organizing groups who participated in this study. We appreciate the time they took from their busy schedules to answer our survey and interview questions.

Thank you also to the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the New World Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Surdna Foundation, the Tides Foundation, the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program and the Wendling Foundation, for funding this study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The New York City public school system is the largest in the country, with a student population of nearly 1.1 million students and a budget of almost $12 billion. There are 1145 schools, over half of which are elementary schools. The student population is roughly one-third Black and one-third Latino, with the remaining third divided between Asian and white students. Slightly less than half the city's high school students graduate in four years. Approximately 16% of the overall student population receives bilingual or English as a second language services.[1]

The system has been marked by protracted and racially polarized struggles of schooling constituents for voice, access and accountability in the schools. The result is a history of tension and distrust between the city's communities of color and the largely white, middle class bureaucracy and teaching force. Parents and community-based organizations have long felt that principals, school boards and the central administration refuse responsibility for improving failing schools because they serve other people's children; indeed, much of the city's middle class has bought out of public education. School quality varies widely; the system's lowest performing schools are concentrated in high poverty neighborhoods.

Figure 1: Race/ethnicity of students, teachers & school administrators in NYC schools.

	ASIAN	BLACK	LATINO	WHITE	OTHER
Students	10.8%	35.7%	37.7%	15.5%	0.30%
Teachers	2.8%	19.3%	13.1%	64.3%	0.50%
Principals/Assistant Principals	1.2%	20.5%	13.0%	64.9%	0.40%

Data source: New York City Board of Education: *Facts and Figures 1998-1999.*

A seven-member Board of Education appoints the Schools Chancellor. Each of the city's five borough presidents selects one board member; the Mayor selects two. The school system is divided into six high school superintendencies and 32 sub-districts called Community School Districts, which oversee elementary and middle schools. Board members of these local community school districts

[1] New York City Board of Education: *Facts and Figures 1998-1999.*

are elected to three-year terms. People who live within the district boundaries, as well as parents of children attending the district's schools, are eligible to vote in school board elections; immigrant families that may not yet have citizenship status are thus eligible to vote in these elections.

This elaborate governance system was created in 1969, after widespread parent and community demands for community control of their schools. Until four years ago, the 32 Community School Boards had the right to hire superintendents, principals and assistant principals. The Central administration controlled all high schools, as well as key operations such as payroll, construction and maintenance, food services, transportation, purchasing and union negotiations. This governance structure was changed by the state legislature in 1996; the resulting School Governance Reform Act ended years of investigations, legislative reports and advocacy efforts highlighting the lack of accountability and responsiveness of some of the city's locally elected community school boards by reducing the boards' power and responsibility.

The new system centralized and augmented authority to hire and fire administrators and expanded local authority over developing school improvement plans and budgets. The Chancellor gained authority to hire and remove district superintendents and take control of poorly performing schools and districts; district superintendents gained authority to appoint, transfer and remove principals and other supervisors, monitor school performance and approve school budgets. The law mandated a role for parents on the school teams that develop school improvement plans and school budgets; teams were required to balance the number of school staff and parents.

Recent federal, state and city initiatives have encouraged the implementation of varieties of participatory school decision-making schemes such as the 1996 law. But a study of school governance implementation in 1999 found "enormous resistance to the new roles of parents and community-based organizations, a lack of intervention by [the central office of the Board of Education] and superintendents in schools with a history of failure, and the continued practice of appointing administrators on the basis of relationships rather than performance."[2]

The 1996 law is part of a national movement towards holding all schools, particularly low performing schools, accountable for improving student achievement on standardized tests. But one effect of this top-down pressure to perform may be a contraction in the opportunities for school-level participation. Community groups cited in the 1999 study noted that the "overriding focus on testing is channeling staff energies into test preparation activities, rather than into developing the capacities and relationships needed to effectively organize and deliver instruction."

These tensions are further exacerbated by the lack of adequate resources. Decades of under-funding education by the city and the state contribute to the system's inability to plan and execute long-term capacity building reforms such as attracting and retaining qualified school staff. The NYC

[2] Mediratta, Kavitha and Ju Wan Choi (1999): *School Governance Reform – Two Years Later*, IESP, New York.

Independent Budget Office reports "uncertified teachers comprise 15 percent of the city's more than 76,000 public school teachers in 2000."[3] Moreover, there is enormous disparity in the distribution of existing resources across schools and districts; inexperienced teachers, for example, are concentrated in districts with the greatest number of children in poverty.[4] Periodic protests and demands for more funding have won modest increases, but have failed to change the state's budget decision-making process, or the city's funding priorities. In January 2001, the NY State Court of Appeals ruled that NY State is failing to provide the city schools with adequate funding to ensure a sound basic education for its students. The Governor is appealing this decision.

Instability at the top of the system over the past decade also greatly undermined attempts at systemic reform. The system experienced a rapid succession of four Chancellors between 1988 and 1994. The appointment of Rudy Crew as Chancellor in 1995 began a four-year period of stability during which a number of significant reforms were introduced. Crew's tenure ended in conflict with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani over school privatization. With City Hall a persistent critic of the school system, governance debates superceded coherent focus on reform.

Several externally driven reform initiatives attempted to deepen the connection between schools and communities over the past decade. These include the Annenberg Foundation-funded small schools initiative, The New York Networks for School Renewal; the city-funded Beacon School initiative; and a school-based after-school program initiative funded by The After School Corporation. As a result, scores of small schools have been created that establish or expand relationships with the community and involve parents in the schools. More than 80 Beacon school programs keep the school buildings open after-hours for youth and family service programs. Over 130 community-based organizations (CBOs) and other nonprofit organizations were funded by The After School Corporation to operate after-school programs in 143 New York City public schools during the 2000-2001 school year.

Schools have traditionally sought to involve parents through school-based parent or parent teacher associations. The parent association (PA) president, for example, is a mandated member of the school team created by the 1996 law, and must sign off on the school's budget and improvement plan. The PA president represents the school in a district level parent committee that selects a district representative to the Chancellor's Parent Advisory Committee. Participation in parent associations varies across the city, but in most low performing schools and districts, parent involvement is minimal, symbolic or co-opted – and often all three. During the 1960's and 70's, efforts to unite parents resulted in independent citywide organizations that presented alternative voices to the

[3] New York City Independent Budget Office (July 2001): *A Statistical Portrait of Uncertified Teachers in New York Schools.*

[4] Ascher, Carol with Norm Fruchter and Ken Ikeda (1999): *Schools in Context: An Analysis of SURR schools and their Districts, 1997-98,* IESP, NY. Iatorola, Patrice (2001): *Distributing Teacher Quality Equitably: The Case of New York City,* Institute for Education and Social Policy, NYU.

system's centralized control.[5] But as parent participation dwindled in recent years, these organizations lost their school bases and their citywide representative structure.

In the absence of organized parent voices, public discussion about the quality, direction and future of the school system has been dominated by media commentary and the often uninformed and biased opinions of civic and business leaders whose children usually do not attend public school. The current Mayor's consistent attacks on the school system are a good example of ideologically driven, uninformed criticism. But community groups are increasingly emerging to challenge the insular and ideological nature of the NYC school reform discussion. Their efforts to build strong local constituency organizations are slowly shifting priorities in schools and districts and challenging the system's policy-making processes to broaden the participation of parents and community institutions.

[5] For example, the Parents Coalition for Education arose from a mobilization effort initially supported by Advocates for Children, a citywide advocacy organization. The Parents Coalition for Education dissolved in 1998.

ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM IN NEW YORK CITY

Using community organizing strategies for school reform is a relatively new phenomenon in the NYC schools. There was a strong wave of organizing at the core of the community control struggles in the late 1960's, as well as in the campaigns, in predominantly Latino immigrant areas such as the South Bronx and the Lower East Side, for effective responses to children's language needs. But many of the community organizations, African-American and Latino, that led those campaigns evolved into social service organizations that provide a variety of services to their neighborhoods, and are no longer focused on education. The more recent community organizing efforts to improve schools have been launched by groups new to organizing and education reform, though most have extensive accomplishments in other areas of community work.

Beginning with the creation of the ACORN Schools Office in 1988, there has been a slow but steady increase in groups doing education organizing; almost a dozen groups are currently engaged in this work. In the late eighties, ACORN and the Industrial Areas Foundation groups (in Brooklyn and the south Bronx) began building parent groups from neighborhood, congregation and Head Start bases, as an alternative to traditional school site parent involvement. Both groups also started new small alternative schools to reflect their visions of community-based schooling. In the early 90's, Mothers On the Move began organizing residents in the South Bronx to protest decades of school failure in their schools.

The second wave of education organizing began in 1993-1994 with the emergence of four new education-organizing groups, the Community Action Project, Community Advocates for Educational Excellence, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, and the South Brooklyn Community Development Corporation. These groups focused on school facilities, textbooks and supplies, and school and district accountability. At a city level, the Parent Organizing Consortium (POC) formed in 1995 to elevate the work of six local groups to impact city and state educational policy, particularly on school facilities, class size reduction, and low performing schools. Founding members of the consortium include ACORN, the Community Action Project, Mothers On the Move, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and the South Brooklyn Community Development Corporation. (The latter group later dropped its school reform organizing. Also in 1995, the Industrial Areas Foundation began working on citywide education issues in collaboration with the Public Education Association.

The third wave of education organizing began in 1997 with the formation of the New Settlement Apartments' Parent Action Committee. Subsequently, three other organizations formed, each as a parent organizing project within a larger community organization: Queensbridge Community in Action, formed by the Jacob Riis Settlement House; the Cypress Hills Advocates for Education, formed by the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation; and the Bedford Stuyvesant Parents Union, formed by Central Brooklyn Churches. These organizations initiated parent organizing in

response to residents' concerns about school performance – low reading scores, racial injustices and school overcrowding and safety. Each is an example of a new entity in education organizing: an independent parent organization affiliated (or formerly affiliated) with a larger, community-based service or development organization in which organizing is not the primary activity.

During this period, two groups began organizing high school youth: Youth Force, which had previously supported a youth-led effort to create a small alternative school affiliated with a juvenile detention center in the South Bronx, began organizing young people on school discipline and racial justice issues. The Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition began working with youth on neighborhood safety issues and, in 1999, began organizing to restructure a large local high school.

Two recent developments are expanding the reach and impact of local groups: The Alliance for Quality Education is uniting community groups, labor unions, and advocacy groups to demand that New York State significantly increase its financial investment in public education. At the same time, the citywide Parent Organizing Consortium (POC) is expanding through the addition of new school reform organizing groups. The Cypress Hills Advocates for Education (CHAFE) joined the POC in 1998 and three groups, Central Brooklyn Churches, Highbridge Community Life Center, and the New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee, joined the POC in 2001.

Figure 2: Local, city and statewide organizing for school reform

Statewide:	**ALLIANCE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION**	
Citywide:	**PARENT ORGANIZING CONSORTIUM**	**INDUSTRIAL AREAS FOUNDATION / METRO**
Neighborhood Organizing:	ACORN Central Brooklyn Churches Community Action Project Cypress Hills Advocates for Education Highbridge Community Life Center Mothers On the Move NWBronx Community & Clergy Coalition New Settlement Apartments PAC	8 local IAF affiliates in NYC

The rapid growth of school reform organizing initiatives in New York City was supported by three significant developments: first, having helped to rebuild housing and address public safety and other neighborhood concerns, neighborhood-based organizing and development groups began to focus on schooling issues. Most groups link the long-term viability of their neighborhoods to the quality of

the local public schools, and some were pushed to do education organizing by members or clients with school age children.

Second, while a core of foundations have always supported community organizing in NYC, in 1995 the Donors' Education Collaborative (DEC) brought together twenty private and corporate foundations to fund constituency building for school reform over a five year period. [6] DEC funding supported the POC and IAF-Metro, and through these citywide entities, helped develop or expand member groups' local organizing.

At the same time, organizing support intermediaries were developing in New York City to help organizing groups carry out their work. The NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy's Community Involvement Program formed to help organizing groups develop and evaluate campaign strategies, learn about school improvement, and analyze school performance data. In 1997, the Training Institute for Careers in Organizing (TICO) was created by ACORN, Mothers on the Move and the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition to recruit and train new organizers, and place them in internships in each of the sponsor organizations. In 1999, the Organizing Support Center was initiated by a collaborative of service, development and advocacy groups to address the development needs of organizing groups.

In the following pages, we profile each of the ten organizations in this study, summarize the research findings, and explore the critical strategic questions and challenges facing school reform organizing in New York City today.

Research Methodology. The Community Involvement Program of the Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University conducted this study as part of its national research on community organizing for school reform. Data collection for this study occurred in two stages: in July 2000, we surveyed all the NYC groups currently engaged in school reform organizing. To obtain a more detailed description about how groups carry out their work, in December 2000, we conducted follow up interviews with five groups: Central Brooklyn Churches, Mothers On the Move, New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and Queensbridge Community in Action. We also reviewed printed materials and website information developed by all the groups in this study.

[6] For a description of the Donors' Education Collaborative, see: Hirota, Janice, Jacobowitz, Robin and Prudence Brown (2000): *The Donors Eduction Collaborative: Strategies for Systemic School Reform*, Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago.

ACORN

The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) is a multi-issue membership organization that builds power for low and moderate-income communities of color. The organization reports a current membership of 22,000 in New York City. The members, predominantly Latino and black; the majority women, are involved in planning campaigns, recruiting new members, and running meetings with school officials. Elected neighborhood leaders from each chapter serve on the New York ACORN Executive Board and are represented on ACORN's National Executive Board.

ACORN began education organizing in 1988. The ACORN Schools Office, governed by a citywide education committee made up of members from each ACORN neighborhood and school, has developed 3 new small high schools and one elementary school and has organized both locally and citywide on school board elections, facilities, class size reduction, and low performing schools. In 1995, the Schools Office produced two *Secret Apartheid* reports demonstrating the denial of resources to and tracking of students of color in the city schools, from kindergarten through high school. Three years later, it released *No Silver Bullet*, an analysis of comprehensive school failure and a plan for addressing that failure in three south Bronx districts.

Between 1998 and 2001, ACORN negotiated with then-Chancellor Crew and his successor, Harold Levy, for implementation of a South Bronx School Improvement Zone. Schools in the zone would receive increased training for teachers, parent organizing, and the introduction of reading programs, including *Success for All*, to assist struggling students. The United Federation of Teachers has endorsed this plan. Most recently, ACORN organized against the Board of Education's decision to turn five failing schools over to the Edison Corporation. This drive succeeded in getting a 4-1 vote by parents to reject Edison's take over of the schools.

ACORN is a founding member of both the Parent Organizing Consortium and the Alliance for Quality Education. It is also a member of the New York Networks for School Renewal, a consortium of four organizations that have started or reorganized more than a hundred small schools in New York City. ACORN is also co-founder of the Training Institute for Careers in Organizing (TICO).

Central Brooklyn Churches, Bedford Stuyvesant Parents Union

Central Brooklyn Churches (CBC) is a membership organization that draws together residents and public school parents in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bedford Stuyvesant, Williamsburg, Fort Greene and Crown Heights. CBC founded the Bedford Stuyvesant Parents Union in 1999 to improve area public schools through organizing and leadership development; the group's current organizing is focused on three low performing elementary schools. Members are 75% black and 25% Latino, and most are from low income and working class families. Members attend weekly planning meetings

and strategy sessions held in local churches. The organization brings in new members through door-knocking, meeting with parents one-on-one and through its church base.

Since 1999, CBC has won two new after-school programs in their schools; helped a school bring in more school aides; halted a principal selection process that failed to include sufficient parents; ensured that minor facility repairs were completed; and forced school administrators to meet with parents. It has also strengthened the link between churches and schools, and helped to build new relationships among parents in the community.

CBC is a member of the Parent Organizing Consortium and the Alliance for Quality Education. It is also affiliated with the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations (PICO).

Community Action Project

The Community Action Project (CAP) was established in 1992 to unite primarily Caribbean community leaders and residents, churches and civic associations in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn to improve the quality of community life and bring about institutional change in state and city policies that directly affect neighborhood residents. Its mission is to "empower the community through action research, leadership development and direct action," says Francois Pierre-Louis, Director of CAP. CAP is a coalition of 15 member institutions, including local churches and neighborhood development organizations. The organization has a multi-issue focus and combines organizing with service provision for immigrant families. Members are primarily from working class backgrounds; 40% are public school parents and 20% are youth. New members are recruited through one-on-one visits to homes and schools, and through area church congregations. Members attend meetings, formulate policies and participate in direct action.

CAP has organized parents in Brooklyn on issues of access to bilingual education, school safety, school overcrowding and school board elections. It has offered workshops for parents on bilingual education, school leadership teams and school achievement standards. As Pierre-Louis explains, CAP "empowers and encourage parents to join school leadership teams. Only this way will parents be able to hold schools accountable." CAP has won additional funds for textbooks and supplies, repairs in existing buildings, the construction of two new school buildings to reduce overcrowding, and the appointment of additional teachers and security guards. Moreover, says Pierre-Louis, "it has been able to integrate new residents of the community in the political process and has succeeded in bringing resources to address the community's needs."

CAP is a member of the Parent Organizing Consortium and the Alliance for Quality Education; it is also affiliated with PICO.

Community Advocates for Educational Excellence

Community Advocates for Educational Excellence (CAEE) is a membership organization that organizes Central Harlem parents for school improvement. The organization's goal is "to increase the academic achievement of Harlem students by organizing parents into an independent force" capable of enforcing accountability and inducing reform, explains Bruce Ellis, Director of CAEE. The organization's members are predominantly low income and working class mothers of public school children; 75% are black and 22% are Latino. Members attend planning meetings and workshops, and participate in meetings and direct action organized by the group.

> Community Advocates for Educational Excellence are parents, teachers, community activists and residents of Harlem whose mission is to increase our children's level of academic performance in the schools of Harlem by organizing parents into an effective and independent force. CAEE seeks to fulfill its mission by providing parents with training, technical support, hands-on experiences, and leadership development opportunities.
>
> *The Vanguard*, January 1999.

CAEE began its work with a focus on the school board elections in 1993; its organizing efforts have contributed to the removal of two district superintendents and three principals for failing to confront and improve poor school performance. CAEE won a five-member majority on the local school board in 1999, and has helped elect parent leaders to school leadership teams and leadership positions on parent associations in ten local schools. They have also helped to improve a failing school in the district; in 2000, Public School 123 was removed from the state's list of poorly performing schools. In addition to organizing, CAEE provides after-school tutoring in a number of churches for children attending local public schools.

CAEE is a member of the Alliance for Quality Education.

Cypress Hills Advocates for Education (CHAFE)

Cypress Hills Advocates for Education (CHAFE) is a membership-based group that organizes public school parents and community residents in the Cypress Hills neighborhood of Brooklyn. CHAFE was initiated by the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC), a multi-service organization that develops housing, manages economic development activities, and runs a number of tenant and quality of life organizing initiatives. The LDC also provides youth services and runs after school programs in four schools in the local district.

The LDC initially worked closely with parent associations, offering training on school reform issues and providing a staff person to assist the PA's work on school reform issues. The LDC eventually jettisoned this approach when PA parents proved reluctant to challenge their school administrations; in 1998, it started CHAFE as an independent parent group to demand action from district and city leadership to relieve school overcrowding. At the same time, the LDC opened a new small school,

the Cypress Hills Community School, which offers a dual language program and a variety of after school and other supports for children and families.

CHAFE members are predominantly Latino and black (African American and Caribbean), with a few white members; 90% are mothers of children attending the local public schools, the rest are community residents involved in other areas of the LDC's work. CHAFE uses community organizing and leadership development to improve neighborhood schools and ensure a "quality, safe and modern education to children in the Cypress Hills community," says Emily Blank, Director of Community Organizing for the LDC. New members are recruited through outreach in the neighborhood and by talking with parents outside the local schools. Members attend and facilitate meetings and do outreach to recruit new members.

CHAFE has organized on school overcrowding; its members developed an extensive overcrowding relief plan and are waging a local campaign to win 3,600 new seats for their area of the district. The group recently began focusing on teacher preparation and professional development in the Cypress Hills schools.

CHAFE is a member of the Parent Organizing Consortium and is participating in the statewide school funding coalition, the Alliance for Quality Education. The LDC supports CHAFE by serving as a fiscal conduit and providing space and organizing staff support.

Industrial Areas Foundation-Metro

The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)-Metro New York is a multi-issue, citywide organization made up of eight faith-based organizations in the metropolitan New York City area. Lead organizer Louise Green, describes IAF-Metro as "a power organization that seeks to build political power for upper Manhattan and the city." IAF reports a membership of over 300 congregations and other religious and non-profit institutions and over 250,000 families. The majority of these families are low or middle-income black and Latino; most are members of IAF-affiliated churches. IAF members are involved in congregational and local actions, training and strategy development. Representatives from the local groups participate on the IAF-Metro strategy and action teams. Members also attend the national IAF ten-day training conference.

IAF began its education organizing in 1990 with the formation of the East Brooklyn Congregations' Bushwick Parents' Association, which brought a lawsuit against the local district's implementation of bilingual education. In 1993, two affiliates, East Brooklyn Congregations and South Bronx Churches, opened three small alternative high schools, the EBC (Bushwick and East New York) High Schools for Public Service and the South Bronx Leadership Academy. In 1995, IAF Metro collaborated with the Public Education Association and the Parents Center at Teachers College, Columbia University to form POWER (Parents Organized to Win Education Reform). This project

produced a report, *Futures Denied*, documenting the concentration of low-performing schools in the city's poorest neighborhoods, which it called "Educational Dead Zones." Media attention to *Futures Denied* and use of the term "Educational Dead Zones" in articles and editorials has contributed to the current focus in New York City on the problems of failing schools in poor neighborhoods. Two years after the report's publication, the New York State Education Commissioner required that all teachers assigned to low-performing schools be certified.

Over the past four years, IAF-Metro has organized meetings with city and school officials on principal tenure, school construction and bilingual education. IAF parent leaders met recently with the Mayor and the Chancellor to discuss their recommendations for reforming bilingual education in the system. Both officials later issued reports on bilingual education that included the IAF-Metro recommendation that parents be provided the opportunity to choose the type of services they want their children to receive. At the local level, IAF groups have formed parent teams through their member congregations and through contacts at schools.

IAF-Metro is part of a national network of 70 organizations that is "building political power in the country."

Mothers On the Move

Mothers On the Move (MOM) is a six hundred member grassroots parents' organization based in the southern part of the Bronx, where local schools have some of the City's lowest reading scores and highest rates of violence and teacher turnover. According to Executive Director Helen Schaub, MOM started with a focus on changing the ineffective leadership of its local school district. As that campaign peaked in 1997, the organization expanded its focus to environmental justice and neighborhood quality of life issues. Members are predominantly Latino and black residents; most are women with children in the local public schools. MOM recruits members by talking to parents outside the schools and through door knocking in the neighborhood. Members attend committee meetings, chair meetings, develop and evaluate campaign strategy, lead actions and bring in new members.

Since 1992, MOM members have demanded quality schools for South Bronx children through direct action, public meetings, rallies and negotiations. Members engaged in extensive voter education and turnout activities in the 1996 school board election, successfully electing two new school board members and exposing fraudulent Election Day activities. They brought then-Chancellor Rudy Crew to a public meeting with South Bronx parents and won a Chancellor's investigation – including high level visits – into local schools. Their efforts to expose district failure contributed to the retirement of the powerful superintendent who had presided over 21 years of neglect of South Bronx schools. MOM is pressuring the new superintendent, who is more responsive to the needs of low performing schools, to improve leadership of these schools.

MOM is a founding member of the Parent Organizing Consortium, and participates in the Alliance for Quality Education. It is a co-founder of the Training Institute for Careers in Organizing (TICO).

New Settlement Apartments, Parent Action Committee

The Parent Action Committee (PAC) is a community-based membership organization initiated in 1997 by New Settlement Apartments. The organization's mission is to hold the local district accountable for providing the children in the PAC neighborhood with an excellent education. PAC organizes public school parents in the Mt. Eden and Highbridge sections of the South Bronx. Members are primarily low income and working class Latino and black mothers, although fathers also attend. NSA recruits new members through neighborhood-based outreach – by passing out flyers and talking to residents in its housing units and making presentations at local churches. Organizers also stand outside of schools distributing flyers to parents dropping off and picking up their children before and after school. Members meet once a week and are involved in developing strategy, conducting outreach to new members, planning actions and speaking at meetings, rallies and protests.

PAC began in 1997, after a series of workshops on parents' rights for parents participating in NSA-sponsored after-school programs. During discussions after the workshops, parents expressed concern over the number of students in danger of not being promoted to the next grade. They then invited a district representative to address their concerns about their children's low reading scores. But when the district representative ignored their questions, the parents decided to launch a campaign to improve their children's school, which led to the principal's resignation. PAC also organized on school safety issues and won additional buses for school children and better monitoring on these buses.

In 2000, PAC initiated a district-wide alliance to improve school outcomes with other community-based organizations and agencies. Megan Nolan, lead organizer of PAC explains, "Our district wide campaign is focused on four simple points: safety in the schools; professional development for teachers and administrators; effective evaluations of school performance; and the need to hire more qualified teachers. Our overarching goal is to improve the reading and math scores and to improve the experiences of the children who attend the schools."

PAC is a member of South Bronx Churches, the Parent Organizing Consortium and the Alliance for Quality Education. New Settlement Apartments, the sponsor organization, has developed housing in the area and provides a range of supportive services and youth development activities for residents.

Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition

The NWBCCC is a multi-issue, membership organization formed in 1974 to stop a wave of arson in the Bronx. The organization is comprised of ten neighborhood organizations that work together on a wide range of neighborhood issues. The NWBCCC has a diverse membership that is predominantly black and Latino; 20% of its membership is white and 10% is Asian. About a third of its members are public school parents. New members are recruited through parent associa tions, tenant organizing, and passing out flyers outside schools and local churches. Members run meetings, develop strategy and lead the organization's actions, rallies and protests.

The NWBCCC began organizing parents for school reform in 1995 in response to parent frustration at the extensive and continuing district-wide overcrowding. . Its first education campaign focused on ensuring that newly built schools would open on time. After this victory, the NWBCCC began a district wide campaign to reduce school overcrowding. The group focused school officials on mismanagement in the city's school construction authority, sped up the timeline for completing school construction and repairs, and increased the Board of Education's provision of seats in distric t schools. At a city level, the NWBCCC built new alliances with community development corporations, banks, and business leaders focused on developing alternative methods for school construction.

In 1997, an NWBCCC local neighborhood association affiliate organized to initiate Bangladeshi bilingual and ESL programs in local schools. A year later, another NWBCCC neighborhood association affiliate organized parents in a low performing school. They analyzed school performance data, developed a ten-point platform for improving a school, and eventually forced the superintendent to replace the principal and to incorporate elements of the NWBCCC's platform into the school's redesign plan. The organization is currently focused on reducing school overcrowding and increasing the number of experienced and qualified teachers in local schools.

In 1999, the NWBCCC began organizing youth to improve a large comprehensive high school. Youth have led campaigns on school safety and are currently organizing to break up the 4000-student high school into smaller learning academies.

The NWBCCC is a member of the Parent Organizing Consortium and the Alliance for Quality Education. Through the National Training and Information Center and National People's Action, the NWBCCC lobbied federal representatives and government officials for more money for school facilities. It is a founding member of the Training Institute for Careers in Organizing (TICO).

Queensbridge Community In Action

The Jacob Riis Settlement House in the Queensbridge section of Long Island City, Queens, initiated Queensbridge Community in Action in 1998, in response to parent concerns about their children's experiences in the local schools. Jacob Riis sponsors an after school youth literacy program. Many of the children in the program had negative schooling experiences. The majority had poor reading skills and a large number were placed in special education. Jacob Riis staff began by providing parents with workshops on their rights in schools. Some of these parents became the core leaders of Queensbridge Community in Action (QCIA).

Although it began as a project of the Jacob Riis Settlement House, QCIA spun off into an independent community-based, membership organization in 1999. Its goal is to hold the district "accountable for providing a sound education for Queensbridge youth and to provide parent leaders with a forum through which to learn and exercise their rights regarding their children's education," says lead organizer Zelda Alpern. Members live in the Queensbridge public housing developments; most are low income, 70% are black, and 30% Latino; 80% are public school parents, and most are women. QCIA recruits members through a variety of neighborhood-based outreach strategies. Members attend meetings, help bring in new members, develop strategy and plan actions, speak at public meetings, provide administrative help, assist with fundraising, and participate in ongoing leadership development activities.

> We began as a group of parents and concerned community residents who wanted to learn more about our rights as parents to advocate for our children in the schools. Soon we began to see that we couldn't just address the problems our individual children were having in their schools. We had to extend our concerns, reach out to more parents in our community, and listen to their concerns as well, in order to make a difference. We founded Queensbridge Community in Action because we have more power to improve the schools in our community if we work together than as isolated parents.
>
> QCIA, March 1999.

QCIA began with a campaign focused on a low performing school in the district. This campaign later broadened to examine the achievement gap between Queensbridge students and other district students. Members analyzed student performance data, special education referrals and school suspension rates. They confronted the district superintendent about the over-referral of Queensbridge students to special education and the poor performance of Queensbridge students in district schools. They pressured the principal of a local failing school to resign, and won changes in the school's homework policy. They helped parent leaders get elected to school leadership teams of two schools and to participate in the process of selecting a new principal. Most recently, they began a campaign to create a task force to address the tracking of children of color in the district, to be convened jointly by QCIA and the district.

QCIA is a member of the Parent Organizing Consortium and the Alliance for Quality Education. The Jacob Riis Settlement House, a multi-service organization that offers family and youth services to Queensbridge residents, houses QCIA and serves as its fiscal conduit.

Youth Force

Youth Force is a membership organization that does organizing, advocacy, youth service and leadership development. Members are low-income African American and Latino youth, 14 to 21 years old, from the South Bronx neighborhoods of Morrisania and Mott Haven. Youth Force has a core leadership base of almost 50 youth. Members attend weekly meetings and participate in organizing campaigns. Young people over 21 have no formal vote in the organization.

Youth Force has been working to improve the juvenile justice system since 1994. The organization protested inadequate education conditions in detention centers, and focused on helping incarcerated youth transition back into school and creating schooling environments that would help young people succeed. The organization has developed a proposal to start a new small alternative school for young people in the Spofford juvenile detention center, and is advocating for the expansion of after-school programs to serve these youth. In 1999, Youth Force began organizing to confront racial injustice in local high schools.

> Youth Force was created to school young people to the fact that we're not powerless. We should be seen and heard. We have the ability, and the right, to act for change and to dismantle any institution that interferes with our positive development. We're committed to providing ourselves and other youth with the skills we need to participate in running our schools. Until youth unite, NYC won't change.
>
> Youth Force

Unlike many adult organizing groups, Youth Force integrates services into its organizing work. The organization offers court support, legal advice and referrals to its members. "Youth organizing tends to involve the most displaced youth," explains Kim McGillicuddy, former director of Youth Force. "We don't see service as separate from organizing – we need to provide these services to sustain our membership." Youth Force members attend expulsion hearings, and offer support to young people who are picked up by the police for truancy.

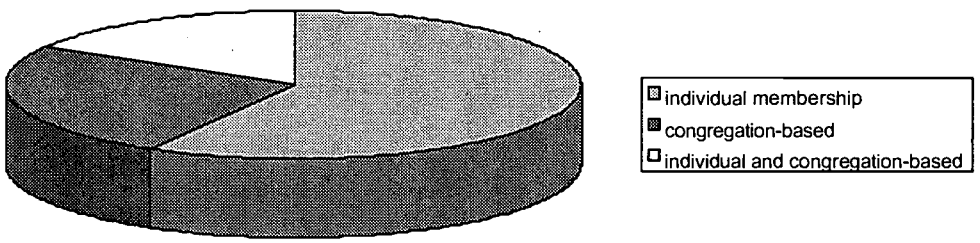
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Mission, goals and scope of work

Power and accountability are central themes in the mission and goals of these organizing groups. Their primary aim is to build power so that their constituencies can effectively demand a range of neighborhood improvements. Through school reform organizing, they seek to hold schools accountable for improved performance. Several groups view the development of parent or youth leadership and increased parental involvement in their children's schools as important goals.

The majority of groups are individual membership organizations. IAF organizations are generally faith-based, though local civic associations and other neighborhood organizations are sometimes members. Central Brooklyn Churches and the Community Action Project – both members of the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO) national network -- bring together congregations, local non-profit organizations and individuals in their organizations.

Figure 3: Organization membership



Roughly a third of groups are single-issue in focus, and are new to community organizing and education reform. Almost two thirds of the groups are multi-issue, and were working on other neighborhood issues before they began education organizing. They made this transition because, as Mary Dailey of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition explains, "working on education issues gets us closer to core problems in our neighborhoods. It helps us contribute to long-term improvements in our neighborhoods and gives us a way to reduce the extent that people move out of our neighborhoods."

One organization, Mothers On the Move, began with education organizing and expanded to environmental justice and quality of life issues. "Becoming a multi issue organization was important for the survival of MOM," explains Helen Schaub, MOM's executive director.

When the school board member we helped elect switched her vote to support the superintendent, our members were demoralized. We worried that we wouldn't be able to sustain our campaign through what seemed like a terrible defeat. At the same time, our members were raising other problems in the neighborhoods – like the high rates of asthma caused by trucks idling at the Hunts Point market. Expanding to other neighborhood issues allowed us to keep building a base while our education committee regrouped and developed a new strategy.

Constituency. The groups in this study work primarily in low income and working class neighborhoods and communities of color. Most groups work with black and Latino populations that include high numbers of immigrant families. Women make up the majority of members across the organizations.

Two organizations, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and IAF-Metro's Upper Manhattan Together, bring together a socio-economically diverse membership that includes white and Asian members, as well as middle-income members.

Scope of work. Most groups focus specifically on public school parents and community residents and involve youth as participants at big events and rallies. Youth Force and the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition actively recruit young people to develop and lead campaigns. Students attending ACORN high schools participate in the organization's citywide education campaigns.

Most groups organize parents to improve elementary and middle schools in their local community school district. Some groups are organizing around safety or student achievement in one school; others are organizing around an issue that affects a cluster of schools in their district. As essentially citywide organizations, IAF-Metro and ACORN organize parents in neighborhoods throughout the city. The youth organizing of Youth Force and the NWBCCC is focused on high school superintendencies, rather than on community school districts; this education organizing is a relatively new activity for both organizations.

Almost all of the groups are involved in coalitions working for public education reform at a city or state level. Most are members of the statewide Alliance for Quality Education and the citywide Parent Organizing Consortium. IAF-Metro is working at a citywide level with advocacy, research and civic organizations, and tends not to work with other organizing groups.

Issues. The organizing issues that groups focus on vary widely, and defy the conventional wisdom that groups begin with simpler climate, infrastructure and environmental issues and progress to more complex issues about the improvement of teaching and learning. NSA, for example, began organizing to improve low reading scores in their school and only later initiated a school safety

campaign; the NWBCCC began organizing on school overcrowding, fought for access to bilingual education for Bangladeshi students, and recently began to focus on low performing schools in the district.

Figure 4: Organizing Issues

Facilities and school climate: • Overcrowded schools, • Poor building conditions, • Delays in school construction, • Class size, and • School safety.
Improving teaching and learning in low performing schools: • Leadership accountability and responsiveness to community, • Parent participation on school leadership teams, • Reading/math performance, • After school programs, • Teacher and principal incentives, • Professional development for teachers, • Community school review/evaluating school performance, • School materials and books, and • Bilingual education.
Equity and racial justice issues: • Over-referral of African American children to special education, • High suspension rates and discipline policies for children of color, • Discrimination/disrespect towards parents of students of color, • Low expectations for student achievement, and • Tracking
Access and accountability: • Communication between teachers and parents, • School documents (improvement plans, budgets, performance reviews), • Data on school performance, and • Meetings with school officials

Groups usually choose organizing issues through a process of identifying member concerns and assessing what is both winnable and strongly felt by members. Megan Nolan, Parent Action Committee (PAC) organizer, describes this process:

> We conduct a regular cycle of 10-12 breakfast or dinner meetings for parents to talk about what are their concerns. Qualitative data is then pulled in through the parents' stories. These stories are grouped under certain areas of concern. We hold a community forum to discuss concerns. We discuss the areas of concern and come to consensus on what we're going to focus on first and what our campaign is going to look like. More recruitment is done to build the base and support around the issue. We do demonstrations and get media and politicians to support the issue. We've done this repeatedly on five different campaigns.

QCIA and MOM are trying to use the ERASE framework (developed by the Applied Research Center) to articulate an explicit social justice perspective in their issue analysis. QCIA reports trying to "link school funding and student outcomes to the prison industrial complex."

The issues these groups work on can be categorized in four areas: facilities and school climate; improving teaching and learning in low performing schools; equity and racial justice issues, and access and accountability. The full range of issues groups have articulated and pursued is shown in Figure 4 on the previous page; most groups are working simultaneously on more than one issue. Through the Parent Organizing Consortium, Industrial Areas Foundation-Metro and the Alliance for Quality Education, most groups are working simultaneously at local, city and state levels.

School Reform Organizing Strategies

Youth and adult organizing groups differ significantly in their organizing approach. In addition to focusing on high school, rather than elementary schools, youth organizing tends to emphasize leadership development more than adult organizing. Because the youth education organizing is a relatively new activity for Youth Force and the NWBCCC, this work is not discussed in detail in this report. However, these groups' work with young people is described in the accompanying national report on community organizing for school reform.

Most adult groups develop school-specific campaigns and connect their local organizing to district or citywide efforts for systemic reform. Organizations typically begin by pulling together parents and community residents concerned about the public schools. A series of one-on-one meetings or group meetings identify problems, and the group then conducts background research on possible solutions, and develops campaigns to pressure decision-makers through a combination of direct action, accountability meetings and lobbying.

ACORN and IAF-Metro, groups with the longest history of school reform organizing in New York City, have used two alternative reform strategies:

- To kick off their organizing, ACORN and IAF-Metro issued reports documenting patterns of poor outcomes in clusters of schools and districts. ACORN's *Secret Apartheid* series and *No Silver Bullet*, and IAF-Metro's *Futures Denied* study, focused attention on the pervasive problems of tracking, poor performance and institutional neglect in their constituencies' schools. These groups trained members to collect data on their schools, enlisted support from technical assistance intermediaries to analyze school data, and staged rallies and press conferences to publicize their findings. The groups subsequently met with the Chancellor and Board of Education members to lobby for the changes their reports recommended.

- ACORN, IAF-Metro and the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation have taken an institutional approach to school improvement by opening new small schools. Working with district staff, they articulated alternative visions for schooling, recruited and hired teaching and administrative staff, and developed innovative governance structures like the parent educator co-principal leadership structure of the Cypress Hills Community School. These groups generally position themselves within the school as the community liaison – helping to support the involvement of parents and other community resources. They also create internship opportunities for young people in the surrounding neighborhoods, and engage youth and parents in neighborhood organizing campaigns. The Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation also trains teachers in how to conduct home visits.

All the adult groups in this study start from neighborhood or congregation bases to build parent or youth groups that are independent of the school system. Groups like the NWBCCC, for example, set up structures to work outside the formal institutions of schooling because, as Mary Dailey explains, "everything we do is also focused on trying to build our own organization." The NWBCCC is working to build a strong education committee that has a tangible presence in at least a dozen local schools, and can form independent parent committees in five or six schools with sufficient power to negotiate about both improving school conditions and the quality of teaching and learning.

A majority of groups begin their organizing from a strong belief in the need for vital, independent[7] organizations to hold schools accountable. Other groups, however, have evolved a similar approach because of the school system's hostility towards working collaboratively for change. Megan Nolan of NSA explains, "We've always tried to work with the system. It's only when they say no that we're then required to go outside the system." Different expectations for student achievement and school performance are also a factor in their choice to build independent organizations:

[7] Independent is used by groups to convey their independence from the school system and the school sanctioned structures that represent parents such as the parent or parent teacher association, or the Title I parent committees.

> The expectations of the school staff are always much lower than what the parents' expectations are. What ends up happening, repeatedly, is that the staff point fingers at parents instead of trying to problem solve together. So, inevitably, in every campaign we've worked outside the system because we're not willing to allow pointing fingers to be the answers to these problems.

Although they may work independently of the school, all the groups in this study attempt to influence the decision-making processes and structures within schools and districts, both to broaden parent participation and to advance their particular school reform concerns. The first step groups usually take is to arrange a meeting with the principal, or the district superintendent, to discuss parent concerns about school performance. A common experience among all of the groups is being initially dismissed because they are not the "official" parent body. Megan Hester, formerly with Central Brooklyn Churches, recalls, "The first school we organized in we tried getting a meeting with the principal but he said, "'As a principal I'm only allowed to meet with one parent group and that's the PTA and I'm prohibited from meeting with any other parent group.' "

Groups have fought to establish themselves as a legitimate parent group by demonstrating the numerical strength of their parent base. The more people they turn out, the more pressure the school or district feels to recognize them. Megan Nolan of NSAPAC observes,

> It's an ebb and flow based on power. For example, we call our superintendent for a meeting and she says: 'I don't have to meet with you because you're not the official voice of the parents. You're not the PTA and you should become members.' Then we build power and demonstrate at the Central Board and finally the Chancellor tells the superintendent to meet with us.

Parent leaders who understand schooling issues and articulate forcefully the reforms the group wants help establish the group's legitimacy. Mothers On the Move members' presentations at citywide forums and national conferences made it harder for local education officials to dismiss MOM's demands. Helen Schaub recalls,

> When we were battling the former superintendent, he had principals call the police on parents who came to meetings with the principals. We were even attacked in the local press. But when our members were invited to speak at conferences about what we were doing, and they were quoted in the citywide press, things started to change. We got support from the Chancellor, and from lots of other organizations. The superintendent couldn't simply denounce us as troublemakers anymore.

All the groups in this study have tried to forge alliances with parent associations at some point in their organizing campaigns. Parent leaders often try to join the parent association (PA) because "they think that if they were involved the administration couldn't accuse them of not being involved," Zelda Alpern of QCIA explains. Joining the PA is also viewed as one way to keep informed about what the school is doing.

Some groups have received support from parent associations, particularly in overcrowding and safety campaigns. Most groups, however, have encountered hostility from parents aligned with the school's leadership when they question the school's performance. Emily Blank, education organizer for CHAFE, recalls:

> We held breakfast outreach meetings near different schools. We invited parents and asked about their concerns about the schools and parent's rights. The turnout was very successful. But it made a lot of principals angry and the parents who were aligned with them got angry. They began to circulate a petition against CHAFE... We wrote an open letter to the community, the politicians, and the schools. This whole experience set us back.

Different norms and expectations for parent leadership also work against collaboration between the community-based parent group and the school parent association. Megan Hester observes that the leadership style of parent association meetings tends to be bureaucratic and non-participatory, which runs against the more inclusive and participatory style of organizations like Central Brooklyn Churches.

Hostility from the school –whether the administration and staff or parents aligned with them—has not succeeded in getting groups to back off from critical teaching and learning issues. Five groups report organizing on school achievement issues, framing demands about reducing class size and bringing in new reading programs and more professional development for teachers. One way in which groups have advanced this reform agenda is by organizing to change the administrative leadership in the school or district. CAEE and MOM have organized to remove unresponsive and ineffective district superintendents, and NSAPAC and QCIA have organized to remove similarly ineffective principals from their schools.

Another way groups have attempted to advance their reform agenda is by attempting to change the leadership of ineffective, co-opted parent associations. Community Advocates for Educational Excellence (CAEE) has helped members become parent association presidents in thirteen schools and has helped elect parents to school leadership teams in ten of those schools. IAF-Metro offered extensive training for parents on parent associations and school leadership teams in two local districts.

A third way in which groups advance their reform agenda is by circumventing the parent association to change the membership of school and district governance structures. Metro IAF and the NWBCCC held accountability sessions with school board candidates. ACORN, MOM, CAEE and CAP helped members run for school board. Groups like CAP that work primarily with immigrant populations hope to increase school responsiveness by electing members of the immigrant community onto the local boards. Because immigrant parents can vote in these elections, even if

they are not US citizens, these elections are also viewed as a way to engage their constituencies in local democratic processes. The experience of groups that elected leaders to school board positions has been uneven; with the exception of CAEE, most groups quickly lost touch with the members they helped elect.

At the school level, a number of groups encouraged their members to participate on school leadership teams; some groups helped parents get elected to principal and superintendent selection teams. MOM and the NWBCCC were founding members of a citywide coalition whose work contributed to the substantive role parents now have on these teams.[8] Nonetheless, groups differ on whether participation on school leadership teams and principal selection committees is an effective mechanism for pushing a reform agenda.

Groups participate to keep "a finger on the pulse" of the school, to stay informed about school issues and to try to influence the school's improvement planning process. But most groups have not figured out a way to support members and keep them connected to the larger group. Zelda Alpern describes QCIA's experience:

> Parents who get involved with QCIA often feel like the best strategy is to get on the PTA and school leadership team... This is always a struggle for us because many of our members who get on to the school teams start to identify with the school and lose their critical perspective on the school's performance.

Mothers On the Move reports a similar experience when working on a school restructuring committee at a local junior high. Helen Schaub recalls, "Parents ended up spending more time with teachers and the principal on the committee and became isolated from the larger group, the broader constituency of parents."

Maintaining a relationship with, and accountability between, the group and its representative in the school is a critical tension for groups trying to work through the institutional machinery of their schools. Reflecting on their experiences working with community school boards, parent associations, school leadership teams and principal selection committees, groups whose leaders joined those more traditional forums report that:

- Leaders become isolated from the power and support of the group because they often don't have time to attend group meetings in addition to school team meetings;

[8] MOM and the NWBCCC were founding members of the Community Campaign for Good Schools, a citywide coalition of community-based organizations and parents that formed in 1996, with facilitation and administrative support of the Institute for Education and Social Policy, to advocate for greater parental and CBO participation and authority in school-based decision-making. The coalition's reform platform called for local school councils modeled after the school councils implemented in Chicago. The 1996 School Governance Reform Act and the Chancellor's school leadership plan ultimately addressed many of the coalition's demands. Over fifty organizations joined this coalition, including Community Advocates for Educational Excellence, the Parent Organizing Consortium, and the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation.

- Leaders are caught between conflicting messages; the messages leaders get from the school team about cooperation conflicts with the group's message about raising questions about school improvement;
- Leaders develop relationships with teachers that can undermine their loyalty to the organizing group. They begin to view the problems from a teacher perspective and become allied with the teachers against other parents;
- Schools use fear and intimidation tactics to isolate leaders from the organizing group. Leaders are afraid to break confidentiality requirements and other possibly illegal "rules"; and
- Leaders become overwhelmed by bureaucratic requirements and procedures and are unable to focus on larger school improvement issues.

Except for CAEE, no group has achieved an ongoing working relationship on school performance issues with either a school administration, or with its own representatives that it helped to elect to these traditional schooling forums. This experience is pushing groups to explore other, external strategies for putting pressure on the school.

Targets and allies. Groups identify targets within the school governance structure based on specific campaigns; most start at the school level and work their way up from the principal to the superintendent to the Chancellor and the Board of Education. However, IAF and ACORN sometimes begin by targeting the district, rather than individual schools, depending on the issue and who their contacts are. Claire Crawford, formerly with Bronx ACORN explains, "We don't want to end up in obnoxious confrontations with a bunch of principals so we tend to focus on the district administration. Some things are really out of their [principals'] control. The principal can't always deliver."

City officials, the Mayor and City Council, as well as state legislative leaders and the governor are also targets. Through national intermediary organizations, groups target Congress and the US Department of Education. Working with the National Training and Information Center and National Peoples Action (NPA), the NWBCCC brought former US Secretary of Education Richard Riley to the Bronx to discuss school overcrowding. Individual teachers and school leadership teams are generally not viewed as entities with sufficient power to become targets of organizing campaigns.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the city's teacher union, has positioned itself as an ally of groups' organizing in recent years. The UFT has joined groups on city and statewide school facilities, class size reduction and school funding campaigns, and is also working with ACORN in its South Bronx school improvement campaign. At a local level, no group has discovered a way to work with a critical mass of teachers in their target schools, although, as Bruce Ellis of Community Advocates for Educational Excellence observes, a "number of teachers [are] interested in what we do." Megan Nolan notes that "there are teachers who talk to NSAPAC members about how thankful they are that parents are organizing but they won't come out and sign a petition." NSAPAC and

QCIA recently met with UFT officials to discuss jointly convening local dialogues between teachers and parents in their target schools.

In some cases, local targets have become allies in broader struggles. Superintendents in overcrowded districts have been particularly receptive to forming alliances with organizing groups. In Brooklyn, for example, former district superintendent Robert Riccobono was supportive of CHAFE's school overcrowding campaigns. In the Bronx, as the NWBCCC's school overcrowding organizing progressed, district superintendent Irma Zardoya joined the campaign for additional new schools.

Coalitions. Most organizations work in coalitions to increase the pressure for reform; these alliances are forming at local, city and even state levels. Faith-based groups generally build power by bringing more institutional members into their organizations. Individual membership organizations have cultivated relationships with local churches, with principals, teachers and school board members sympathetic to their cause, and with city council representatives, as well as with citywide business groups and the media. These alliances have a two-fold effect of helping to "validate the feelings of parents" while increasing the group's influence. "As parents build their campaign, the more people they have on their side making noise the more power they have," Megan Nolan explains.

Some coalitions are short-term issue-based efforts, like the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE). AQE formed in 1999 to use the school-funding lawsuit brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity against the state as leverage for increasing state funding of schools. Other coalitions, such as IAF-Metro and the Parent Organizing Consortium (POC), are long-term collaboratives aimed at building citywide power organizations. Christine Marinoni, Director of the POC, offers this vision of her organization:

> We're building a citywide organization that has the ability and power to move significant campaigns, win major victories and speak for low and moderate-income parents on schooling issues that affect them. This is the only way to hold elected and public officials accountable for making improvements in our schools.

The POC generally works on issues that cut across member groups, and pushes member groups to develop organizing campaigns in response to changes or opportunities in the political context, like the school funding lawsuit brought against the state by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. "The POC gives groups a vehicle for stepping up their local campaigns and moving bigger demands," Marinoni says. "It gives them clout – if they're associated with the POC, they'll get access where they might not otherwise. The targets become familiar with them, and see that the group is part of something bigger that can kick their ass if need be. Our members also gain clear local victories on their issues. While we make bigger picture demands, we always have a list of specifics that need to get delivered back to the neighborhoods."

To sustain their involvement in the POC, member groups must develop local angles on broad policy issues that resonate with parents' experiences and bring new members into the organization. This translation can be difficult to do, and it's often easier to move from local organizing to system-wide advocacy than the other way around. Helen Schaub explains,

> It can be hard to build a base when you start with abstract, global problems. Even though they're important, you can't take action on them locally. Right now, we're pulling back from broad [policy] issues like school funding. We need to focus on our members' concerns about their children's schools, like what is the superintendent doing to improve reading in the Hunts Points schools? What do our members think should be done? As the campaign develops, we can link these local concerns with underlying equity issues such as how qualified teachers are recruited and distributed across the system.

Through IAF-Metro and the POC, groups have developed relationships with business leaders and other influential financial institutions. IAF Metro is working with the NYC Partnership and Chamber of Commerce; the Parent Organizing Consortium worked collaboratively with the Partnership to lobby state and city officials for increased school facilities funding and for reforms in the city's school construction and maintenance process. The POC was also a pivotal member of the NYC School Construction Working Group (SCWG), a coalition advocating for reform of the Board of Education's school leasing program to enable non-profit development organizations to build or renovate space to lease to the Board of Education for schools. The SCWG brought together banks, financia l and technical assistance intermediaries, community development corporations and community organizing groups.

Figure 5: Coalition organizing issues*

INDUSTRIAL AREAS FOUNDATION- METRO	PARENT ORGANIZING CONSORTIUM
Accountability	School construction
Charter schools	Facilities improvements
After school programs	Overcrowding
School facilities	Class size reduction
Bilingual education	Low performing schools
Teacher quality	Lack of adequate textbooks
	Teacher quality

*Source: Hirota et. al (2000): *The Donors Education Collaborative: Strategies for Systemic School Reform.* Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago.

At a district level, the newly formed District 9 collaborative offers an alternative, although complementary, means of building parent power. The collaborative was initiated in 2000 by

NSAPAC, with extensive strategic and administrative support from the Institute for Education and Social Policy, to scale up parent organizing in a local community school district. NSAPAC convinced five community-based organizations in its district to begin working jointly for school reform. Several of these groups are service organizations that have no prior experience in education organizing.

Organizing methodology. Adult organizing groups initiate their campaigns by developing relationships with parents through neighborhood-based outreach. They meet parents by visiting parent associations; by passing out flyers outside the school and talking with parents one on one; and by drawing on the parents involved in other areas of the organization. Parent committees meet outside the school, at the community group's offices or in local churches. Two service and development groups -- NSA and QCIA -- began their school organizing by offering workshops to parents of children in their after-school programs. These parents decided to form a parent committee with the support of the larger organization. Zelda Alpern, education organizer for QCIA, describes her organization's overall approach:

> We provide parents with information on their rights and school performance through workshops. In these meetings, parents talk to each other about how their children are doing. As a group, we select an issue to work on and formulate demands. We hold an accountability meeting at Queensbridge as a first step. If our target agrees to our demands, we might hold a follow up meeting. But if they don't agree, we stage a protest and maybe do some direct action.

IAF-Metro works mostly through neighborhood strategies, but in the last two years, they have tried to work inside some schools to build an independent parent base. IAF makes contacts with parents, sometimes through principals with whom they are beginning to establish relationships, and sometimes through their member congregations. Most recently, IAF negotiated school access with two district superintendents and offered training and leadership development for parent associations and parents on school leadership teams in two schools.

Youth groups have also used neighborhood-based strategies for recruiting new members. The NWBCCC began "organizing neighborhood youth, often the ones hanging out on street corners." It made contact with young people outside of schools, and sometimes through family members involved on other NWBCCC committees. Youth Force recruits young people involved in the juvenile justice system – young people picked up for truancy or incarcerated at the Spofford juvenile detention center. It also reaches new members through voter education drives.

Groups have developed a variety of tactics to increase the pressure to respond to their proposals for reform. They have held large public meetings with district officials and staged creative demonstrations that draw media attention. For example, fifty parents of NSAPAC stormed a Board

of Education meeting to demand the resignation of a failing principal. They presented the Chancellor with a watering can and a dead plant as a metaphor, and a plea, to help them nurture their children.

The Community Action Project, a faith-based group, works primarily through empowerment training, leadership development and direct action campaigns. Francois Pierre-Louis, of CAP, describes the organization's approach:

> Participants engage in leadership seminars as a way to understand power, relationships, tolerance and self-development. Empowerment classes, taught by CAP staff, are held once a month. Direct action campaigns involve committees from each CAP member institution deciding on issues relevant to their neighborhood and bringing these issues to fellow CAP members. CAP then takes these concerns to the appropriate public authorities. Through these direct action campaigns, CAP hopes to make public figures and the city government aware of the community's interests.[9]

Data. All the groups in this study draw on school performance data to raise members' awareness of school failure and confront their schools about patterns of poor performance. Most rely on annual school report data obtained from the Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP) and from the Board of Education's website. For example, QCIA began its campaign by studying their school's Annual School Report, which indicated an unusually high rate of referral to special education. Using student-level data obtained from the Office of Civil Rights division of the US Department of Education, QCIA was able to show that African American youth from Queensbridge attending a local elementary school were being disproportionately referred to specialeducation, as shown in Figure 6 on the next page.

Through data, groups help members to address problems that schools have traditionally defined as family deficits rather than as institutional failures. Megan Nolan of NSAPAC describes this process:

> The Institute for Education and SocialPolicy broke down the school report card and put it in laymen's terms so everyone could see that 17% of the children in the school couldn't read at grade level. That data changed things for parents - it transformed it from a personal issue about their child into a larger political issue. We took that information and turned it into a flyer showing that 8 out of 10 children are not reading, and parents used this to talk with other parents.

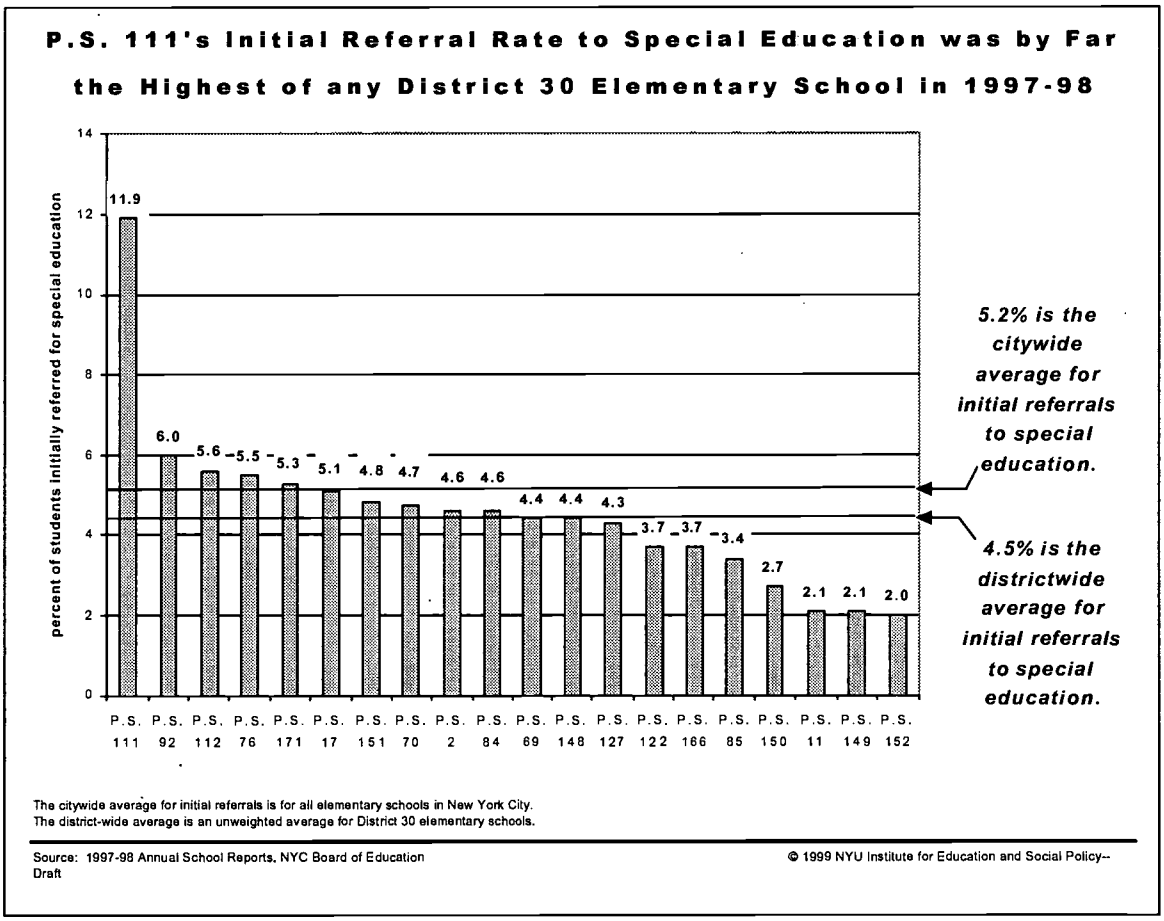
Groups rely on data to develop their school improvement agenda as well. They also conduct visits to successful schools to learn about strategies that can lead to improvement, while inspiring parents with a sense of hope about what can be achieved by urban schools in low-income neighborhoods. And they bring in experienced teachers, administrators and reform advocates to meet with parents and discuss strategies that have proven effective in improving academic achievement. MOM for example, recently led a group of parents through a ten-week Community School Review training

[9] *The President's Initiative on Race, 1998.*

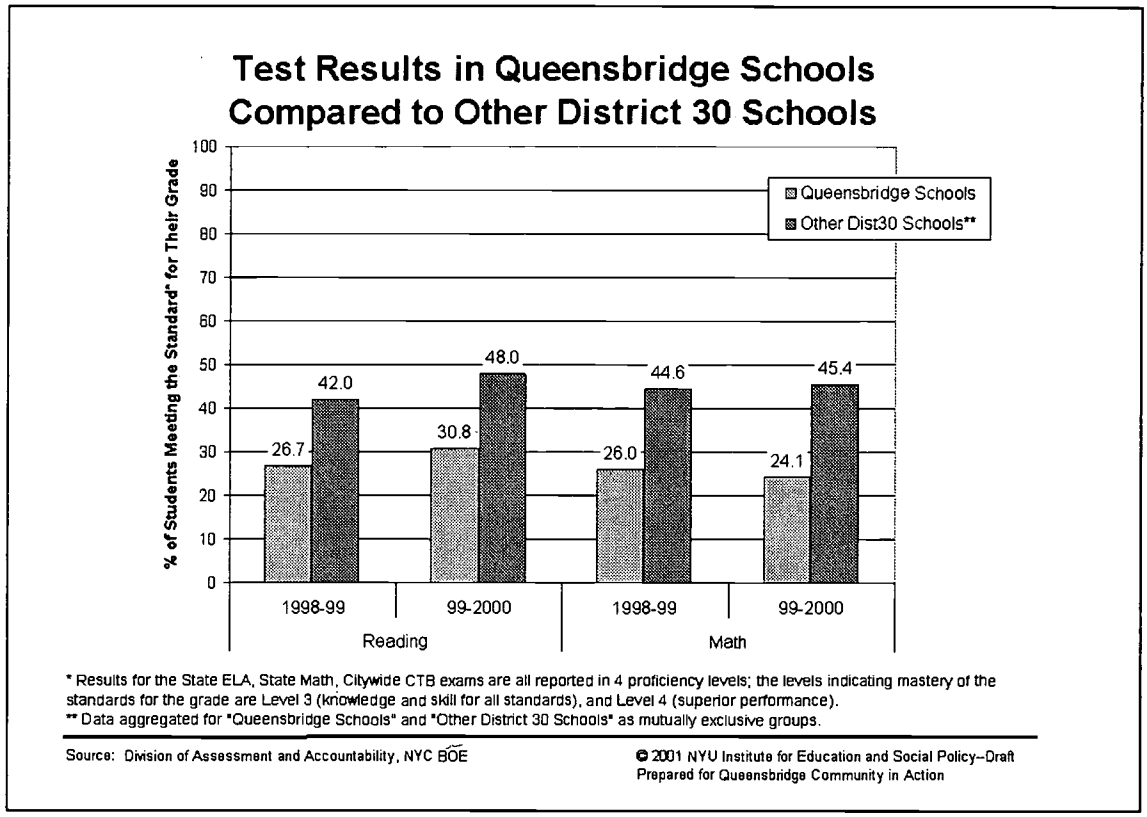
process. Parents reviewed their schools' education plans, interviewed their children's teachers, visited high performing schools, and researched and discussed critical schooling issues such as how their schools might recruit and support more experienced and effective teachers. Two teachers and two administrators participated in this intensive training.

Figure 6: QCIA data presentations

A. This graphic compares initial referrals to special education of public school 111 to schools in the district. It also notes the citywide average for initial referrals to special education.



B. This graph compares schools in the Queensbridge neighborhood to other schools in the district, and shows that Queensbridge schools do considerably worse than other district schools.



Parent and Youth Leadership Development

Leadership development is an important goal for all the groups in this study. Most believe that leaders develop through the experience of leading and participating in the organization's activities. In these groups, leaders do everything from outreach to new members to planning campaigns and evaluating actions. Several organizations view leadership development as among the most important tasks of the organizer. Zelda Alpern emphasizes, "The first step is to make sure parents are informed about the issues and feel confident in engaging the school system, getting letters and petitions signed and holding accountability sessions."

Organizations differ on the role that staff should take in meetings and actions. ACORN, MOM and the NWBCCC, for example, believe that staff do not represent the organization and should not run membership meetings or speak publicly on behalf of leaders. IAF takes a different approach, in which staff do run some, but not all of the internal meetings. Although IAF's goal for public meetings is that leaders will do all of the public speaking, staff will speak when they feel leaders are

not yet at the point where they can fully articulate the issues on their own. NSAPAC has yet another approach: staff and leaders co-facilitate internal group meetings while leaders chair and speak at public meetings and actions.

Sustaining leader and member participation over time is a key consideration for organizations. As Megan Hester notes, "Victories keep people in organizations; it makes them proud and gives them prestige." But long drawn-out campaigns against hostile school personnel can weaken members' unity, resolve and confidence. To fight against this, NSAPAC, for example, tries to make members feel welcome and valued in their weekly group meetings. At MOM, organizers try to develop close relationships with parents and maintain regular contact to see how things are going. Helen Schaub explains, "The work can be difficult and there can be struggles about how issues are worked on. We think about how people can get something from this work, for example, learning about the issues, leadership development, forming new relationships with people."

Most groups also hold annual retreats and celebrations to nurture a sense of community among members. One group holds potlucks at members' homes. Another holds an annual celebration outside the city for members and their families. These kinds of activities are important because, Zelda Alpern notes, "education organizing can be demoralizing at times. If you don't integrate positive, fun things into the campaigns, it can just add to the overall negativity in people's lives."

Support for organizing

The majority of groups profiled in this study turn to a range of support organizations for assistance. Most are affiliated with national organizations: Central Brooklyn Churches and the Community Action Project are affiliated with PICO. ACORN and IAF groups rely on their national organizations. As a member of National People's Action, the NWBCCC has drawn on the support of the National Training and Information Center. MOM works with the Center for Community Change and the Applied Research Center. QCIA has used the racial justice framework developed by the Applied Research Center's ERASE project.

In New York City, the majority of groups rely largely on three organizations: the Training Institute for Careers in Organizing, the IESP's Community Involvement Program and the Organizing Support Center. These support organizations play distinctly different and complementary roles.

- TICO recruits and trains potential organizers who are then placed in three-month internships at MOM, ACORN and the NWBCCC.
- The Organizing Support Center offers training and on-site assistance, related to organizational development, to all organizing groups in NYC, including the groups in this study.
- The Community Involvement Program provides a range of strategic, data analysis and facilitation support for education organizing groups. Nine of the ten groups in this study are receiving

neighborhood-based assistance from CIP staff and are participating in CIP-convened Education Organizer's Network Meetings.

Two training and support needs were raised in the interviews and surveys. First, groups raised the need for "second level training" through which more experienced organizers can continue to develop their skills. Second, youth organizing groups need assistance in developing relationships with parent organizing groups and in identifying organizing models to guide their school reform organizing work. Kim McGillicuddy, formerly with Youth Force, notes:

> The biggest challenge for youth organizers is the lack of support from the adult and advocacy communities. We don't have the youth movements of old days. Now there is a youth services model in cities and it is silencing youth movements. Because youth organizing tends to be around the most displaced youth, it's easy to dismiss them. Its incredibly important that youth organizing [is viewed as] a part of community organizing, and that it's seen as connected to the work adult groups do.
>
> We haven't been trained formally by any of the [support] organizations. [Our training] comes from [looking at] social movements: the Young Lords, Black Panthers, and the labor and women's movements. We look at their tools. We don't think [this is enough.] We'd like to have access to a professional field of youth organizing—we're the youngest and least experienced in the field.

Impact and Outcomes

Measuring change. Groups assess the impact of their organizing in several ways. First, groups evaluate their success in achieving campaign demands. Most groups do a variation of the ACORN analysis: "Did we win on the issue? Did it build the organization – are more people involved, and does the organization have more power?" Some of this evaluation is done at follow-up membership meetings, and some of it is done through informal one on one sessions between the organizer and leaders. Megan Nolan describes the evaluation process used by NSAPAC:

> We debrief right after an action. We do verbal pros and cons. We also do written evaluation on the bus back home. We [discuss the] evaluation at our weekly membership meetings. We also have written minutes of every Monday night meeting... Every year we do a "Year in Review" retreat.

Second, groups assess how well they are meeting process goals for parent participation and leadership. Emily Blank explains: "I see the real measure [of effectiveness] as how many people come to each meeting? How many come back? How does a meeting feel? Is it welcoming? Is input appreciated?" Groups also consider how parents felt in presenting the issues to the targets; how well they spoke and whether they were clear about the group's points and purpose. Zelda Alpern sees these process goals as even more important than achieving campaign goals because of their long-term potential. "When parents hold their own in verbal confrontation with administration and don't

back down from getting commitments from the targets, it is more important than actually getting the demand met," she says. "A target can agree to the demand and then not do it later. But when leadership is developed that's more important."

Third, groups assess their progress towards meeting their school improvement goals. Most believe the ultimate indication of success is improved academic achievement, but all groups also judge their success by their ability to bring about incremental changes. Megan Nolan says:

> If the end goal is solely around improvement in reading and math scores, then we've been ineffective. But I think the children have experienced a better environment. The new principal is better than the other principal is. She is a lot more open to working with NSA and PAC.

Organizing successes. Organizing groups report a considerable list of achievements despite both the relatively short time in which they have been active and the often-volatile relationship between the school system and city and state political leadership. As shown in Figure 7, groups have helped to spotlight school failure, replace ineffective school and district leaders, shape new and more equitable, inclusive policies around tracking, facilities and governance, and monitor implementation of these reforms. For example, ACORN, CAEE, CAP and MOM elected new school board members and changed the priorities of their local boards. CAEE and MOM ousted unresponsive superintendents; CAEE, NSAPAC and QCIA forced ineffective school principals to resign, Central Brooklyn Churches and MOM have intervened in principal selection processes that failed to include sufficient parents.

> We've been able to fire two superintendents and three principals through our organizing. The next big success was the take over of the school board. We infused the board with a slate of candidates from our organization. Eight members ran and five were elected. Thus far, we have direct control of thirteen schools in our district, where ten of our members serve on school leadership teams. In four of those schools, we helped elect the PA president and vice president. Parent involvement [in those schools] has been a big success. (Bruce Ellis, CAEE)

> We removed the superintendent of our local district, who had been there for twenty years. We helped bring in a superintendent that is more responsive to the needs of the lowest performing schools. We elected two members to the school board, and pressured the new superintendent to change leadership at the lower performing schools. (Helen Schaub, MOM)

Central Brooklyn Churches, Community Action Project, CHAFE, NWBCCC, and Youth Force have won facilities improvements for their school districts.

> We received monies for the purchase of schoolbooks, the construction of two new buildings, and the hiring of additional teachers. We also have more security guards at

> the schools, and we have been able to take care of necessary school repairs. (Francois Pierre-Louis, CAP).
>
> We got new schools into the capital budget amendment. We have commitments from leading democratic contenders to put two to four thousand seats back into the capital plan for the future. We've gotten many facilities improvements and reduced the time it took the School Construction Authority to complete school repairs. (Mary Dailey, NWBCCC).

ACORN "was able to get class size reduced in [community school] district 7 [South Bronx]. We were able to get the Chancellor to commit to put Success for All in schools and, potentially, [to implement] a teacher incentive and professional development program in those schools," reports former ACORN organizer Claire Crawford.

ACORN, IAF and the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation successfully started new small schools. Lee Stuart, lead organizer for South Bronx Churches (IAF) explains, "We founded the Bronx Leadership Academy. It's local and small, [and] not a systemic win, but [we thought] we will show what can happen when the Board of Education, parents and community-based organizations succeed [in working together.]" South Bronx Churches is now working with the Bronx High School Superintendency project to start new high schools, with funding from the Carnegie/Gates/Open Society Institute new century high schools funding initiative.

Youth Force has brought attention to the issue of police in the schools. "We're running a cops out of schools campaign," says Kim McGillicuddy. "We haven't gotten the demands met yet, but we've gotten our preliminary demands. The Board of Education knows about our coalition."

The groups' experiences suggest that external accountability roles do produce changes in schooling outcomes. Four years after Mothers On the Move's removed the superintendent who had ignored failing schools in their neighborhood for almost two decades, test scores are slowly rising and school facilities are improving. Similarly, CAEE's focus on holding its district leadership accountable and on building parent leadership capacity in a core of schools helped to improve a failing schools and led to its removal from the state's list of schools under registration review. Ellis says,

> We got a public school off the SURR list of schools. With the help of organizers and state officials we were able to take over the school's parent association and leadership team. We are not in the process of challenging the principal and organizing a campaign to get her out of the school. Two years ago, at [another school], parents organized the school's parent association and succeeded in firing the principal for years of failure to confront the school's history of poor academic performance.

This organizing is changing the insular nature of education policymaking in the city. Several groups say they are more involved in citywide education reform policy discussions than before. Louise Green, lead education organizer for IAF-Metro notes,

> We have had the most success at the policy level and we measure that by the relationships we've been able to form with key power leaders. For example, I think

> four years ago the term "dead zone" wasn't such a focus. Principal and superintendent accountability has become a major theme. Our work has paid off on that. We're about to have an internal event that focuses on bilingual education with the Mayor and Chancellor. Our ability to call such meetings is a measure of our success.

The media increasingly calls organizing groups, and their campaign slogans continue to define critical educational issues. The NWBCCC's 1997 school overcrowding campaign slogan "our kids need room to learn" is still used in news stories documenting the inadequate school facilities in the city. A 2000 report on the Donor's Education Collaborative initiative notes the establishment of the

> POC, and parents, as legitimate players in the school reform arena. Several public officials sought the consortium's participation in, or opinion about, particular events in the education arena, and the collaboration was asked to join other citywide efforts. POC issues received considerable media attention and parents from POC member organizations were quoted in newspaper articles. POC also played a central role in a citywide movement to develop alternate methods for constructing and financing the building of new schools. This latter effort resulted in a commitment from the Board of Education to pursue new avenues to undertake such work (Hirota, et al. 2000).

Figure 7: Organizing Successes

Facilities and school climate • Getting new schools in the capital budget for their districts; • Speeding up school construction and repair work; • Developing alternative methods for school construction; • Increasing the number of security guards at the school; • Creating a school safety policy at a local school; • Getting extra buses to reduce overcrowding on buses; • Getting more money to hire additional teachers; • Getting more money for school books for local schools; and • Changing the school uniform policy in high schools.
Improving teaching and learning in low performing schools • Winning a commitment from the Chancellor to implement a new reading program and a teacher incentive and professional development program in a cluster of failing districts; • Helping to improve a low-performing school on the state registration review list; • Drawing media attention to the problem of school failure in low-income neighborhoods; • Pressuring ineffective superintendents and principals to resign; • Helping parents participate on principal and superintendent selection committees; and • Opening new small schools.

Equity and racial justice

- Winning a commitment from the Chancellor to end tracking of kindergarten students;
- Drawing media attention to over-referral of African American children in special education;
- Changing citywide bilingual education policy; and
- Helping to shape a new bilingual education policy for the city.

Access and accountability

- Helping parents get involved in school parent associations;
- Electing members to the school board; and
- Expanding the role and authority of parents on school-level decision-making teams in the 1996 school governance reform act and helping elect parents to school leadership teams.

Just as importantly, the groups also report achievements in building new forms of democratic civic capacity in their communities. The example of QCIA highlights the three critical dimensions of this local capacity: First is the development of new leadership skills and social capital among members; parents have been empowered to take on leading roles in the organization and in the school. Zelda Alpern reports,

> Parents own the organization; they ran it for four months without staff support. Parents feel equipped to speak at public meetings, they are familiar with school jargon and can participate with confidence on school leadership teams.

Second is the creation of deliberative space within communities, new organizations through which residents can work together to fight for change:

> Our biggest success is having created a place where parents can take their concerns about the schools, and where they trust the process of working together to hold their schools accountable. There wasn't a place to do this before in Queensbridge. Many people didn't believe that folks would come together to change things. But this group has met every week for almost two years without fail.

Third is the development of new political capital through the organization of residents and institutions in the community. This power and organization is re-shaping relationships between the community and the school.

> The district doesn't take QCIA lightly. We have developed power through sustained organizing. When we're doing outreach, most people have heard of us and are supportive. The local clergy is also supportive – we've been able to develop supportive relationships with them.

These relationships are facilitating greater access for community groups to policy makers and other influential stakeholders. IAF-Metro, for example, recently convened a meeting on bilingual education with the Mayor and Board of Education officials. ACORN has negotiated agreements about improving failing schools with Board of Education officials, and played a pivotal role in bringing unions and community groups together in the statewide Alliance for Quality Education. New power, leverage, and relationships with schools and districts, also helps groups take on more difficult school improvement campaigns. Two years ago, when the NWBCCC began a school improvement campaign, it was able to avoid a prolonged confrontation with the superintendent because of the relationship their facilities organizing had previously helped them develop with district officials.

Lastly, most groups say they have strengthened their own, internal capacity to move the organizing forward. A number of groups report that more parents and residents are involved in their organizing work; one group, the NWBCCC, observed that their education organizing is bringing in Latino members they had not reached through tenant organizing.

Challenges

Groups face many obstacles and challenges in moving their work forward. Despite their impressive list of achievements, substantial school improvement remains an elusive goal. No group has been able to significantly transform the educational experience offered by their local schools, although there are some beginning steps in that direction. Most organizations have yet to reach a critical mass of parents in their neighborhoods.

The conventional wisdom is that school reform organizing is more difficult than organizing on other neighborhood issues such as housing and public safety. Indeed, a 1996 analysis developed by the Community Involvement Program argued, "failing schools often have highly dysfunctional cultures that are quite resistant to change. The system is structurally more complex than other city institutions, and targets for change are harder to define and more difficult to hold accountable. Effective solutions to poorly performing schools, unaccountable districts or high schools superintendencies are thus more difficult to develop, and far more difficult to carry out."

One group with a history of tenant organizing contests this view. Mary Dailey offers an alternative perspective: "We don't see education organizing as different from the organizing we do in other issue areas. Education is not different from housing organizing; we take for granted the necessity to learn very complex housing regulations. People can learn this education stuff; the trick is to find natural leaders on education issues." Dailey's observation suggests that perhaps more time is needed for groups to develop the knowledge base and repertoire of strategies to effectively confront and transform failing schools.

Nonetheless, the collective experiences of the organizing groups in this study suggest that three critical challenges currently hinder their work. These challenges relate to the school system's size, culture and resistance to change; to the factors in the lives of low- income urban parents and youth; and to the limited internal capacity of school reform organizing groups.

System-related challenges. Several groups talked about the "punitive and bureaucratic" culture of the school system. At all levels of the system, administrators and teachers are reluctant to engage in open dialogue with parents and community groups about solutions to schooling problems. Instead, they view parents and community groups who raise school improvement issues as a direct threat to their authority and professional knowledge. Emily Blank recalls being surprised to discover how "paranoid and controlling principals could be." Principals and superintendents try to discredit groups by labeling them as troublemakers and as illegitimate.

Groups spend enormous amounts of time and energy simply fighting for access to information and mechanisms for improving the school. This battle is not necessarily made easier by negotiating a collaborative relationship before working with the school. For example, some principals resisted granting access to IAF-Metro even after it had negotiated access with district superintendents (Giles, 2001.) "Principals are key. If you have a good leader you can do anything," says Lee Stuart, lead organizer for IAF-Metro's South Bronx Churches. But how many failing schools have effective principals who are open to working collaboratively with parents and community groups?

Pinpointing accountability in such a large and complex system can be a frustrating exercise. For multi-issue organizations that have amassed power and influence on other issues, the education arena is often bewildering and surprisingly resistant to pressure. Mary Dailey notes,

> Education has a separate political system, particularly in NYC, where the local community school boards really constitute their own political system. We find that we can't easily focus the political power that we've built up in larger arenas onto the educational political systems.

Some groups find negotiating the city's decentralized school system a waste of time. "We can sometimes negotiate more effectively with the Central [Board of Education] than with all the little local fiefdoms," Dailey says. "And if all politics is local, the more local is often the more idiotic. We prefer to deal with ranking officials citywide than with local educational bureaucracies, like the District 10 school board."

The scale and depth of educational failure is overwhelming. Hundreds of failing schools are embedded in a larger dysfunctional system that has failed to adequately support effective teaching and learning. CES 64 in the Bronx, the focus of NSAPAC's four-year long campaign, was removed from the NY State's Schools Under Registration Review List, even though less than twenty percent of students could read at grade level. Most groups perceive the poor schooling outcomes in their

neighborhoods as structured by the larger dynamic of institutionalized racism in the school system. Zelda Alpern asks, "How do you hold a school or district accountable when the expectations for low income children of color are so low?" Groups like QCIA and ACORN have worked to establish the effects of this racism – documenting pervasive tracking and dumping children of color in special education programs.

In this context, school improvement requires a complex set of related interventions at school and system levels. But what interventions will produce significant improvements in a system riddled with capacity problems? Most groups find it difficult to understand how to change the system. Claire Crawford, formerly of Bronx ACORN, confesses, "There are so many views on education reform; I struggle to find the one strategy that everyone agrees is effective."

Since public education has so many layers of authority, identifying one clear target can also be difficult. School-level instructional quality, for example, depends on the effectiveness of the principal's leadership and supervision, but it is also determined by district and central policies of teacher recruitment and professional development. The lack of a clear target makes it harder to mobilize large numbers of people. Helen Schaub observes:

> It was easier to build a local campaign when we were focused on getting rid of the superintendent. People knew he was a problem and that nothing was going to change in their schools with him there. But it's harder to mobilize people around more complex issues like teaching and learning – who do you target? The problems and solutions aren't as clear.

The groups in this study describe the multi-year campaigns they have waged to build support for reform solutions they believe will contribute to improving their local schools. They have relentlessly organized parents and staged meetings, protests and rallies to demand action. When at last they do succeed in shifting local priorities and relationships, abrupt changes in school, district or central board leadership have often undermined their victories. Kim McGillicuddy notes that many of Youth Force's victories have been short-lived because new administrations didn't see it as a priority. "The issues we are dealing with are hard," explains Bruce Ellis of Community Advocates for Educational Excellence. "We are trying to change an entrenched bureaucracy and it takes a lot of time, which causes tremendous frustration on our part."

Parent and youth-related challenges. Groups report a high level of turnover in parent participation in their organizing work. They see a number of factors contributing to this problem: first, low-income parents face many competing stresses in their lives that make it difficult for them to dedicate time to the organizing work on a consistent basis.

Second, many parents have negative experiences with their children's schools. They are afraid to challenge the district, and their school's teachers and principals, and often share the institutional

perception that their child's academic failure is their own fault. Even if they are aware of the school's deficiencies, they often do not feel competent to assess the school's performance.

Third, parents can be reluctant to look too closely at school performance for fear of seeing too much. Helen Schaub explains, "It's hard for parents to admit that the school isn't doing well overall because they don't have other options. If they admitted that the school wasn't good, they'd have to take their child out of the school." Louise Green notes the flip side of this dynamic with parent leaders in her group: "The more they learn, the more likely they are to take their kids out of the schools. We lose people."

Lastly, parent leaders also leave the group when their child graduates from the local school. Bruce Ellis reports, "We work with parents, train them and then lose them once their child completes a grade or permanently leaves the school, especially when the child enters junior high or high school. We are always having to constantly re-train, re-build relationships with parents that require a lot of trust and mutual respect. Once parents are finally equipped with the understanding and organizing experience, they are on their way somewhere else." This may be a particularly strong dynamic in neighborhoods such as Harlem that historically lacked effective middle and high school programs.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a high turnover rate among parent leaders. Although this is a considerable challenge, it may not be unique to school reform organizing. Mary Dailey observes:

> We work with highly transitional populations in education organizing and it may be that groups who work with homeowners and congregations may not be used to the extent of transition in education organizing. But we work with tenants in public and private housing; as tenant organizers, we're used to transitions. Moreover, as long as folks are elementary school parents and stay in the neighborhood, we'll have them from 6 – 10 years, depending on siblings.

ACORN, another organization with a history of tenant organizing, uses its multi-issue focus to stabilize their education organizing. Ismene Speliotis explains, "We have a moving base. You educate and train and some people stay and some leave. If they become ACORN members they become multi-issue members." In other words, leaders in multi-issue organizations are able to pull together across issues to support and sustain each other's organizing campaigns.

Organizational capacity. The organizing groups in this study are attempting to change entrenched bureaucracies with bare bones organizing budgets and staffs. The majority of organizations have an overall budget of less than $250,000, with only a small percentage of this funding supporting the group's education work. They generally rely on one staff education organizer who is assisted on a volunteer basis by local leaders. Yet most of the community school districts in which they are working are larger than urban districts in other parts of the country. The NWBCCC, for example,

organizes in a district with over forty elementary and middle schools and almost 50,000 students. Mary Dailey points out, "How many schools can you work with and keep your work focused? If you under-fund your base, it limits your ability to succeed." In this environment, Louise Green of IAF-Metro observes, "The best you can do is guerilla hits."

Several groups have experienced high turnover in this position in recent years, and two organizations' school reform organizing work was on hold for almost a year while they searched for replacement organizers. Multi-issue organizations can tap their network of neighborhood organizers to turn out large numbers of people for events, but most also have trouble sustaining local organizing with the current levels of education staffing.

Low salaries and long hours contribute to staff burnout and turnover, and make it hard for groups to devote the time and resources needed to create the positive internal organizational cultures that are so critical to retaining staff. Many organizing staffs are young, with little professional experience and a lot of idealism. They need support, supervision and opportunities to grow if they are to make a longer-term commitment to this work.

ORGANIZATIONS WITH THE POTENTIAL TO DO SCHOOL REFORM ORGANIZING

Although organizing for school reform is expanding rapidly in New York City, many more organizations might be engaged in this work. Neighborhood-based organizing groups that work primarily with adults can be encouraged to develop an intergenerational approach to organizing, and to recognize and work with youth organizations.

Community development corporations, youth service agencies, immigrant service and advocacy groups all have developed meaningful relationships with their youth, parent and resident constituencies, and have the staff and infrastructure necessary to support and sustain school improvement organizing. Groups offering after-school programs and other developmental opportunities for youth can expand their focus to organizing students and adults, as New Settlement Apartments did in the South Bronx.

Groups involved in the District 9 Collaborative are exploring education organizing. These groups include the Citizens Advice Bureau, Highbridge Community Life Center, Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens Council, Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, and the Latino Pastoral Action Center. Of these groups, the Highbridge Community Life Center has already formed the United Parents of Highbridge, a group of parents and residents that have focused their initial efforts on improving safety at their local school. It held three workshops on parents' rights, and led a successful campaign to get a crossing guard at a dangerous intersection.

The Edenwald-Gun Hill Neighborhood Center has recently begun education organizing. Located in a large housing project in the northeast Bronx, the Center is a member of United Neighborhood Houses, the city's federation of settlement houses. The group has examined data comparing the educational outcomes in the local public schools with those in the rest of the district and the city, and is developing an outreach plan for recruiting parents. The Fifth Avenue Committee, another longstanding and highly effective community development corporation, is developing an education organizing plan. Make the Road by Walking in Brooklyn and the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAV) are groups with potential to organize young people for public education reform.

For many service and development groups, the transition to organizing involves clear risks. Groups must be ready for attacks on their integrity and motives, and must be prepared to sustain the complexities of the organizing process. Groups new to organizing must figure out how to build a culture guided by the norms of democratic decision-making and collective action, which may differ from their usual modes of operation. And the conflictual potential and confrontational style of some community organizing can jeopardize the host group's relationships with the school system and other potential funding streams. Nonetheless, as the experiences of NSA, QCIA and CHAFE suggest, neighborhood-based service and development organizations can be a powerful and effective vehicle for school reform organizing.

CONCLUSION

Overall, school reform organizing groups in the Bronx, central Brooklyn, upper Manhattan, and Queens are working in neighborhoods that have some of the lowest performing schools in the city. In each case, these are the only groups that are helping parents, young people and other community residents fight against school failure. Nonetheless, these groups have yet to reach a critical mass of parents, youth, and schools in their districts, let alone a critical mass of districts in the city. Funding for organizing groups, and for the training entities that support them, is a critical and ongoing need. Bringing youth and parent organizing groups together to share strategies and learn from each other might enhance the work of both types of groups, and encourage adult groups to develop more organizing initiatives with young people.

The experiences of the groups in this study underscore how fragile this work is, and how quickly gains can be undone in bureaucratic and highly volatile urban school systems. School reform organizing is very resource-intensive work and takes time and stability to show impact. Mothers On the Move's experience suggests that in districts with hostile administrations, substantial improvement can take up to ten years to achieve.

Despite the odds, some promising developments inspire hope. First, organizing groups are attempting to elevate their local work by joining new city and statewide reform coalitions. Second, organizing groups are increasingly open to sharing lessons and strategies about what is working and why. And third, these groups' stories – their successes and their struggles— are inspiring more groups to undertake this important work. Mainstream community organizations that provide neighborhood-based services and develop housing are increasingly interested in initiating similar kinds of school reform organizing campaigns in their neighborhoods.

DIRECTORY OF ORGANIZATIONS

ACORN
88 Third Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11217
718-246-7900
Fax: 718-246-7939

ACORN -- South Bronx
310 Walton Avenue
Bronx, NY 10451
718-292-0070
Fax: 718-292-8846

Alliance for Quality Education
88 3rd Avenue, 3rd floor
Brooklyn, NY 11217
718-222-1089
Fax: 718-246-7939

Central Brooklyn Churches
140 Devoe Street
Brooklyn, NY 11211
718-302-9840
Fax: 718-302-0466

Community Action Project
890 Flatbush Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11226
718-287-4334
Fax: 718-287-4355

Community Advocates for Educational Excellence
103 East 125th Street, Suite 604
NY, NY 10035
212- 426-9206
Fax: 212-996-7246

Cypress Hills Advocates for Education
Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation

3214 Fulton Street
Brooklyn, New York 11208
718-647-8100, ext. 111
Fax: 718-647-2104

Fifth Avenue Committee
141 Fifth Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11217
718-857-2990
Fax: 718-857-4322

Highbridge Community Life Center/Neighbors in Highbridge
979 Ogden Avenue
Bronx, NY 10452
718-681-5212
Fax: 718-588-1965

Industrial Areas Foundation – Metro
Upper Manhattan Together
165 West 86th Street
New York, NY 10024
212-875-9345
Fax: 212-501-0842

Mothers on the Move
928 Intervale Avenue
Bronx, NY 10459
718-842-2224
Fax: 718-842-2665

New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee
1512 Townsend Avenue
Bronx, NY 10452
718-716-8000
Fax: 718-294-4085

Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition
103 East 196th Street
Bronx, NY 10468
718-584-0515

Fax: 718-733-6922

Parent Organizing Consortium
88 Third Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11217
718-222-1088
Fax: 718-246-7939

Queensbridge Community in Action
Jacob Riis Neighborhood Settlement House
10-25 41st Avenue
Long Island City, NY 11101
718-784-7447, ext. 135
Fax: 718-784-3055

Youth Force
320 Jackson Avenue
Bronx, NY 10454
718-665-4268
Fax: 718-665-4279

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

REPRODUCTION BASIS

This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket) form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").