

# BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER FOR BETTER SCHOOLS

An Evaluation of the  
Parent and Youth Education  
Policy Collaborative  
2001–2003

This collaborative includes Blocks Together,  
Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, and  
Northwest Neighborhood Federation.

TERRY KELEHER AND JOSINA MORITA | APPLIED RESEARCH CENTER



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# INTRODUCTION

## Background

School reform in Chicago, the third largest school district in the country, has been a major public concern for decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) suffered through financial crises, a bloated bureaucracy, and repeated teacher strikes, as academic achievement plummeted and dropout rates soared. In 1987, U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett characterized Chicago schools as “the worst in the nation” and an “educational meltdown.”

As the school system headed into the 21st century, some promising signs showed that some progress had been made, but many key indicators still showed serious problems.

- The school system’s dropout rate of 43 percent was holding steady in 2001, according to a *Crain’s Chicago Business* report. The high school graduation rate in 2002 was 68.5 percent, compared to the Illinois statewide average of 85.2 percent.
- Roughly half the students were unable to read at grade level. In June 2003, nearly 70 percent of the schools reported declines in reading scores.<sup>1</sup>
- A majority of Chicago’s schools—371 of them—were named on the Illinois Board of Education’s 2001 academic “early warning” list, an indicator of persistent systemic problems. The number had risen sharply during the previous four years.
- In September 2002, thirteen thousand CPS students had to repeat a grade, more than twice as many as the previous year and the largest total of retained students since the district initiated its policy to end social promotion in 1996.<sup>2</sup>
- In early 2003 a *Chicago Tribune* analysis concluded that, “The Chicago schools are as segregated as they were 20 years ago,” and that the creation of magnet schools amounted to “a miniature school district of choice, unavailable to most students, where white students get an increasingly disproportionate share of the highly sought-after seats.”<sup>3</sup>

These key indicators paint a troubling picture of a school district that has been the subject of so much attention and reform efforts. The system has yet to come to grips with some of its fundamental problems, such as insufficient and inequitable distribution of resources, qualified teachers, classroom space, and other fundamental requirements for quality education.

Perhaps the greatest hope for positive change lies in the hands of the schools’ major stakeholders, the students and parents who have become increasingly active, but have

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yet to assert the power of their true potential. Several community groups are at the forefront of a vibrant wave of activism that is building power at the neighborhood level, with an agenda to see both immediate improvements at their local schools and system-wide policy reforms that can benefit all schools. This report highlights the efforts of three of these Chicago neighborhood groups that have come together during the past three years as the Parent and Youth Education Policy Collaborative.

### **Project Description and Goals**

The Parent and Youth Education Policy Collaborative (PYEPC) consists of three neighborhood-based organizations in Chicago engaged in community organizing efforts to improve local public schools. The organizations include Blocks Together, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, and the Northwest Neighborhood Federation. Blocks Together is a nonprofit, grassroots, direct action community organization made up of residents, schools, and churches in the West Humboldt and North Garfield Park communities of Chicago. Brighton Park Neighborhood Council is a community-based grassroots organization uniting individuals, block clubs, churches, schools, and businesses in the Brighton Park neighborhood. The Northwest Neighborhood Federation is a multi-issue community organization serving a cluster of neighborhoods, including Hermosa, Avondale, Belmont Cragin, and Galewood-Montclare.

The three organizations have geographically defined neighborhoods located in non-contiguous sections of Chicago's west side. The schools in these low-income neighborhoods face a myriad of problems, such as severe overcrowding, understaffing, inadequate school support staff, and high-crime surroundings, all within a school system plagued by high dropout rates, low test scores, and inadequate funding.

All three organizations utilize community organizing as a primary strategy for producing change. They actively engage local residents in issue campaigns that are decided, developed, and led by community residents. The organizations build community leadership and power, develop proposed solutions to problems, and mobilize grassroots constituents in direct actions that publicly engage key decision-makers in efforts to produce tangible community improvements and needed change. The constituencies developed and engaged by the organizations include individual neighborhood residents, as well as community institutions and organizations, such as faith-based organizations and schools. Organizing around school-related issues is a major, but not exclusive, focus of these multi-issue organizations.

The primary constituencies involved in the organizations vary, but most are low- and moderate-income families, a majority of whom are people of color—predominantly Latino and African American—including many immigrants. The organizations involve populations distinct to the neighborhoods they serve. The Northwest Neighborhood Federation includes Latinos and ethnic Europeans such as Polish Americans; Blocks Together involves African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans; and the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council includes a large population of Latinos, along with a diverse mix of other ethnic groups.

*The schools in these low-income neighborhoods face a myriad of problems, such as severe overcrowding, understaffing, inadequate school support staff, and high-crime surroundings.*

***“The organizations believe that by working together, residents can improve the social, economic and physical conditions of their community.”***

**Parent and Youth Education Policy Collaborative report to the Joyce Foundation**

In late 2000, the Joyce Foundation awarded this cluster of organizations a multiyear grant in the amount of \$375,000 for a 30-month period from January 2001 through June 2003. The funding was divided equally among the three organizations. The grantees formed the Parent and Youth Education Policy Collaborative to share resources and ideas, and coordinate plans and actions related to their efforts to improve local schools.

In their grant request to the foundation, the grantees’ goals for the project included:

- increasing the capacity of the grantee organizations to take direct action to address important neighborhood issues resulting in both relationships of mutual respect between the organizations and public officials and an increase of resources invested in the community’s schools;
- challenging organizational members to take on new roles to develop skills in moving from working on symptomatic issues to root causes of poverty and inequality in the community; and
- developing organizations that are inclusive of all people regardless of class, race, ethnicity, disability, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

The Joyce Foundation was interested in funding collective efforts, rather than individual organizations, prompting the PYEPC groups to form the collaborative. In its grant award letter in December 2000, the Joyce Foundation summarized the purpose of its grant to the Parent and Youth Education Policy Collaborative as follows:

*“The grant is to be used for the purpose of informing, training and mobilizing parents and students of the Chicago Public Schools concerning academic achievement, school improvement strategies, and city, state, and national education policy issues.”* In addition, the foundation stipulated that the groups *“work in collaboration to strengthen and expand your parent, youth, and community education policy projects targeting west, northwest and near southwest side Chicago neighborhoods.”*

### **Community Organizing and Collaboration**

Two sets of organizational principles defined the scope of the project: community organizing and collaboration.

**Community Organizing:** The PYEPC organizations use community organizing and direct action as their primary strategy for fostering community improvement. The PYEPC organizations describe this approach as “dedicated to developing grassroots leadership and empowering residents to win substantive improvements for their communities. The organizations believe that by working together, residents can improve the social, economic and physical conditions of their community.”<sup>4</sup>

The three PYEPC organizations have an affiliation with the National Training and Information Center (NTIC) and its national organizing network, National People’s Action (NPA). NTIC states that “direct action organizing” is premised upon the belief

that, “Neighborhood residents have the ability to identify and resolve the issues in their neighborhoods. What they need are the skills and opportunities to do so.” The goal is “to build powerful leadership-driven organizations with the capacity to: (a) identify local issues, (b) develop effective strategies to address the root causes of issues, and (c) create opportunities for the organizational leadership to negotiate with decision-makers.”<sup>5</sup>

Eva Gold and Elaine Simon from Research for Social Action and Chris Brown from the Chicago-based Cross Cities Campaign for Urban School Reform point to four major strategies for building public accountability:

1. Public Conversation among a wide range of parents, school staff, and elected officials examining information, engaging in problem solving, and committing to work for solutions.
2. Monitoring Programs and Policies: data is collected and examined to assess needs and progress towards improvements, as well as to draw attention to problems.
3. Participating in the Political Arena, including the engagement of large numbers of constituents in the process of influencing public officials.
4. Joint Ownership and Relational Culture, including organizational efforts to conduct “one-on-ones” outreach and house meetings to build relationships of trust, a culture of responsibility, and a willingness to take action.<sup>6</sup>

The PYEPC organizations employ all of these strategies to develop leadership, foster civic engagement, increase public accountability, and produce systemic policy change.

**Collaboration:** To strengthen their community organizing strategies and maximize their power, the PYEPC organizations decided to work in collaboration. Critical to this task is an understanding of what it means to engage in real collaboration. Barbara Gray’s *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*<sup>7</sup> describes collaboration as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can explore constructively their differences and search for (and implement) solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.” More specifically, collaborative projects are often viewed by grantmakers and participants as opportunities to address a number of interrelated dynamics, including:

- enhancing the ability of a wide range of organizations to address complex problems by building social infrastructure and realigning organizational relationships;
- making more efficient use of scarce resources;
- engaging and empowering disenfranchised community residents; and
- providing a process and structure to address sweeping changes in political context, while affirming group identities and promoting interdependent problem solving.<sup>8</sup>

*“Neighborhood residents have the ability to identify and resolve the issues in their neighborhoods. What they need are the skills and opportunities to do so.”*

National Training and Information Center



*...the PYEPC organizations... supplemented their efforts with a mechanism for collaboration, intended to enhance their capacities, strategies, and impact.*

While the PYEPC organizations chose to keep a major emphasis on the independent work of their respective organizations, they supplemented their efforts with a mechanism for collaboration, intended to enhance their capacities, strategies, and impact.

### ***Evaluation Methodology***

This evaluation is primarily an assessment of the degree to which the grantees attained their stated goals and objectives. Success indicators identified by the Joyce Foundation in its grant award letter to the collaborative included:

- the collaborative's work in expanding the parent committee structure and in assisting parents and community residents in taking leadership roles in performing school-level needs assessments tied to school improvement plans;
- the enhancement of inter-ethnic relations and communication about school issues between teachers and community residents within and across geographic boundaries; and
- the collaborative's ability to increase the role of youth in education work, participate in local school council and parent committees, and expand the collaborative's leadership development programs.

The Foundation stipulated that the grantees secure the services of an independent evaluator to assist in the documentation and assessment of program activities and results. The grantees selected the Applied Research Center (ARC), a national organization with extensive experience in social change research and evaluation of community organizing efforts. ARC has had prior and ongoing contact with the grantees through other evaluations, consultations, and trainings regarding research design and racial justice advocacy.

Working in partnership with the grantees, ARC developed a participatory and interactive methodology designed to document and assess various components of the collaborative's work. Organizational members, leaders, and staff participated in the evaluation process by

- engaging in prioritizing, planning, and assessing the key strategies and actions of their issues campaigns;
- participating in debriefing discussions immediately after all major public events to assess successes, shortcomings, unanticipated developments, and future steps; and
- chronicling all tactical steps and outcomes for each issue campaign, as well as tracking community participation and empowerment activities such as membership and leadership development, community turnout at public events, media coverage, and issue victories.

ARC provided the collaborating organizations with tools and guidance for setting goals, gathering data, and tracking results.

## **Data Sources and Data Gathering Techniques**

**Evaluation measurement standards.** At the beginning of the grant period, the organizers and leaders of each neighborhood organization engaged in a process of identifying priority issues they wished to address through organizing campaigns. Each organization then completed a planning and evaluation chart for each priority issue campaign, identifying outcome objectives, progress indicators, timelines, methods, and measurement tools.

**Collaborative meetings.** Periodic meetings were held among the neighborhood organizations' executive directors, lead education organizers, and the outside evaluator. These meetings provided opportunities for sharing and assessing progress, identifying challenges, learning from each other, exploring options for collaborations, and planning and coordinating some of the collaborative activities.

**Site visits and observation at public actions.** By attending accountability meetings with public officials, organizational conventions, leadership trainings, and collaboration meetings and celebrations, the evaluators interacted with staff and leaders, and observed the workings and efficacy of the organizations at internal and public events.

**Data review.** The evaluators provided the organizations with tools and consultation for developing surveys, requesting public records, collecting stories, and conducting interviews for the purpose of documenting community problems and opinions, and developing solutions.

**Documents assessment.** The evaluators reviewed funding proposals, activity reports, newsletters, news coverage, and other documents.

**Post-project surveys and interviews.** Interviews were conducted with organizers and staff directors, parents, students, school staff, and others participants and stakeholders in the organizations involved in the collaborative.

A final component of the evaluation, initiated directly by the Joyce Foundation, was to provide the grantees with additional training in outcome-based evaluation. The foundation contracted with Aspira of Illinois, a nonprofit organization committed to the self-determination of Latinos through education, leadership development, and cultural awareness. Aspira engaged Knight Consulting to provide a series of half-day trainings, which were attended by the directors and lead organizers of the PYEPC organizations.

## **Report Structure**

This report contains the following sections:

### **Summary of Key Findings.**

**Section 1:** A summary of the key school issues identified by the members of the collaborative.

**Section 2:** A case study focusing on Brighton Park Neighborhood Council's efforts to establish new district-wide school meal safety policies.

*Each neighborhood organization engaged in a process of identifying priority issues... outcome objectives, progress indicators, timelines, methods of measurement and tools.*

**Section 3:** A case study of the work of Blocks Together, highlighting the organization's efforts to address shortfalls in school support staff by developing a proposal for the Chicago Public School district to adopt an equitable support staff allocation formula.

**Section 4:** An examination of the Northwest Neighborhood Federation's efforts to address the shortage and quality of teachers.

**Section 5:** A comprehensive look at the combined organizing efforts of the three neighborhood groups working collaboratively.

**Section 6:** A summary of overall observations and recommendations derived from the PYEPC organizations' experiences and results.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. Community organizing efforts worked well in producing policy change, especially when the need for immediate community improvements can be linked to broader systemic change.
2. Youth involvement can significantly enhance the quality of education organizing campaigns, adding new and energetic leadership grounded in the reality of school life; however, youth and adults must be integrated thoughtfully to be successful.
3. Community organizing can significantly increase community leadership in schools, but it is a very time- and labor-intensive process.
4. Proactively addressing racial divisions and disparities provides community organizations with greater capacity to unite diverse constituencies and address systemic inequities in issue campaigns.
5. Research in this report demonstrates that substantial policy change will require on-going collaboration of community groups, assistance from key intermediaries, and a long-term funding commitment from the philanthropic community.
6. As a demonstration project, PYEPC's efforts contained a number of experimental elements that enhanced the projects' capacity, including:
  - youth and cross-generational organizing
  - organized school/community partnerships
  - collaborative advocacy research and policy development; and
  - increased communication and replication with the assistance of the National Training and Information Center (NTIC)

*Community organizing efforts worked well in producing policy change, especially when the need for immediate community improvements can be linked to broader systemic change.*

## SECTION 1: KEY ISSUES

Chicago's latest wave of school reform, initiated in 1995 by a new Chicago Public Schools (CPS) leadership team appointed by Mayor Richard M. Daley, brought relative financial stability to the school system and initiated more after-school instruction, summer schools, teacher training, and early childhood education. The CPS leadership imposed aggressive reforms, such as a test-based accountability system and the placement of low-performing schools on various types of probation. Despite these efforts, many problems persist in Chicago's public schools. Don Moore, executive director of Designs for Change, argues that, "Heavy-handed intervention in failing schools by the Central Board has done little for the lowest-performing students and schools," and that these top-down pressures have instead encouraged "a fixation on drilling students for the standardized tests." These reforms coupled with a huge state deficit, a sweeping new federal education law—the No Child Left Behind Act—and leadership changes both locally at CPS and at the state capitol have changed the political terrain of school reform.

### Chicago Public Schools at a Glance

- Total student enrollment: 410,589
- Elementary Schools: 493
- Secondary Schools: 95
- Student Racial Breakdown (2002): 50.9% African American, 36.4% Latino, 9.2% white, 3.3% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 0.2% Native American
- Staff Racial Breakdown (2002-2003): 46.4% African American, 34.5% white, 16.5% Latino, 2.3% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 0.4% Native American
- 85.3% of the students are from low-income backgrounds
- 14.3% are limited English proficient
- 92.1% citywide attendance rate
- 22.6 pupils per teacher in elementary schools; 20 pupils per teacher in high schools
- Total budgeted positions: 46,601; total number of teachers: 26,548

Source: CPS website<sup>1</sup>

It was in this tumultuous political atmosphere that PYEPC was launched. And it was through PYEPC that these three community groups attempted to address six key issues: school overcrowding; deficiencies in Special Education; teacher shortages and teaching quality; school safety; community learning; and school food safety.

### **School Overcrowding**

During the 2001–2002 school year, 22 percent of Chicago high schools and 31 percent of the elementary schools were overcrowded. This means nearly 37 percent of all Chicago public school students—a total of some 200,000 students—attend overcrowded schools.<sup>2</sup> Chicago has issued \$1.9 billion worth of capital improvement bonds since 1996 and completed over \$800 million worth of projects.<sup>3</sup> Over the last five years, fifteen new schools, twenty-nine new additions to existing buildings, and twenty-seven new annexes were built to relieve school overcrowding throughout the system.<sup>4</sup> Despite this multimillion-dollar investment, overcrowding remains an acute problem. Of the forty-five new schools or additions that were built since 1997, 27 percent (twelve schools) are already overcrowded again.<sup>5</sup>

The reality of overcrowded schools has harsh consequences. The students most affected tend to be students of color. For example, Latinos make up 35 percent of the student body, yet compose nearly 76 percent of students attending the ten most overcrowded schools.<sup>6</sup> Fifty-six overcrowded elementary schools are on the city’s southwest side, 32 are on the northwest side, and eighteen are on the south side, the same regions where high school overcrowding is most prevalent.<sup>7</sup> In Brighton Park, schools have closed libraries and kitchen facilities, while canceling essential programs such as prekindergarten because there is not enough space. Even after Brighton Park, one of the neighborhoods involved in the PYEPC collaborative, received a new school and two additions, the local schools continue to be severely overcrowded.

All three of the PYEPC organizations have devoted considerable energy towards alleviating overcrowding. The organizations have each worked, individually in their own neighborhoods, and collaboratively at the federal level to try to secure more funding for school construction and repairs. Their local efforts have resulted in new additions, repairs, and some entire new schools. In recent years, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) has had the most success, with a new school and two additions built, and another new school promised. Blocks Together has won a commitment for a new local school, but the new school district CEO reneged on promises made by the previous CEO. The need for more space is still immense. Efforts to pass a federal school construction bill have stalled, and the state of Illinois has a massive debt. But BPNC and other groups are initiating efforts to secure state funding, which could be a long, uphill fight.

*“Illinois has not only been one of the lowest states in funding general education, but one of the lowest in funding special education as well.”*

**Sue Gamm, Chicago Public Schools Chief of Specialized services**

***“The dirty little secret is there are large numbers of unqualified individuals teaching, and they are disproportionately assigned to teach children of color and children from impoverished backgrounds.”***

**Arthur Wise, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.**

### ***Special Education***

“Illinois has not only been one of the lowest states in funding general education, but one of the lowest in funding special education as well,” says Sue Gamm, CPS chief of specialized services.<sup>8</sup>

Special education teachers constitute the single biggest shortage in Chicago’s public schools. The problem is most acute in high schools. Special education jobs accounted for 43 percent of all unfilled teacher positions statewide at the beginning of the 2002 school year. Overall, high schools have about one unfilled position per school, while elementary schools have one unfilled position for every two schools, leaving nearly eight hundred teacher vacancies. Among the district’s 3,930 special education teachers, 40 percent lacked full certification to work with students with disabilities. The shortage is especially acute for eleven high schools in the poorest communities, where as many as 30 percent of students qualify for special education services.<sup>9</sup> Compounding the problem, effective special education services depend on a battery of other support staff, such as counselors, nurses, social workers, and teacher assistants, who are also in short supply in Chicago schools.

PYEPC organizations have targeted the shortage of support staff in their neighborhood schools. Blocks Together (BT) has taken the lead in demanding not only more support staff in their local schools, but also a more equitable district formula for allocating support staff so that the schools with the highest need receive the most staffing. BPNC and Northwest Neighborhood Federation (NNF) have mounted similar efforts to increase support staff. BT and BPNC won some additional staffing, as well as a commitment by the district to examine the fairness of the overall support staff allocation formula.

### ***Teacher Shortage and Teaching Quality***

Illinois is experiencing a significant teacher shortage. And, according to a Chicago Sun-Times report, Illinois ranks close to last among all states when it comes to teacher quality in its poorest schools.<sup>10</sup> This finding was echoed in the 2003 *Education Week* annual “Quality Counts” special report, which found Illinois to have the worst teacher quality gap in the country, with at least half of the state’s high-poverty and high-minority schools employing teachers who do not have majors or minors in the subjects they are teaching.<sup>11</sup>

In 2002, about one fourth of Chicago’s teachers lacked full credentials. “The dirty little secret is there are large numbers of unqualified individuals teaching, and they are disproportionately assigned to teach children of color and children from impoverished backgrounds,” says Arthur Wise, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. “It’s a secret of major consequence.”<sup>12</sup>

NNF has taken a leading role in addressing teacher shortage and teacher quality issues, calling for changes in immigration law to allow experienced immigrant teachers to become certified teachers in the United States, and working to establish accessible and affordable teacher training and professional development in neighborhood schools.

## **School Safety**

Ask any parent in Chicago about their concerns about local schools and school safety will likely be near the top of his or her list. The PYEPC organizations, responding to these widely felt concerns, have made school safety one of their major school issue priorities. One Chicago public school student dies from gunfire every two weeks on average. Twenty-three died from gun-related deaths between July 2002 and June 2003, although none on school property.<sup>13</sup>

Currently, Chicago Public Schools spends \$60 million a year on school security measures. High school security audits began early in 2003 after a series of shootings near schools resulted in a number of deaths of Chicago public school students, including high school basketball star Maurice Evans, shot across the street from Englewood High School on Dec. 16, 2002. As a result of the audit, CPS has increased the number of security guards to seventeen hundred, filling a minimum of two posts at each high school.

Along with this move for increased security over the last decade has been the Illinois School Board's zero tolerance policy. This has produced a staggering increase in the number of students expelled—from fifty-seven in 1995–96 to 318 in 1997—many for nonviolent offenses including tardiness and unexcused absence from class.<sup>14</sup> Many of these zero tolerance policies have disproportionately punished students of color. In 1993, the year before zero tolerance policies were implemented, African American students made up 55 percent of overall enrollment and received 66 percent of suspensions and expulsions. In 2000, African American enrollment declined to 53 percent but suspensions and expulsions increased to 73 percent.<sup>15</sup>

The PYEPC organizations all place a high priority on promoting school security in a way that does not further discriminatory practices. The organizations have addressed school safety by calling for and securing more police patrols around neighborhood schools. BPNC and BT combined the forces of their youth councils into a new city-wide formation called Chicago Youth United, which has succeeded in winning some new district guidelines for security guard hiring and training. NNF successfully worked to institute a peer jury system to make disciplinary procedures and sanctions fair. NNF also conducted a successful campaign to convert a high-crime area adjacent to three of its schools into a remodeled, state-of-the-art park with new recreational facilities.

## **Community Learning**

Educational quality can be boosted by parental and community learning and involvement, yet many schools are not very accessible or welcoming. There are often language and cultural barriers that keep many segments of the local community away, particularly new immigrants. BPNC found that local residents wanted their neighborhood schools to be the center of community activities, yet the schools lack the funding and staff needed to provide sufficient tutoring or support for struggling students. Maintaining existing programs has been a challenge for most neighborhood schools, often making new tutoring programs and community-focused activities out of reach.

*Many schools are not very accessible or welcoming. There are often language and cultural barriers that keep many segments of the local community away, particularly new immigrants.*



**Community schools help improve academic achievement, improve student attendance, and decrease rates of mobility and truancy**

To address these issues, community groups and school leaders have started after-school programs and community learning centers involving adult education programs such as GED, English language classes, and computer literacy classes. Studies have shown that community schools help improve academic achievement, improve student attendance, and decrease rates of mobility and truancy.<sup>16</sup>

All three of the PYEPC organizations have played significant roles in getting new community learning programs at their schools. Northwest Neighborhood Federation won two community learning centers in their area. Blocks Together won a commitment to fund after-school programs in the community, a “10,000 Tutors Program”—an after-school academic support program—along with the reinstatement of funds for after-school programs at Stowe Elementary School. And Brighton Park Neighborhood Council help helped get new or expanded after-school programs at every school in Brighton Park, including tutoring and recreational programs for students, and ESL, GED, and computer classes for adults.

**School Lunches**

Paul Vallas, the former CEO of CPS, privatized the school system’s lunch program. Two private contractors began operating about 450 of the city’s school kitchens, while supplying nearly two hundred other schools with meals, to be heated under the supervision of school staff. Chicago became the largest school district in the United States with a privatized school meal program, with contracts now worth \$55 million annually.<sup>17</sup> Since 1999, at least forty-one suspected food poisoning incidents were reported at Chicago schools, where at least 215 children were sickened according to city Department of Public Health reports and school records.<sup>18</sup>

In December 2001, following some public actions and media work by BPNC, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a series of articles exposing a host of problems with school lunches, including lead-based paint chips in food preparation areas, poor refrigeration of food, dirty kitchens, and inadequate responses to outbreaks of food-borne illness.<sup>19</sup> The public outrage forced Chicago Public Schools to address food safety issues within CPS and with their food contractors.

BPNC took a leading role in bringing these problems to the public’s attention. By actively engaging the *Chicago Tribune* and elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels, the neighborhood organization played a pivotal role in shaping local and national policy.

## SECTION 2: BRIGHTON PARK NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL WINS SCHOOL LUNCH POLICIES

### *Organizational Background*

**B**righton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) was founded in 1997 to tackle both immediate and long-standing community problems by embracing a community organizing strategy aimed at building and activating a local and long-term power base. Brighton Park has a long history as a working-class neighborhood of immigrants, who provided labor especially for the shipping and meatpacking industries. Aging churches, once the hubs of vibrant ethnic enclaves, still dot the neighborhood. But shifts in economic and employment patterns from the 1970s to the 1990s resulted in dramatic changes in the neighborhood's physical condition, as well as its population composition. Neighborhood businesses cut nearly one quarter of their workforces, and many shut down altogether. The average household income is \$36,245, while the average number of family members per household is six. The overall neighborhood population has increased by 43 percent, and the number of children under 18 years old has tripled. Almost 24 percent of children three to five years of age in Brighton Park live in poverty.

The neighborhood's economic decline was accompanied by dramatic demographic shifts in its population. Substantial and continuing immigration, especially during the last ten years, has transformed the local neighborhood population to nearly 80 percent Latino. Many are monolingual Spanish speaking; some are undocumented. Although they are the dominant ethnic population in the neighborhood, Latino residents are often isolated from community services due to linguistic, cultural, and legal barriers.

These changing conditions have taken their toll on the local public schools. Brighton Park faces one of the worst school overcrowding problems in Chicago. In fact, Kelly High School in Brighton Park is ranked the most overcrowded high school in Chicago. Almost 25 percent of youth between the ages of 16 and 19 do not finish high school; more than 70 percent of the students at local schools rank below the national average in math and reading scores.

To address local school problems, BPNC is working with the parents and students at six neighborhood schools to address a host of education issues, including the lack of parent involvement, school overcrowding, school safety, bilingual education, curriculum issues, and school staffing.

### **Organizational Profile: Brighton Park Neighborhood Council**

**Year Founded:** 1997

**Mission:** The Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) is a community-based grassroots organization uniting individuals, block clubs, churches, schools, and businesses. BPNC's mission is to create a safer community with a strong infrastructure, improve neighborhood schools, provide a voice for our youth, stabilize the local business and housing structure, and protect the rights of immigrants. BPNC is dedicated to developing strong grassroots leadership by utilizing the capacity of residents to organize and mobilize their own resources.

**Community Area:** Brighton Park is bounded by the Stevenson Expressway (North), Western Blvd. (East), Central Park Avenue (West) and 49th Street (South).

**Constituency:** BPNC serves a low-income, working-class neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side. In the past fifteen years, Brighton Park has experienced dramatic changes in the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic composition of its population.

**Issues:** Community safety, school reform, youth organizing, affordable housing, immigrant rights, community reinvestment and capital improvements, business development and zoning.

**“Who can study and learn when they haven’t eaten anything all day because they are afraid of getting sick from the food that’s served at our schools?”**

**Sergio Bocanegra, student at Shields Elementary**

### **Campaign Case Study: Food Security**

*My daughter came home after eating a hot dog at school. She was so sick I had to take her to the hospital. She missed a week of class.*

—Elizabeth Duran, Brighton Park parent

*Who can study and learn when they haven’t eaten anything all day because they are afraid of getting sick from the food that’s served at our schools?*

—Sergio Bocanegra, a student at Shields Elementary, who contracted salmonella after eating a hamburger served to him at his school cafeteria

*Almost every day my daughter is handed frozen lunchmeat or rotten milk at school. The school heats up prepackaged microwave dinners, and usually they are served partially cooked.*

—Silvia Torres, BPNC leader

As the quotes above illustrate, when talking with community residents about school issues, the safety and quality of school lunches is a recurring theme. In Brighton Park, where over 97 percent of the school population qualifies for free or reduced-price school lunches, problems with school lunches directly affect a sizeable number of local residents.

### **Documenting the Problem**

In interviews with hundreds of parents and students, BPNC leaders and staff discovered that the problems were even more widespread and serious than they first realized. Numerous students had suffered from food poisoning and illness from contaminated lunches served at every school in the neighborhood. In addition, some schools lacked school nurses to treat the sick students, causing many children to be rushed to hospital emergency rooms. Another consequence reported was countless missed days of school as a result of food poisoning at school.

The organization’s research revealed systemic patterns and underlying causes. Food poisoning incidents were higher at schools that did not have full kitchens. Many “cooking” kitchens had been removed to make space for additional classrooms at their overcrowded schools. At these sites, lunches were delivered in pre-packaged containers that were put in warming ovens and reheated on site. As a result of privatization, food was being prepared off-site, then transported or stored for hours before reaching the students. In the process, the food would cool down and become vulnerable to unhealthy bacteria. Further research revealed new layers to the problem, including lack of tracking of food sources, inadequate training of food preparers, and low nutritional content of meals, compounded by an inadequate or nonexistent system for monitoring and addressing complaints. Based on these findings, BPNC proposed a multipronged solution to the problems.

Armed with data and determination, seventy-five BPNC leaders from all six neighborhood schools launched the school lunch campaign in July 2001 at a public meeting with key officials of the Chicago Public Schools. In conjunction with the public meet-

ing, at which they won commitments from school officials to address the problem, BPNC held a press conference that received wide coverage in the local media. The meeting, coupled with a strategically timed briefing with the *Chicago Tribune* the following day, proved to be a critical step that resulted in the *Tribune's* initiation of a full-blown investigation of unsafe school lunches.

### **Turning Up the Heat**

Continuing to build momentum, in October 2001, fifty BPNC leaders met with Arne Duncan, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, and secured commitments for new kitchens at Brighton Park schools as soon as space could be made available, and new systems for ensuring food safety.

BPNC leaders were able to announce these victories at its first Neighborhood Convention, held in November 2001 and attended by nine hundred residents and a full line-up of public officials, including city aldermen, U.S. Congressmen, public school officials, and law enforcement representatives. At the meeting, chaired by one of BPNC's youth leaders, the organization used the occasion to flex its growing political muscle and make further public demands to school officials on a variety of issues. The following month, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a front-page, two-part comprehensive investigative series about the school lunch problems, placing the issue front and center on the public radar screen.

Since new kitchens promised at some of the local schools were conditional upon the availability of space, and space was conditional upon the availability of new school construction funding, in early 2003 BPNC launched a new effort to secure more state funding for schools. With the state of Illinois facing a significant budget deficit, this battle will likely require a long-term, broad-based campaign, which BPNC is interested in exploring and engaging in with possible new coalition partners in the years ahead.

### **BPNC's Other School-Related Accomplishments**

The school lunch safety campaign was one of several school improvement issues taken up by BPNC during the period of this study. Below is a list of the group's other accomplishments.

- **One new school was constructed;** the CEO of Chicago Public Schools has committed to another new school; and additions were constructed at two schools to relieve overcrowding.
- **After-school programs** were started or expanded at every school, including tutoring and recreational programs, as well as new ESL, GED, and computer classes for adults.
- **Police patrols** were added—including bike patrols—at every school, along with more crossing guards, parent patrols, and school security guards.
- **School security guard policies.** Through Chicago Youth United, BPNC

### **BPNC's Proposed Solution to Unsafe School Lunches**

- Create a new district-wide policy to make food distribution companies accountable for serving contaminated foods and subject to the immediate loss of their contract with CPS.
- Require food distributors to track the origins of ingredients in all products sold to CPS.
- Install full cooking kitchens at all Brighton Park schools so that fresh meals can be prepared on site every day; renovate and repair all kitchen facilities.
- Require regular training in food preparation and sanitation for all kitchen staff and supervisors.
- Require regular health inspections with publicized results; and create a publicized, multi-lingual hotline to report incidents of food poisoning.
- Enforce a monthly rotation of menus.

### Campaign Timeline: School Lunch Safety

DATE	KEY ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS
Spring 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Community Interviews and Planning Meetings:</b> Seventy-five leaders from six neighborhood schools unite to work together on the quality of school lunches, school safety, bilingual education, after-school programs, adult education, and lack of support staff.</li> </ul>
July 12, 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting with Chicago Public School (CPS) officials and Press Conference:</b> Two hundred fifty BPNC leaders hold a public community meeting with Tim Martin, CPS Chief Operations Officer, and other school officials to demonstrate the seriousness of school lunch safety issues. Martin commits to provide fresh school lunches to all children by the end of 2001. The event receives wide media coverage; the <i>Chicago Tribune</i> decides to conduct a citywide investigation of school lunches.</li> </ul>
October 11, 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Negotiation with CPS CEO Arne Duncan:</b> Fifty BPNC leaders hold a meeting with the new CEO of CPS, Arne Duncan, who agrees to install full kitchens at all Brighton Park schools as soon as space is available, to renovate the school lunch system to ensure safe meals, and to rotate menu items more frequently.</li> </ul>
November 3, 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Neighborhood Convention:</b> Nine hundred BPNC leaders meet with public school officials and law enforcement officials to mount public pressure for healthy and safe schools.</li> <li>• Duncan agrees to renovate school lunch system and improve meal quality.</li> <li>• BPNC leadership training continues; relationships are built with school principals.</li> </ul>
December 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Chicago Tribune Investigation on School Lunch Safety:</b> After months of investigation and continued contact with BPNC, the <i>Tribune</i> reports on the systematic flaws of the public school lunch system.</li> <li>• <b>New School Lunch Policies Announced:</b> Prompted by growing public pressure from the <i>Tribune</i> and BPNC, Duncan announces new school lunch safety policies.</li> </ul>
February 21, 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>BPNC Parent Action Council Founded:</b> Parents formalize an ongoing coalition to fight for further public schools reforms; leadership skill development continues.</li> </ul>
March 20, 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting with CEO Duncan:</b> Three hundred BPNC members meet with Duncan.</li> <li>• Duncan discusses new policy changes to school lunch system and agrees to make Brighton Park the priority to receive two new schools to relieve overcrowding.</li> </ul>
Winter 2001–2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Food Safety Improvements Implemented:</b> New food safety policies are implemented, and repairs and renovations are conducted at all Brighton Park schools.</li> <li>• BPNC leadership trainings continue, including training of Local School Council candidates.</li> </ul>
June 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Meeting with U.S. Senator Dick Durbin:</b> Twenty BPNC members urge Sen. Durbin to increase school lunch regulations and penalties for private food company violators.</li> <li>• BPNC participates in National People’s Action’s school construction campaign.</li> </ul>
January 29, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Further Negotiations with CEO Duncan:</b> Fifty BPNC leaders meet with Duncan to review progress and develop a timeline for future repairs and renovations.</li> <li>• Duncan agrees to build two new schools and provide kitchen facilities to all schools, as soon as funding is available. State funding is identified as primary need.</li> </ul>
February 13, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>New Statewide Campaign for More School Funding Launched:</b> BPNC begins campaign for state funding for new facilities to accommodate kitchens and alleviate overcrowding.</li> </ul>

won citywide school safety policy improvements, including required nametags for school security guards and a policy change to prevent recent graduates of a school from being placed at their school as guards.

- **Youth scholarship legislation.** In collaboration with other Youth Councils, BPNC won support from Congressman Gutierrez to introduce a bill to provide a scholarship fund for youths working to improve their community.
- **The nursing staff and bilingual staff were expanded,** and monthly clinical visits by a medical mobile at local schools were initiated.
- **BPNC provided training for Local School Council candidates** and members, resulting in more community involvement, higher voter turnout, and competitive elections at all schools
- **Millions of dollars worth of school renovations and repairs** were secured (e.g., playground and roof repairs at Davis School, a new stove and library at Burroughs, and a new electrical system at Shields).
- **Language Accessibility.** Local School Council meetings are now being translated into Spanish, and written school information in Spanish and English is now available and disseminated to parents and students.
- **Immigrant access to higher education.** In collaboration with other organizations, a new law was passed by the Illinois legislature reducing tuition fees to children born to undocumented parents in the United States.
- **New preschool programs.** A commitment from the school district to open a facility for preschool and Head Start programs in Brighton Park was secured.

### Key Observations

**BPNC's school lunch safety campaign is a good illustration of successfully using community organizing to bring about policy change.** The group identified problems, proposed solutions, engaged and developed the constituency most affected by the issue, devised a strategic plan to move the issue, mounted public pressure on key power holders, negotiated and won concrete commitments for improvements and policy changes, then monitored and ensured that the changes were effectively implemented, holding elected officials accountable every step of the way. Not only did the campaign result in some local improvements in the neighborhood school kitchens, it affected district-wide policy in all Chicago schools. It also prompted national attention in the form of a U.S. congressional hearing. And, the campaign also provided a natural and vital link to a subsequent campaign to secure more school funding at the state level for school construction and other needed services.

### New School Lunch Policies

- Mandatory trainings of kitchen staff and principals in proper food preparation and sanitation.
- Unannounced health inspections to be conducted twice annually at all schools.
- The establishment of a bilingual Food Service Hotline for public reporting of problems.
- The creation of a CPS website to post results of all health inspections for public accountability.
- The establishment of new regulations to hold food manufacturing and distribution companies accountable for providing safe, high quality, and nutritional food.

*“It’s not every day you see a group of youth talking to the CEO. We weren’t scared because we had already had a public meeting with him.”*

Jessica Benitez, BPNC Youth Council member

**BPNC’s efforts would benefit by having more organizations to collaborate with on campaigns aimed at changing public policy.** BPNC’s primary collaborative partners on education issues—National People’s Action and Blocks Together—have proven that there is much to be gained through collaboration. Any serious attempt to secure needed school funding at the state level will require the exploration and expansion of collaborative partners. BPNC has already begun to take steps to explore new relationships and formations with legislators and potential organizational collaborators. The School Reform Committee is currently meeting with members of the Illinois State Senate and House Education Committee to develop working relationships and win support for new legislation to increase education funding. In addition, the committee is reaching out to other Chicago-based and state-based school reform organizations to explore the possibility of building a coalition that will have as its goal an increase in state funding for school construction and school improvements.

**BPNC’s model for engaging youth in all facets of the organization has been effective.** BPNC’s Youth Council provides youth with their own vehicle for leadership and meetings, which can be well tailored to the youths’ style and interests. Several youth interviewed for this report credit BPNC with having a major influence on their lives. According to Jessica Benitez, a high school student involved in BPNC’s youth council who participated in a negotiating meeting with CPS CEO Arne Duncan, “It’s not every day you see a group of youth talking to the CEO. We weren’t scared because we had already had a public meeting with him. He’s willing to work with us, and we got what we wanted.” Benitez also described how being a part of BPNC “has changed my whole personality. Now I know I can be part of changing things. I can talk to aldermen. Before I used to be shy. Now I can talk in front of three hundred to five hundred people and not be shy.” Another success for BPNC’s youth leadership has been their ability to design and implement a peer mentorship program, which engages high school students with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at several neighborhood schools

**BPNC has developed a model for effectively engaging students, parents, and teachers in the same organization and organizing campaigns.** Though BPNC has a separate organizational structure for its youth, the youth also have formal representatives in key roles on BPNC’s board and committees, enabling authentic cross-generational campaign work. Jonas Mejia, a BPNC leader with six grandchildren, reflecting on his involvement, said, “I feel like we’re working together as a group to improve the entire community. I’ve learned all about the school system, become more involved in the community, gotten to know my neighbors, and have become a real active part of my neighborhood.” Teachers are also recruited as active allies and engaged in BPNC’s school improvement campaigns. The combined forces of students, teachers, and parents “wins results,” says Avelina Guzmán, BPNC leader. “There are new safety measures at all schools, kitchen staff started mandatory trainings in sanitation, and all our schools are offering more after-school programs.”

## SECTION 3:

# BLOCKS TOGETHER FIGHTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AND SUPPORT STAFF

### *Organizational Background*

**B**locks Together is a grassroots, direct action organization on Chicago's west side with a long history of working with neighborhood residents, schools, and churches in the West Humboldt and North Garfield Park area around fair housing, police accountability, health care, youth alternatives, and education issues. The organization focuses on those with historically the least amount of power, bringing neighborhood residents together to develop community power and leadership skills to change institutions. Community organizing allows for the people who are most affected by public policy to participate in changing it.

Blocks Together has expanded from a predominantly Latino area to an area split in half, African Americans and Latinos, literally, by Division Street. West Humboldt Park and North Garfield Park have the highest proportion of youth residents than any other neighborhood in Chicago. With half of its residents over 18 lacking a high school diploma and 97 percent of its school children from low-income families, it was quite fitting for BT to make youth organizing a priority.

The Blocks Together Education Committee brings parents, students, and teachers from eleven schools in the West Humboldt Park and North Garfield Park communities of Chicago together around local school issues. The Education Committee has worked on issues ranging from school construction and repair to school safety and security, and from teacher quality to overcrowded classrooms. Thousands of community members have participated in BT's efforts to ensure more equitable distribution of funds and resources into neighborhood schools. The Education Committee has seen many victories, including millions of dollars in capital improvements, changes in school security guard policies, and increased support staff at local schools.

### *Campaign Case Study: Special Education*

"We are sick of the way special education students always come last. We want to see CPS put them first!" demanded Blocks Together leader Adelaida Negron. The fight for more special education and support staff began like all others, at the doorsteps of neighborhood residents, where BT organizers and leaders engage people in conversations about the issues they care about most. After talking with hundreds of community residents in the neighborhood, it was clear that support services at local schools were failing students.

### **Organizational Profile: Blocks Together**

**Year Founded:** 1993

**Mission:** Blocks Together (BT) is a nonprofit, grassroots, direct action community organization made up of residents, schools, and churches in the West Humboldt and North Garfield Park communities of Chicago. These low-income communities are located on the city's west side. BT works to develop grassroots leadership and empower residents to win needed improvements for their neighborhoods. BT believes that by working together people can improve the social, economic, and physical conditions of their community.

**Community Area:** Blocks Together is bound by Armitage (North), Sacramento/Humboldt (East), Pulaski (West), and the Kinzie railroad tracks (South).

**Constituency:** Blocks Together serves a low-income working class neighborhood on Chicago's near northwest side. BT's area has gone from being predominantly Latino to now being nearly half Black and half Latino. Over 50% of area residents are under the age of 25.

**Issues:** Education, youth alternatives, women's rights, police accountability, health care, and fair housing and infrastructure.



**“Parents and teachers often don’t see themselves as working on the same team. If we truly want to improve children’s education, we have to work together.”**

**Nilda Vega, Teacher and Blocks Together member**

*Joseph is an 11-year-old fourth grader at Lowell Elementary School who has been in Lowell’s Special Education Program for three years. Last fall, Joseph’s parents separated, and his mother was forced to take the children to a women’s shelter where they lived for the next few months.*

*During this time, Joseph acted up in class. Joseph’s teacher spoke with his mother and recommended he see the school psychologist. But because the one psychologist who serves Lowell’s eight hundred students only works at the school a day and a half a week, ten minutes each week was the most time the psychologist could offer him.*

*Joseph’s teacher and mother both joined Blocks Together’s campaign to increase the number of support staff at Lowell Elementary and are intent on changing the district-wide formula for assigning support staff so that students like Joseph receive the support they need.*

Despite the increasingly high numbers of special education students in Chicago Public Schools, local schools have experienced dramatic cuts in special education resources. After requesting and analyzing data from CPS, Blocks Together found that the schools with the highest need for support were getting the least amount of services. Low-performing schools in low-income and high-crime areas often had support staff-to-students ratios up to five times greater than other schools. Not only was the support staff allocation under the existing formula not equal, the standards and criteria of the formula were inequitable.

Armed with this information, the Blocks Together leadership knew that in order to challenge the existing support staff formula they would have to demonstrate new and different standards of need for support staff.

In August 2001, BT began leading trainings in community organizing for teachers from Lowell Elementary and Stowe Elementary schools. The group also involved teachers in planning meetings, door-knocking sessions, and as speakers at public meetings. At the first public meeting of the campaign, there were sixty-five new Blocks Together members, many of whom were teachers from local schools. “Parents and teachers often don’t see themselves as working on the same team. If we truly want to improve children’s education, we have to work together,” explains Nilda Vega, a teacher and Blocks Together member.<sup>1</sup>

In building its base of power, Blocks Together has had to balance and bridge many different constituencies and interests, including youth and adults, Latinos and African Americans, and English speakers and Spanish speakers, as well as parents, teachers, and students. This has required some thoughtful strategizing to create an accessible and inclusive organization.

### **Initial Meeting**

In November 2001, BT organized more than 250 community members to meet with Sue Gamm, the Chief Specialized Services Officer for Chicago Public Schools. She

## Campaign Timeline: Expanding School Support Staff and Services

DATE	KEY ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS
August 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Organizing Training for Special Education Teachers:</b> BT holds in-service training on organizing for thirty teachers at Lowell and Stowe schools, then develops a list of special education concerns to organize around.</li> </ul>
November 6, 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting with CPS Official:</b> One hundred fifty community members attend public meeting with Sue Gamm, Chief of Specialized Services for CPS. BT wins local, bi-monthly special education trainings for teachers and parents, and commitment to investigate an increase in school support staff.</li> </ul>
November 14, 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Negotiations with CEO of CPS:</b> Twenty Blocks Together members hold introductory meeting with CPS CEO Arne Duncan, present concerns about school overcrowding and special education, and secure a public meeting date with him.</li> </ul>
November 2001– March 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Leadership Trainings:</b> Hundreds of community members learn about special education and school support staff issues; dozens of adult and youth leaders are trained in various leadership skills and help plan public meeting.</li> </ul>
March 5, 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting with CPS CEO Duncan:</b> Two hundred sixty community members attend a public meeting run by adult and youth leaders. Duncan agrees to enforce existing support formula and work to update formula.</li> </ul>
March 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting Follow-up:</b> Leaders and staff plan next steps. Two hundred seventy-five community members attend next public meeting.</li> <li>• Two schools win additional support staff hours for nurses and psychologists, based on Duncan’s agreement to enforce existing support staff rules, benefiting over 2,300 students.</li> </ul>
March–October 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Research and Coalition Building:</b> BT partners with Brighton Park Neighborhood Council to develop a proposal for an alternative support staff formula.</li> <li>• Fifty leaders attempt, through letters and phone calls, to get meeting with Board of Education president Michael Scott.</li> </ul>
October 18, 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public pressure for meeting with Board President:</b> Ten leaders intensify efforts to secure a meeting with Scott by demonstrating at his office. They meet with Scott’s chief of staff to schedule a meeting.</li> </ul>
November 12, 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting with Board of Education President:</b> Two hundred fifty community members meet with Michael Scott, who agrees to work on new support staff formula and to a follow-up meeting.</li> </ul>
January 29, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Negotiations with CEO Duncan:</b> Twenty BT and BPNC leaders meet with Duncan to present proposed new support staff formula. Duncan agrees with proposal, but says there’s no money to implement them.</li> </ul>

***“Some of our schools only have psychologists, social workers, and nurses for one day a week! If they are only in our schools one day a week, they can’t possibly get it all done!”***

Haydee Ruiz, Blocks Together

heard from Blocks Together leaders like Haydee Ruiz who expressed their frustrations about overworked and under-qualified special education and support staff. “Some of our schools only have psychologists, social workers, and nurses for one day a week! If they are only in our schools one day a week, they can’t possibly get it all done!”<sup>2</sup>

Gamm agreed to increase local professional development programs to help special education teachers and support staff stay current on constantly changing classroom techniques and requirements. She committed to providing local bimonthly, bilingual trainings for special education teachers and parents. And, she promised to ensure that four local schools met state requirements for support staffing.

### ***Campaign Escalation***

On March 5, 2002, over 250 West Humboldt Park and North Garfield Park residents participated in a public meeting between Blocks Together and the new CEO of Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan. BT leader Haydee Ruiz made the message clear: “Our students are not getting the individual attention they deserve. This formula is not working in our schools.” Raymond Collins, a member of the Blocks Together youth council recalls, “We wanted to let Duncan know who we are, and where we’re coming from. We also let him know that we’re not willing to negotiate these important issues behind closed doors.”

Duncan agreed to audit four local schools to ensure that the existing support staff formula was enforced. He conceded that the formula was outdated and committed to working with Blocks Together members to improve the way CPS allocates support staff to low-income schools. Later that month, three local schools that serve over 2,680 students received additional staff hours for nurses and psychologists based on the audit Blocks Together won from Duncan. Within a month, Blocks Together was seeing some changes.

While Blocks Together had conducted considerable research to look at the discrepancies of the existing support staff formula, they still needed to propose a new formula. Blocks Together and Brighton Park Neighborhood Council examined the existing staff allocation formula and looked at the list of factors affecting special education and support staff needs that Blocks Together compiled through previous research. Together, staff and leaders from both organizations developed a proposal to address the myriad of special education and support staff problems in Chicago Public Schools.

### ***Campaign Accomplishments***

Through their organizing and through this campaign for improved special education and increased support staff, Blocks Together has continued to develop their research capacity, their ability to conduct organizing trainings, and their skill at building strong and strategic relationships with other organizations through coalition building. However, in terms of the campaign goals, BT’s gains, thus far, are relatively modest. They have won enforcement of the existing staff formula, which resulted in additional staff support in two schools, but have not yet won a change in policy. The fact that BT suc-

ceeded in securing the maximum allowable level of staffing under existing policy, yet the affected schools still face severe staffing shortfalls, makes their case for policy change even more compelling. Recognizing that policy changes are not typically won in a short-term campaign, BT has committed to continue organizing until an equitable policy becomes reality.

### **Blocks Together's Other School-Related Accomplishments**

Other Blocks Together education-related campaigns have also resulted in improvements.

- **Proposed new library:** BT initiated a successful campaign and secured a commitment from the Chicago Public Library to build a new library in North Garfield Park. BT uncovered racial disparity in the library system: The only library in North Garfield Park, a largely African American community, serves twenty-three area elementary schools, while four near north side libraries in a predominantly white community serve an average of eleven schools each. This research attracted wide press coverage, including the *Chicago Tribune*.
- **School security policies:** BT youth joined with the BPNC through Chicago Youth United (CYU) to address school security issues. The youth won a policy requiring security guards to wear name tags and new hiring guidelines requiring previous experience in security work.
- **School building improvements and repairs:** BT has won hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital improvements, including: removal of lead paint at Lowell Elementary; a new roof, windows, and other repairs at Stowe Elementary; and a new roof at Pablo Casals Elementary.
- **Police and parent patrols around schools:** BT has seen improvements in school police patrols. The local Chicago Police moved their shift change time to ensure security for students in the hours after school. BT has helped improve parent patrols and crossing guards at area schools.
- **New after-school programs:** BT won a commitment to fund after-school programs in the community, as well as a commitment from Chicago Public Schools to establish the "10,000 Tutors Program," an after-school academic support program, along with the reinstatement of funds for after-school programs at Stowe Elementary School.
- **LSC trainings and elections:** BT played an active role in the 2002 Local School Council elections by recruiting and training candidates for all local schools. Significantly, BT's new organizing efforts in several predominantly African American schools fostered new interest and vitality in these elections: For the first time, the schools had competitive elections, poll watching, and higher voter turnout.

### **Special Education and Support Staff Campaign Successes**

- Over sixty teachers, four principals, Local School Council members, and special education case managers join the campaign.
- Chicago Public Schools offers bimonthly bilingual trainings for special education parents and teachers.
- Chicago Public Schools implements local professional development programs for special education teachers.
- Increased support staff at two local schools.
- CPS CEO Arne Duncan and Board of Education President Michael Scott commit to working with Blocks Together to improve support staff formula.

*“While it is important to build power locally and begin by working on very local issues, real change will never come at that level.”*

Blocks Together

### **Key Observations**

While Blocks Together’s major policy goals have yet to be realized, the organization has used the campaign to promote a number of important developmental achievements.

#### **The organization has significantly expanded its base of support by**

- **developing young leaders.** BT holds monthly training sessions with youth to develop their leadership skills, enabling them to move into active roles in organizing campaigns. Youth have many opportunities to readily apply their new skills, serving as spokespersons at public meetings with elected officials, researching problems, formulating proposed improvements, and participating in negotiating meetings and direct actions. The students work alongside adults in BT’s decision-making and public actions. Two of BT’s eight board members are youth.
- **involving teachers.** Blocks Together was able to bring teachers into their campaign through strategic outreach and training. BT trained thirty teachers and recruited over sixty teachers into the campaign, building a crucial alliance between parents and teachers.
- **increasing African American participation.** BT organized a new active membership base at four predominantly African American schools. This expanded the size and changed the composition of the organization’s overall base. Now, with strong leadership and representation of both the Latino and African American communities, BT has a distinct and diverse power base.

**By introducing the concept of equity, the organization has begun the important pre-policy work of reframing standards for public debate on a key issue.** BT, in conjunction with BPNC, developed a new proposal that reframes the debate about support staffing from a numerical equality (support staff levels are based solely on the number of students in a school) to needs-based equity (schools have different support staffing needs based on students’ different circumstances), a necessary shift in framework if needs are to be met.

#### **Blocks Together has struggled with the tension between devoting most of their attention to tangible community improvements or district-wide policy change.**

The shift from fighting for very local victories to broader policy change has been a trying process for Blocks Together. At the end of the grant period for this project, BT’s staff felt that their biggest accomplishment was “the fact that we were able to move from issues that concern capital spending and bricks and mortar, to work on issues, specifically special education and support staff issues, that affect quality of learning. While it is important to build power locally and begin by working on very local issues, real change will never come at that level.” BT was able to secure some modest additions in support staff at their neighborhood schools, but the effort to win a district-wide change in the support staff allocation formula has yet to be won, with an uphill organizing challenge ahead.

**BT may need to employ an expanded repertoire of tactics to move top CPS leaders.** BT was able to successfully engage both the CEO and school board president of CPS in public meetings and negotiating meetings, winning several commitments to improve local schools and examine deficiencies in some existing policies. As their campaigns progressed, however, the top school officials became less responsive and accessible. Other tactics for influencing power holders need to be expanded, such as releasing a study or policy proposal to the media, joining forces with some unusual allies, shifting the target to the mayor, or other such options that raise the public heat and shift the power dynamic.

**Blocks Together has made strategic efforts to address race in their organization and in their organizing.** Blocks Together has strong relationships and a long history of working with the Latino community, but needed to build more connections and relationships with African Americans in the southern part of their service area. In 2001, Blocks Together hired a second education organizer to work with predominantly African American schools. In October of that same year, Blocks Together held a public meeting with over 220 parents, youth, and community members from schools in their southern area including Ryerson, Wright, Morse, and Orr. As a result, Blocks Together significantly engaged African Americans in the campaign for increased support staff and improved special education, and increased African American participation in Local School Councils (LSCs), as well as in leadership positions throughout BT's organization, including its board.

Blocks Together has devoted considerable energy to internal education, through staff and leadership trainings, to expand their diverse constituency's understanding of race. BT has also begun to address racial disparities in its issue campaigns, for example, by documenting and correlating the size of city library service areas with the racial populations of the areas they serve to demonstrate the need for a new library in their community. In 2003, BT participated in the Racial Justice Action Education Program with a cluster of other Chicago organizations to become more skilled at addressing race issues.

*Blocks Together has devoted considerable energy to internal education, through staff and leadership trainings, to expand their diverse constituency's understanding of race.*

*“Classes were held in hallways and closets... We have three classes that are taught in three different languages in the same gymnasium... That isn’t teaching, it’s crowd control.”*

Debbie Caput, Northwest Neighborhood Federation

## SECTION 4: NORTHWEST NEIGHBORHOOD FEDERATION WORKS TO IMPROVE TEACHER QUALITY

### **Background**

The Northwest Neighborhood Federation (NNF) is a multi-issue, neighborhood-based community organization. Founded in 1979, the Federation is made up of seven affiliate neighborhood organizations, nine schools, and one seniors’ organization. “Community residents have the right and responsibility to be involved in determining the fate of their neighborhoods,” reads the front of NNF’s brochure. “The only qualification for membership is that you must live, work or worship within the NNF service area.”

Over the past decade, the northwest side of Chicago has seen a decline in the local economic base and a dramatic demographic shift. The northwest side has the fastest growing population of Polish and Latino immigrants in all of Chicago. Rapid neighborhood change has taken its toll on local institutions, especially the public schools. The Belmont-Cragin area experienced the greatest growth in school-age children in the entire city during the 1990s, with an overall increase of 4,600 students. Between 1992 and 2001, the area has seen a 600 percent increase in poverty in its twelve neighborhood schools; more than 90 percent of neighborhood children live below the poverty line.

Increasing student populations without increasing school construction has resulted in massive overcrowding. “Children were packed forty to a room. Three classes at a time were held in the gym. Classes were held in hallways and closets... We have three classes that are taught in three different languages in the same gymnasium,” says NNF leader Debbie Caputo. “That isn’t teaching, it’s crowd control.”<sup>1</sup>

The Northwest Neighborhood Federation officially formed an Education Committee in July 2001, although they have a longer history of working around education issues. NNF involved representatives from twelve neighborhood schools and established youth organizations in two of the schools to address issues including teacher quality, teacher shortages, school construction, school safety, bilingual education, and support staff.

### **Campaign Case Study: Teacher Quality**

*“Our campaign is about helping teachers unlock their potential.”*

—Eunice Arce, teacher and Northwest Neighborhood Federation leader

In July 2001 NNF’s newly formed Education Committee decided to take on two of the biggest issues that have daunted Chicago Public Schools for over a decade: teacher qual-

ity and teacher shortages. Between July and September 2001, NNF conducted research to develop a proposal to turn local schools into community learning centers (not just for parents and students, but also for teachers), to develop a local teacher training center on the northwest side of Chicago, and to pass limited amnesty to put immigrant teachers into Chicago classrooms.

The first part of the campaign was launched within three weeks of the Education Committee's formation. On July 25, 2001, over two hundred community leaders met with the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan, about transforming local schools into community learning centers. At the group's first public meeting, Duncan agreed to establish three community schools in the area.

With a new Education Committee and a new campaign off the ground, NNF began conducting outreach to increase support for their new campaign. Through the following months, NNF held three public meetings with nearly three hundred students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. These meetings helped to surface and develop new leaders who joined the campaign and played central roles in the research and public actions.

The next step for the campaign was to find a partnering agency to help implement and support the teacher training centers. A partnership was developed with the Chicago Teacher's Center at Northeastern Illinois University to provide on-site university courses and model effective teaching techniques for the classroom. The group also gained support from Chicago Public Schools and the state department of education to match funds put up by local schools. Under NNF's proposal, if local schools could provide \$25,000 and then received matching funds, each school would have the \$75,000 required to start a teacher training center.

### ***Involving Teachers***

NNF began to involve teachers from each participating school, recruiting over two hundred teachers and all the principals from their local schools into their campaign. NNF engaged this base of teachers in reaching out to the new head of the Chicago Teachers Union, Deborah Lynch, in an effort to attract union support for NNF's plans. Getting support was one thing, but getting schools to find the money was an entirely different challenge. With the teachers' union on board, NNF's leadership was ready to approach LSCs and principals at their neighborhood schools to ask for an endorsement and a commitment of resources. Five schools signed on to the plan.

The second part of NNF's plan to address teacher quality and teacher shortages was to find a way to allow immigrants with teaching credentials and experience in their home countries to be able to teach in the Chicago schools.

On Sept. 10, 2001, NNF held a public meeting with potential immigrant teachers to discuss how to advocate for changes in the current immigration law. Over 350 community members attended the public meeting, most of whom were immigrants. That day, Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) and CPS helped NNF register over 250 poten-

## **Organizational Profile: Northwest Neighborhood Federation**

**Year Founded:** 1979

**Mission:** The Northwest Neighborhood Federation's mission is to build powerful neighborhood organizations involving large numbers of neighbors in the identification, research and resolution of issues defined by the community. NNF believes that families have the right and responsibility to be involved in determining the fate of their neighborhood.

**Community Area:** NNF serves a cluster of neighborhoods located on Chicago's northwest side, including Hermosa, Avondale, Belmont Cragin, and Galewood-Montclare. The thirty-two thousand families represented by the Federation live in an eight hundred-block area from Narragansett on the West to Kimball on the East and from Armitage/Milwaukee Railroad to the South and Irving Park on the North.

**Constituency:** Neighborhood residents in NNF's service area are predominantly working-class Latinos, while the northern part of the area is home to many Polish immigrants.

**Issues:** Education, neighborhood safety, immigration, housing, youth development, and senior services.



***“How can this be possible? Our children are the victims in this situation. We are what the schools need, we have the experience, the skills and we know the culture.”***

**Cecilia Cardozo, a teacher from Colombia**

tial teachers with an average of fourteen years of teaching experience in other countries. At the meeting, potential teachers told their stories and identified obstacles preventing them from becoming teachers. Among attendants listening to their stories was Chicago Public School’s CEO Arne Duncan, who agreed to support their efforts to certify immigrant teachers, and if all went well, sponsor immigrant teachers to work in Chicago Public Schools.

Although the sentiment in the meeting was positive and hopeful, the next day’s attack on the World Trade Center towers in New York placed an immediate chill on immigrant rights legislation; in fact, a new wave of anti-immigrant policies was soon unleashed. Still, only days after Sept. 11, NNF received positive press coverage of their public meeting supporting immigrant teachers, including a Sept. 16, 2001 *Chicago Tribune* article headlined “Answer to teacher shortage may be near.”

In October 2001 NNF held its annual convention, bringing over eight hundred NNF leaders together to talk with over a dozen public officials including Arne Duncan and Congressman Luis Gutierrez. Nearly half of the leaders at the convention were students, parents, teachers, and school administrators from local schools. The certification of immigrant teachers was a hot topic for discussion that day.

“How can this be possible? Our children are the victims in this situation. We are what the schools need, we have the experience, the skills and we know the culture,” said Cecilia Cardozo, a teacher from Colombia with ten years of experience who has been taking classes at Wright College in hopes of teaching in Chicago schools.

At the convention, Illinois Professional Learner’s Partnership and NEIU committed to taking the lead on developing the teacher’s center. The teacher’s union committed to developing a comprehensive teacher recruitment and retention strategy. Congressman Gutierrez announced his support for immigrant teachers as well. And Duncan, who opened the convention, agreed to support legal residency for qualified teachers and to meet again to talk about further plans.

In February 2002 NNF collected over two hundred surveys of potential teachers that helped them compile data on the legal status, level of teaching credentials, types of classes needed, and obstacles to becoming a teacher in the Chicago schools. NNF also documented stories of potential teachers to help understand the intricacies of their experiences and to better understand the complexities of their obstacles and challenges.

NNF talked to people like Teresa Yepes, a legal resident, who has years of teaching experience in Mexico. Teresa is also a Local School Council member at Schubert Elementary. “I graduated as an elementary teacher in Mexico, and I want to work in my field. As a member of the LSC I can see the important role of a Latina teacher in the classroom. My son is one of the best students, and I want the best education for him.”

In April 2002 representatives from the Northwest Neighborhood Federation (NNF), Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), and the Illinois Professional Learner’s Partnership (IPLP) met to develop plans for the Teacher Training Center. NNF, who provided much of the original vision and initiated the plan, handed the designing and develop-

## Campaign Timeline: Teacher Shortages and Teacher Quality

DATE	KEY ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS
February 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting with CPS Official:</b> Eighty leaders attend meeting with Sue Gamm, Chief of Specialized Services for CPS to discuss teaching needs.</li> </ul>
March 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>2<sup>nd</sup> Public Meeting:</b> teachers, principals and parents testify about teaching needs.</li> </ul>
June 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Negotiating Meeting with Sue Gamm:</b> NNF secures support for teacher training and recruitment proposals.</li> </ul>
July 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>New NNF Education Committee Established</b> with leaders from nine schools.</li> </ul>
July 25, 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting with CEO Duncan:</b> Two hundred community members meet with Duncan, who agrees to turn two local schools into community learning centers.</li> </ul>
July–September 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>New Partners Secured:</b> Chicago Teacher’s Center at Northeastern Illinois University joins as a partner in developing a teacher training center.</li> <li>• Chicago Public Schools and state board of education support development of a teacher training center.</li> </ul>
September 10, 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Public Meeting with Immigrant Teachers:</b> Three hundred and fifty community members attend, mostly immigrants. Public meeting draws <i>Tribune</i> coverage. CEO Duncan agrees to support certifying immigrant teachers. NEIU and CPS help NNF register over 250 teachers with an average of 14 years of teaching experience in other countries; identify obstacles to becoming teachers.</li> </ul>
October 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>NNF Annual Convention:</b> Eight hundred community members attend and nineteen state and city officials attend, including Arne Duncan and Congressman Luis Gutierrez. Duncan agrees to support legal residency of qualified teachers; Gutierrez commits to push for extension of Section 245(i) of the LIFE Act.</li> </ul>
January 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Two Teacher Fairs:</b> Held at NEIU, where 1,050 potential teachers register; CPS and NEIU offer assistance.</li> </ul>
February 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Teacher Surveys:</b> NNF surveys two hundred teachers on barriers to teaching and training.</li> <li>• Over sixty leaders attend three-part training series on power and organizing.</li> </ul>
April 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Plans Developed for New Teacher Training Center:</b> NNF, NEIU, and Illinois Professional Learner’s Partnership meet to develop plans for Teacher Training Center.</li> </ul>
October 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>El Centro Teacher Training Center Opens:</b> Forty-five potential immigrant teachers start eighteen-week courses to improve English skills, prepare for Basic Skills Tests, and placement in support roles in local schools.</li> </ul>
January 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Meeting with CPS Board of Education President Michael School:</b> NNF continues to raise concerns and present proposals regarding teacher recruitment and training and other school issues.</li> </ul>

ment of the center to IPLP. NEIU committed to house and run the center. On October 15, 2002, El Centro Teacher Training Center opened its doors at Northeastern Illinois University, El Centro campus on Belmont and Pulaski on Chicago's northwest side. For a nominal fee, the Center offered 18-week courses in beginning, intermediate, and advanced English, as well as courses to help potential teachers pass the basic skills test. There were forty-five potential teachers in El Centro's first incoming class, mostly Latino, Polish, and Slavic, all with teaching experience and certification in their home countries. After completing the 18-week course work, potential teachers are placed in support roles in Chicago Public Schools classrooms.

### ***NNF's Other School-Related Accomplishments***

NNF's education reform efforts involved several other activities and accomplishments.

- **New School Construction:** Two new schools and four additions built, as well as \$23 million worth of sewer repairs in Chicago's northwest side covering five neighborhoods, or about thirty thousand people. NNF is currently negotiating construction of a new school in the Hermosa neighborhood.
- **Renovated Park/Campus Area:** Worked with CPS and State Representative Delgado to get \$2 million for improvements at Hanson Park—now a state-of-the-art park and campus, adjacent to three schools attended by 5,800 students.
- **Peer Jury System:** The youth organization at Prosser Academy won a peer jury system that utilizes a committee of teachers and students to address minor offenses by students at the school. In Fall 2002, the Prosser principal agreed to implement and fund the Peer Jury Program to start Fall 2003.
- **New Partner Organizations:** Recruited partner organizations to form a new Belmont-Cragin Hermosa Youth Collaborative.
- **National Organizing:** Thirty-five NNF leaders participated in efforts with National People's Action (NPA) to pass national school construction legislation.
- **Special Education and Support Staff:** NNF encouraged participation in special education committees at local schools to increase parents' understanding of and participation in, special education programs. NNF also joined with Blocks Together in a citywide campaign to reprioritize support staff allocation at local schools.
- **Mini-University:** Opened first mini-university in Mary Lyon schools.
- **Local School Councils (LSC):** NNF served as an official LSC trainer, providing training to hundreds of local residents. Sixty-five of the candidates NNF trained now serve on LSCs at neighborhood schools.

## Key Observations

**NNF has strategically used local schools and Local School Councils (LSCs) as a base for its organizing campaigns.** NNF has organized student/parent committees at its neighborhood schools. Many of these local schools have initiated their own organizing campaigns with the support of NNF. NNF has also become an official trainer for LSCs and has trained hundreds of LSC members in organizing, understanding power, and staying connected to the community. Sixty-five of the candidates NNF trained now serve on LSCs. “When we were first elected, we didn’t have any idea what was going on,” said Bessie Calderon, a first-time LSC member and chairwoman of the new LSC at Northwest Middle School. “NNF had some classes, and they invited us. And what I got out of that was great.”<sup>2</sup>

**NNF has made its organizing efforts more accessible and inclusive by addressing language barriers.** “NNF was instrumental in bringing ESL (English as a Second Language) programs into the schools. We wouldn’t have them without NNF,” says Lucy Lopez, who works for CPS and is an NNF member. NNF has also been working to make LSCs more accessible, particularly for immigrant parents. Lopez adds, “Latinos were afraid to talk at LSCs.” NNF organized parents to demand bilingual meetings. Now, all meetings and materials are in English and Spanish, which has increased the participation of monolingual Spanish speakers in LSC meetings.

**NNF has built strong youth leadership in local schools.** NNF hired a youth organizer who developed Youth Leadership Councils in two schools. This brought new youth involvement and leadership in NNF organizing campaigns. The model of the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council has been a strong asset to NNF’s youth organizing efforts.

**NNF experienced its limitations when attempting to address federal immigration policy.** With limited experience in the policymaking arena, NNF’s strategy of attempting to change federal immigration policy without a wider base of support could not succeed. To mount an effective campaign at this level, NNF would need to expand its involvement with both statewide coalitions and national efforts such as National People’s Action.

**NNF had a significant challenge addressing staff turnover.** During the past few years, NNF has had a succession of education organizers, and these changes have taken a toll, since so much of organizing is built upon relationships. In addition, in July 2003, just after the end of the period addressed in this evaluation, NNF underwent a change in executive directors, due to some internal differences in visions and styles, including whether to have an organizational model with institutions or individuals as members. Given the staff turnover and some internal differences over organizational directions, some community relationships were disrupted, particularly with local schools, and even NNF’s connection to the other PYEPC organizations. NNF is now in a rebuilding stage, reshaping its staffing, funding, and relationships to local schools and community organizations. The new NNF director has been devoting considerable energy to rebuilding these relationships, efforts which appear to be succeeding.

*“NNF was instrumental in bringing ESL programs into the schools. We wouldn’t have them without NNF.”*

Lucy Lopez, Chicago Public Schools and Northwest Neighborhood Federation member

## SECTION 5: GROUPS COLLABORATE TO ADDRESS SCHOOL OVERCROWDING AND SECURITY

**A**lthough the Northwest Neighborhood Federation (NNF), Blocks Together (BT), and Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) had not previously engaged in a coordinated issue campaign at the local level, the groups had some history of working together prior to receiving the collaborative grant monies from the Joyce Foundation. NNF and BT had teamed up for a prior grant from the Joyce Foundation and chose to include BPNC in their subsequent proposal for continued funding from the foundation, calling their new combined efforts the Parent and Youth Education Policy Collaborative (PYEPC). The three groups were also connected through their common affiliation and participation with the trainings, issue campaigns, and actions of the National Training and Information Center (NTIC) and its national organizing network, National People’s Action (NPA).

In 2001 the leaders and directors of the PYEPC organizations met, assessed opportunities for collaborations, and identified the education issues each group was addressing. These issues are listed below.

ISSUE	NNF	BT	BPNC
Improved and accessible teacher training	●	●	●
Recruitment and fair allocation of teachers and support staff	●	●	●
Improved school security	●	●	●
Improved special education	●	●	●
More bilingual education teachers and services	●		●
Expanded and upgraded school facilities and resources	●	●	●
After school programs/community learning centers	●	●	●
Expanded youth organizing and leadership	●	●	●
Increased student peer mentoring, student curriculum			●
Expanded health services and support staff at schools		●	●

Rather than develop a new issue campaign or a formal structure for the collaborative, the organizations felt that any joint efforts should simply be an extension of the existing local issue campaigns of the respective organizations.

The four areas that seemed to lend themselves best for collaboration were: 1) school construction in order to alleviate overcrowding; 2) school security, both inside and around the schools; 3) school staffing, including ample, high-quality teachers and support staff; and 4) expanded youth organizing and involvement in school issues. The organizations collaborated in different ways to address each of these issues.

### **School Construction and Repairs**

The local issue of acutely overcrowded schools prompted the PYEPC organizations to join NTIC/NPA's nationally coordinated effort to promote increased federal funding for school construction and repairs. This campaign broadened public awareness of a bill introduced in the U.S. Congress calling for \$25 billion for school construction and modernization across the nation. HR 1076 was introduced in the House during the 2000 legislative session, then reintroduced in 2001. Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) also introduced a companion bill (S 905) in the Senate during the 2001 session.

Armed with data from a report called *Recess is Over* by the National Priorities Project and NTIC, local groups were able to band together and make a strong case for federal involvement in school construction. But three external factors significantly affected the fate of school construction funding legislation. First, the new Bush administration's appointment of Secretary of Education Rod Paige brought a shift in education policies and priorities, favoring a decrease in federal funding of schools. Second, the events of Sept. 11, 2001 and the ensuing "War on Terrorism" have diverted federal dollars to domestic security and foreign wars, making the passage of a major social spending bill politically untenable. Third, the economic recession created unprecedented shortfalls in state budgets, making it more difficult to secure state funding for school construction.

For now, the federal legislation remains stalled, and NTIC's persistent attempts to meet with U.S. Department of Education officials are being met with resistance. Despite the setbacks, community leaders have not given up on the issue. During the past several years, hundreds of leaders from the PYECP organizations have participated in NTIC/NPA events related to education issues, including national conventions, trainings, organized actions, and monthly conference calls. They joined one thousand leaders at a demonstration at the U.S. Department of Education headquarters in March 2001 and at another action involving four hundred leaders held at the home of the Deputy Education Secretary. The PYEPC organizations sent a total of eighty adult and youth leaders to the 2003 NPA conference in Washington D.C., where they participated in and led training workshops and strategy discussions about education issues with other groups across the country. They also held numerous meetings and issue briefings with the Illinois congressional delegation. Grassroots organizing has helped keep the issues of school construction and funding in the forefront of ongoing national education policy debates, school construction funding sure to be on the agenda of upcoming sessions of Congress.

***Grassroots organizing has helped keep the issues of school construction and funding in the forefront of ongoing national education policy debates.***

**Discussing topics such as the criminalization of youth, race relations, and gender equity helped youth examine key dynamics and root causes of community inequities.**

### **School Security Campaign**

Two PYEPC organizations, BPNC and BT, cofounded a new citywide youth organization, Chicago Youth United (CYU), which succeeded in changing some district policies related to school security guards. CYU develops youth leadership to address citywide systemic issues related to youth. Other organizations have participated in these efforts, including the Mikva Challenge, a youth civic action organization, and Target Area Development Corporation, an African American community organizing group.

Due to an increase in violence in and around schools, CYU took up the issue of school security. Ironically, many students attribute some of the violence to school security guards. “At some schools, guards are just 18 years old, which means that we can’t tell who’s a guard and who’s a student, especially since many spend their time flirting with students, instead of doing their jobs,” says student Margie Rodríguez from the Brighton Park Youth Council.<sup>1</sup> Students from across the groups share similar stories of sexual harassment and assaults by security guards. Some guards, soon after graduating from high school, can be assigned to their former schools with no training or accountability.

In April 2002, CYU launched an organizing campaign by holding a major public meeting involving CPS CEO Duncan and 350 youth. Duncan agreed to institute a new policy requiring security guards to wear name tags so students can file reports in case of misconduct, to establish new hiring guidelines that require more references and experience, and to consider a proposal for youth-designed trainings for guards.

Bringing youth together across organizations and communities has not been without challenges. For example, when BPNC took its youth members to West Humboldt Park for a CYU rally and a social event, the racial and cultural differences between Latinos and African Americans were obvious by their awkwardness and reluctance to socialize with each other. “It was definitely outside their comfort zone,” according to BPNC organizer Shoshanna Specter, and they had “tons of stereotypes.” Noting the need to develop more bridges across communities, the organizers implemented a series of trainings to broaden the political analysis of the youth. Discussing topics such as the criminalization of youth, race relations, and gender equity helped youth examine key dynamics and root causes of community inequities. This empowered youth with leadership skills, a deeper political analysis, and greater capacity for strategic action.

CYU has helped convince the funding community to support not only *youth development*—which emphasizes youth education and community service—but also *youth organizing*—which emphasizes empowerment and political action. National foundations such as Surdna and Hazen out of New York have funded CYU, and several local foundations such as the WGN McCormick Tribune and the Speh Foundation now see youth organizing as meeting and even exceeding their criteria for youth development.

CYU continues to improve school security by seeking training and accountability for security guards. As important as this particular work is, it is the creation of a multi-racial, cross-city youth formation with a focus on policy change that marks a key development in Chicago’s organizing landscape.

## **School Staffing**

All three PYEPC organizations experienced serious staffing shortfalls at their schools, but the needs varied in the different neighborhoods. Rather than selecting one of these needs and building a joint campaign to address it, the organizations chose to address the issue on several fronts. Each group took leadership on different dimensions of the issue, but coordinated plans, information sharing, and support across the groups. This model allowed each of the groups to be driven by the particular needs of its own neighborhood, while collectively bringing public attention to three important, district-wide policy proposals addressing teacher recruitment, teacher training, and the allocation of support staff.

NNF took a leading role in proposing new teacher recruitment policies and training programs, generating sound proposals, and establishing new collaborations. Efforts to secure changes in federal immigration law to allow immigrants with teaching experience to teach in Chicago were given serious attention, but were unsuccessful, largely due to the anti-immigrant sentiment that followed the events of Sept. 11, 2001. The proposal is still under consideration both locally and nationally. A new, high-quality teacher training program was started at Northeastern Illinois University's El Centro campus, serving many immigrant teachers. The pilot program was successful, but permanent funding needs to be secured.

Blocks Together took the lead in demanding adequate and equitable school staffing. BT found that the existing CPS formula for staff allocation left high-need schools with the worst shortages of qualified staff. BT and BPNC developed an equitable formula for distributing support staff across the district. BT filed a public records request with the school district to learn the existing formula for the district and their local schools.

Armed with data revealing staff deficiencies at their local schools, BT was able to immediately demand and secure new support staffing. Though the increased staffing was modest, it was much needed for the particular schools. It was also the first step in a broader strategy: BT secured a commitment from the CPS CEO to re-evaluate the district's staffing formula to make it more equitable. This campaign is still underway.

BPNC replicated BT's efforts by filing a public records request to uncover staffing deficiencies, then demanded and secured new school staff. Because health issues were a particular concern in Brighton Park, BPNC focused efforts on securing more school-based health resources. They succeeded in expanding the nursing staff at local schools and securing monthly clinical visits to the schools by a medical mobile unit.

The PYEPC organizations were able to develop a cohesive strategy to address school staffing needs. They developed plans together, shared information and ideas, and reported to each other on developments. They shared strategies about meetings with top CPS officials, attended each other's negotiating meetings with decision-makers, and participated in each other's public events. By having each group address different dimensions of the school staffing issues, they were able to bring public attention to policy proposals for teacher recruitment, teacher training, and the allocation of support staff. All three proposals are viable and pending as the campaigns continue.

*Efforts to secure changes in federal immigration law to allow immigrants with teaching experience to teach in Chicago were given serious attention, but were unsuccessful largely due to anti-immigrant sentiment...*



***Students are uniquely positioned to understand school problems and identify creative solutions.***

### ***Youth Involvement in Schools***

The PYEPC organizations devoted considerable energy towards actively engaging students in local school improvements and educational policy reforms. Recognizing that students are uniquely positioned to understand school problems and identify creative solutions, each of the PYEPC organizations has active youth councils, which develop leaders, initiate issue campaigns, mobilize resources, and have won several victories. NNF most recently began involving youth in a structured way by organizing two youth councils at local schools, utilizing ideas and models from BPNC that combined the forces of youth and adults in some of their issue campaigns.

The launching of Chicago Youth United by BT and BPNC is a significant step towards young people having an opportunity to work across neighborhoods and racial and ethnic communities. These efforts were designed to provide students with a voice and representation in school policymaking, as well as to win tangible victories such as increased school safety and access to higher education. For example, CYU's first rally involved three hundred BT and BPNC youth leaders, Congressman Luis Gutierrez, plus representatives from three other U.S. Congressmen and two U.S. Senators from Illinois, who heard the students describe the needs for school construction, school security improvements, and access to scholarships.

In response to the needs expressed, the Youth Service Scholarship Act (YSSA) was introduced in the Illinois Senate in February 2001 to provide college scholarships for youth who work to improve their communities. In 2002, with the help of NPA, similar scholarship legislation was introduced and received bipartisan support in both the U.S. House and in the Senate. In June 2003, youth from PYEPC joined with other NPA groups in Washington, D.C. and held briefings with fifteen Senate and congressional members and their staff about the need for scholarships. The YSSA is being reintroduced as a bipartisan bill in the Senate.

The PYEPC organizations also highlighted the need for expanded access to higher education for immigrants. The Student Adjustment Act (H.R. 1684), reintroduced in 2003, would allow undocumented high school seniors to become citizens after they graduate from high school so they can qualify for public aid and college scholarships. The DREAM Act (S 1291), would repeal Section 505 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), under which states that provide in-state tuition rates to undocumented immigrants must provide the same tuition rate to out-of-state residents. Long-term resident students would be granted an interim status that protects them from being deported. A related bill, allowing undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition rates, was passed in the Illinois General Assembly in 2003, with the help of a broad-based coalition of immigrant rights and social justice organizations, including the PYEPC organizations.

**Key Observations**

**When community organizations collaborate they can expand both their power and success, but an optimal balance between the efficiency and formality of the collaboration must be achieved.** There are many trade-offs that need to be considered when entering into a collaborative. The intent of building a collaborative may be to strengthen collective work among a number of groups, increase intergroup coherence, and produce results that are greater than the sum of the parts. However, the *reality* of some collaborative processes, as the chart below illustrates, can be time-consuming, frustrating, and often contentious.<sup>2</sup>

FACTORS THAT ENHANCE SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION	BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collectively perceived need for collaboration</li> <li>• Positive attitude towards collaborating among stakeholders</li> <li>• Partners see others as valuable resources</li> <li>• Adequate funding and resource allocation</li> <li>• Common commitments to a goal</li> <li>• Existence of prior relationships</li> <li>• Environment of honesty and accountability</li> <li>• Clear and open communication</li> <li>• A complementary diversity exists among staff, leadership, and constituency</li> <li>• Leadership styles favor collaboration</li> <li>• Regular opportunities for exchange among organizations and across constituencies</li> <li>• Respect for diverse organizational structures, capabilities, and needs</li> <li>• Support for multiple constituency bases</li> <li>• Willingness to invest resources of time, personnel, materials, or facilities</li> <li>• Availability of technical assistance</li> <li>• Willingness to assess collaborative's internal dynamics and external outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Costs outweigh actual benefits</li> <li>• Bureaucracy inhibits communication</li> <li>• Failure to address power dynamics and internal tensions</li> <li>• High staff and leadership turnover</li> <li>• Lack of geographic proximity</li> <li>• Lack of resources/insufficient funding</li> <li>• Lack of support for staff work</li> <li>• Frequent and unwarranted interventions by funders</li> <li>• Sense of competition for resources among participating organizations</li> <li>• Differing approaches to leadership and decision-making</li> <li>• Organizations fear a loss of program, identity, prestige, or authority</li> <li>• Inability to address conflict</li> <li>• Unwillingness to address structural inequities (isms) within the collaborative</li> <li>• Different organizational priorities, ideologies, outlooks, or goals</li> <li>• Lack of common "language"</li> <li>• Historically poor relations between the organizations</li> <li>• Inability to execute program objectives</li> <li>• Inappropriate allocation of resources</li> </ul>

Source: "Evaluating Collaboratives," Univ. of Wisconsin Cooperative-Extension 1998

*The PYEPC organizations are very pragmatic in their issue campaign strategies—they play to win. To the extent that the collaboration might help them win their local issue campaigns, they were invested in it.*

Some defining features of the PYEPC collaborative included

1. **a collectively perceived need for collaboration and common commitment to a goal.** All three of the PYEPC organizations have a very explicit goal of building power, and it was clear to them that the potential combined power of three organizations was worth exploring. The PYEPC organizations are very pragmatic in their issue campaign strategies—they play to win. To the extent that the collaboration might help them win their local issue campaigns, they were invested in it. In the areas where they chose to collaborate, they were able to flex their political muscles in new ways, demonstrating cross-community power and demanding systemic solutions.
2. **different organizational priorities.** Each of the PYEPC organizations entered, and participated in, the collaborative with its own issue priorities already determined by their respective members. Instead of selecting issues together, each organization selected its own issues. The collaborative functioned as a clearinghouse to exchange ideas, report on developments, and in some cases, plan some coordinated activities. Because each organization had its own priorities as its primary focus, the collaborative played a secondary role—a useful vehicle, but not a substantially new realignment of power. A more significant investment in the collaborative would have required a very different level of commitment, coordination, and change that the organizations had not fully considered. During the collaborative, the groups learned that the process of working in collaboration needs to be prefaced by a great deal of dialogue and discussion about expectations, goals, missions, and philosophies, perhaps more than the groups had anticipated or planned for in terms of time commitment.
3. **a very informal structure.** The PYEPC organizations chose to maintain a very streamlined collaborative process, while still communicating and coordinating enough to experience several useful benefits and to achieve some victories. PYEPC, due to its informality, was neither time-consuming, nor very contentious. A formal coalition was never the intent. Each of the PYEPC organizations functioned independently and autonomously. In the areas where they chose to collaborate, shared learning, planning, and actions yielded better results than they would have achieved alone.
4. **flexibility.** The PYEPC organizations collaborated in a variety of ways for different issues to achieve mutual benefits. Different ways of collaborating included
  - **Coordinating efforts through a larger, national coalition.** In the school construction campaign, the PYEPC organizations collaborated through the structure of a national organizing and training intermediary, NTIC, to have access, capacity, and collective power in the national policymaking arena. NTIC and its NPA organizing network played a critical role in coordinating strategies, sharing information and research, providing training,

and coordinating communications and planning actions for several of these issues. Both locally and nationally, the PYPEC organizations worked mainly with other NTIC/NPA-affiliated organizations to increase their influence.

- **Creating a new local formation.** In the school security campaign, BPNC and BT created a new formation—Chicago Youth United—to engage the youth councils of the PYEPC organizations, as well as other organizations, in organizing campaigns, resulting in new school security hiring and training guidelines.
- **Addressing the same issue from different angles.** In the campaign for fully staffed schools, each of the collaborators took on different roles, and focused on different needs, but shared information and coordinated—and sometimes replicated—strategies. BT worked to increase support staff at local neighborhood schools, which was then replicated by BPNC, while NNF focused on expanding teacher recruitment and training. All of the groups supported a proposal to change the district’s staff distribution formula.

**The new citywide youth formation—Chicago Youth United—provides a unique and needed vehicle for organizing students and is already achieving policymaking success.** Securing district-wide changes in CPS’s recruitment and training of school security guards, and actively participating in the development of federal youth scholarship legislation are both impressive ways that youth were engaged in the democratic process. Bringing more youth from other Chicago organizations into CYU will be an important step for building upon this initial success.

**PYEPC’s decision-making structure was efficient and productive, but more opportunities for community members to participate in collaborative planning might have yielded further benefits.** Interactions across organizations took place in a variety of ways: Joint meetings among staff directors and education organizers, periodic joint meetings of leaders, national trainings and actions convened by NTIC, and some conference calls. The respective organizations did not designate official representatives to plan, decide, and coordinate PYEPC activities. Instead, ideas and information were shared informally at periodic meetings among key staff and leaders. There was no vying for power, leadership, control, credit, or resources (the grant monies were split evenly among the groups from the outset). Each of the organizations, through its respective members and decision-making process, maintained control over its own activities. All of this was efficient. In fact, some of the differences among the organizations in terms of organizing models and theories, as well as differences in personalities, did not have to be mediated in any significant way since the stakes were fairly low in terms of the expectations attached to such an informal collaboration. However, some additional structure and goals might have generated a more compelling vision, more investment by community leaders in the collaboration, and even more coordinated activities.

*The new citywide youth formation—Chicago Youth United—provides a unique and needed vehicle for organizing students and is already achieving policymaking success.*

*The commitment to youth leadership development has significantly strengthened the PYEPC organizations' individual and collective power.*

## SECTION 6: RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Key Findings*

**1** **Community organizing efforts worked well in producing policy change, especially when the need for immediate community improvements can be linked to broader systemic change.** Conventional community organizing strategies emphasize action and short-term, winnable issue campaigns that yield tangible community improvements. Advocating for policy change is a more complex task for neighborhood organizations, for it often requires a greater commitment of time and resources, a deeper analysis of the issues, a more sophisticated formulation of solutions, and the development of a wider base of allies. For several issue campaigns, the PYEPC organizations were able to build solid connections between local needs and public policies, resulting in winning several district-wide policy changes, such as new Chicago Public Schools district guidelines for security personnel and policies to ensure the safe handling of school meals. But more often, the organizations won tangible improvements at the neighborhood level—such as new after-school and community learning programs, new school additions and repairs, and increased support staff—without changing policy. To shift the emphasis towards policy change, it is often up to the organizers and key leaders to devise a strategy to both win tangible local improvements and pursue long-term policy changes. With additional experience and success, the PYEPC organizations are well-positioned to further explore additional changes in approach and capacity to bring the scope of their analysis, strategy, and constituency in alignment with the level of policy change being sought.

**2** **Youth involvement can significantly enhance the quality of education organizing campaigns, adding new and energetic leadership grounded in the reality of school life; however, youth and adults must be integrated thoughtfully to be successful.** All of the PYEPC organizations have active youth councils, where youth have the dedicated space and opportunity to develop their own leadership and campaigns. The youth were also integrated into the other structures and activities of the organizations as a whole. Youth sit alongside adults, in official voting capacities, at board and committee meetings, and they serve in leading positions at public community meetings. Youth from all of the organizations participated in addressing national legislation to provide youth scholarships and access to higher education. This commitment to youth leadership development has significantly strengthened the PYEPC organizations' individual and collective power.

**3 Community organizing can significantly increase community leadership in schools, but it is a very time- and labor-intensive process.** The PYEPC organizations successfully developed a broad and active community base by providing many different opportunities for engagement: at school committees, youth councils, police accountability meetings, Local School Councils, leadership trainings, and local and national conventions. In total, PYEPC organizations involved several thousand community members in various capacities during the 30-month grant period, many of whom acquired considerable leadership skills and experience. Many more community members regularly attend classes and functions at neighborhood schools and actively participate in an ongoing array of school and community improvement efforts. But all of the groups have found that there are no shortcuts to building their bases. Organizers and leaders spend their days knocking on doors, calling people on the phone, and attending LSC meetings and other community events in order to recruit members and get them involved in community affairs. With multiple issues to address at any given time, the sizeable workload is constant.

**4 Proactively addressing racial divisions and disparities provides community organizations with greater capacity to unite diverse constituencies and address systemic inequities in issue campaigns.** Chicago's racial divisions and disparities, aggravated by deeply entrenched patterns of residential segregation, rapidly changing demographics, and persistent policy impact disparities present significant challenges for community organizations. Each of the PYEPC organizations has had to incorporate new strategies to address racial and cultural barriers and inequities. NNF had to fight for language accessibility at school-related functions in order for Latinos to take a more active role in their schools. BT has had to shift staffing resources and organizing strategies to unite Latinos and African Americans, and document racial disparities in public library services. BPNC has had to challenge structural barriers that many immigrant residents face when trying to access educational and social services. Both BPNC and BT have initiated a full series of trainings with their staff and leaders in order to expand their analysis and ability to address racial dynamics and disparities. Both groups have reported that these trainings have successfully contributed to organizational cohesiveness, a deeper understanding of community relations, and the rethinking and reframing of issues campaigns.

**5 This report demonstrates that substantial policy change will require ongoing collaboration of community groups, assistance from key intermediaries, and a long-term funding commitment from the philanthropic community.** The organizing collaborative has laid solid groundwork in developing community power and initiating issue campaigns, many of which are still in progress. Further collaboration with local community organizations, statewide advocacy groups, as well as regional and national training intermediaries, could expand capacities in the policymaking arena. To sustain these efforts without overburdening organizations that are already operating at the limit of their staff and resource capacities, additional funding will be necessary.

*Chicago's racial divisions and disparities, aggravated by deeply entrenched patterns of residential segregation... present significant challenges for community organizations.*

*“The PYEPC groups have demonstrated that effective policy change begins locally with research and policy proposals that can be collectivized and coordinated to have citywide, state and federal impact.”*

PYEPC report to the Joyce Foundation

**6** As a demonstration project, PYEPC’s efforts contained a number of experimental elements that enhanced the project’s capacity, including

- **youth and cross-generational organizing.** The groups found that it was important for youth and adults to work together—which happened in all of their education campaigns—but it is also necessary to create youth-only spaces for youth to address their issues and engage in trainings to build their skills and political analysis. Also, a youth organizing model focused on empowerment and political action can be an effective supplement to an organization’s strategies for making change.
- **organized school/community partnerships.** The participating organizations each engaged parents, students, teachers, and school administrators in their organizing efforts, successfully building working partnerships between youth and adults and between the community and school personnel. “Instead of attacking teachers and principals, they helped us plan our meetings, turn out parents, and prepare testimony. We all work together. Our biggest goal is bringing us all together, because we have the power,” said NNF leader Bessie Calderon at a PYEPC collaborative meeting.
- **collaborative advocacy research and policy development.** Effective policy change begins locally. PYEPC’s final report to the Joyce Foundation states, “The PYEPC groups have demonstrated that effective policy change begins locally with research and policy proposals that can be collectivized and coordinated to have citywide, state and federal impact.” For example, the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council’s research and publicity of the issue of student sickness and food poisoning caused by unsanitary school lunch programs led to improvements in kitchen facilities at neighborhood schools, district-wide school lunch safety policies, and U.S. congressional hearings and proposals for addressing the problem at the national level. PYEPC’s campaigns to address teacher quality and staff shortages also involved the development of viable, solution-oriented proposals.
- **increased communication and replication with the assistance of the National Training and Information Center (NTIC).** Many issues addressed by the PYEPC organizations could not be resolved at the neighborhood level where their power base lies. NTIC/NPA was instrumental in providing a way for local groups to participate actively and meaningfully in the national policy arena. Through this network, the groups originally met each other, received much of their training, benefited from research findings, participated in national conferences and actions, and kept in regularly scheduled communication.

## Recommendations

### 1 To build upon the PYEPC organizations' efforts and successes, groups should consider

- **devoting additional structured time for deeper and broader political analysis.** Due to time constraints, it can be challenging for organizations with a strong “action” culture to develop an equally strong “learning” culture. Further consideration of ways to institutionalize an ongoing and shared political analysis will continue to enhance their work.
- **devoting more resources to the presentation and promotion of research findings.** The PYEPC organizations engaged in a considerable amount of research, knowing that solid research can often provide the ammunition for issue victories. But the packaging and promotion of their research findings could easily get slighted in the heat of campaigns. With additional capacity and commitment, research could be even more systematically gathered, collectively assessed, attractively compiled, and strategically released. For several of the education issues the PYEPC groups addressed, producing a more professionally packaged report geared towards external dissemination that documented problems and detailed proposed solutions could have helped attract more public awareness, media attention, and response from policy-makers.
- **developing an expanded base of allies, including more statewide coalition efforts.** Since most policies are decided at levels beyond the local neighborhood, building a broader power base through larger collaborations or coalitions is essential. New broad-based formations with real capacity and clout, particularly at the state level, need to be further explored and developed in order for community stakeholders to have an influential role in education policy in the years ahead.

2 **An effective model for involving youth in school reform is to engage them in community organizations that have both dedicated youth-only space and integrated youth/adult structures, where they have comparable decision-making authority and leading roles in organizing campaigns.** The “youth organizing” model, rather than a more narrowly defined “youth development” model, can be more empowering and more likely to lead to community change. The PYEPC organizations not only learned some “best practices” for involving youth, but also tried some approaches that did not work as well. For example, the collaborating groups have found that youth councils provide a much better forum for youth to develop and exercise leadership than participating in Local School Councils, where they have little representation and no vote.

*The “youth organizing” model, rather than a more narrowly defined “youth development” model, can be more empowering and more likely to lead to community change.*



*“In order to expand our power, it’s essential to understand the realities and dynamics of racism and ways to overcome it in our organizing.”*

Alex Poeter, BPNC Director

- 3** **One particularly important lesson for funders is that PYEPC’s success in policy advocacy was dependent on a community organizing component that ensured policy proposals were grounded in true community needs, enjoy widespread public support, and could be actively monitored, once implemented.**
- 4** **Racial divisions and disparities should continue to be explicitly discussed and challenged in order to create a new alignment of power and change long-standing inequities.** The PYEPC organizations have progressively developed their commitment and capacity to address racial and cultural differences, as well as structural inequities, in their communities. According to BPNC Director Alex Poeter, “Race was not being talked about, but that’s changed. With so many neighborhoods coming together, leaders have to think outside the community boundaries, and they’ve got to understand institutional racism, because it’s being applied against them. In order to expand our power, it’s essential to understand the realities and dynamics of racism and ways to overcome it in our organizing.” BT and BPNC have initiated staff and leadership trainings on race and have shifted the focus of some of their campaigns to address racial equity. Further capacities and strategies for ensuring access and inclusion, building unity across diverse constituencies, and advancing racial equity need to continue to be developed.
- 5** **Substantial policy change requires a long-term, broad-based, sophisticated organizing strategy that can be facilitated through a commitment of larger, multiyear funding grants to local community groups or collaboratives; but the goals and composition of collaboratives should emerge from the community.** The encouragement of collaborative proposals by the philanthropic community should be accompanied by well-informed decision-making that has wide grassroots community input from the outset and throughout the grant-making process. Funders can play a pivotal role in encouraging new collaborations, but the goals and composition of the collaborative should emerge from the community. A more significant level of funding—and an opportunity for increased funding over progressive years to reward success—could encourage a greater investment in collaboratives by community organizations.
- 6** **Partnerships between local community organizations and training intermediaries should be supported and strengthened.** Training intermediaries and organizing networks—organizations that provide local community groups with various types of support, such as training, research, consultation, technical assistance, and coordinated issue campaigns—can play a pivotal role in helping local groups participate more fully in the policymaking arena. This is evidenced by the PYEPC organizations’ fruitful relationships with NTIC/NPA. Gaining a larger than local perspective and power base is critical to developing and advancing viable policy proposals. With the added capacity, connections, and access that local groups gain from broader support organizations, more far-reaching policy proposals can be initiated and won.

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