

Community Organizing for School Reform: The Question of Parent Agency Past and Present

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Introduction

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

The current discussion about the failure of public schools in low-income urban neighborhoods is the latest chapter in an historical debate as to what role public education should play in making our society a more equal one. On the one hand, public education is supposed to function as the gateway to equal opportunity for all citizens; accordingly, a family's social and economic position should bear little if any "relation to the probability of future educational attainment and the wealth and station it affords" (Kozol, 1991, p. 207). On the

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

While the current debate over how to improve public schools in low-income urban communities includes differences over educational philosophy, it also embodies fundamental political differences. The political side of the debate has great urgency at the present due to the vigorous attack by conservative forces on the very nature of *public* education. Many conservatives argue that the public monopoly over education, and its accompanying bureaucratization and lack of competition and innovation, is the root political cause of its poor quality. Their alternative paradigm posits market mechanisms, including vouchers and privatization, as the key instrument for organizing schools for improved student outcomes (Chubb and Moe, 1990).

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

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

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

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

The following case study of the New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee illustrates the opportunities and challenges that result when a community-based organization extends its work of rebuilding a low-income neighborhood by organizing the community's political will and capacity to improve its public schools. The implications of this study, however, extend beyond the issue of schools. By utilizing a community organizing strategy to build the *collective and independent* power of parents and residents to influence the practices and outcomes of their local schools, New Settlement Apartment's work intersects with the larger discussion about how to rebuild the civic capacity and sense of community within low-income urban neighborhoods.¹

New Settlement Apartments

Background

Opened in 1990, New Settlement Apartments (NSA) is a housing development of nearly 900 families in the Mount Eden section of the southwest Bronx. It is composed of 14 fully-renovated, previously-abandoned buildings within an eight square-block area that had "...experienced the destruction of inner city America that went largely unchecked from the 1950's through the early 1980's" (Walsh, 1996, p.6). Its intentionally diverse mix of residents include a very substantial core of working people as well as 30% who were formerly

¹ The authors of this paper are on staff of the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy (see box on p.11). The Institute has provided intensive technical assistance to New Settlement Apartments to support the organizing work described in this paper. For the purpose of writing this paper, the data collected through the authors' role as technical assistance providers was supplemented by interviews with PAC members and NSA staff, as well as analysis of PAC and NSA documents. By request of the individuals, all quotations from PAC members will remain anonymous. The sections of this paper that appear in boxes define the intellectual and political context for the case study.

homeless. The surrounding neighborhood is part of one of the poorest areas in New York City. In 1996, more than 40% of the households had incomes below \$10,000, and 93% of the children in the local school district were eligible for free lunch (Citizens Committee for Children of New York, 1999).

From its inception, NSA's mission has been not only to rebuild and maintain a significant portion of the neighborhood's housing stock, but also to provide education programs and community services to all area residents. By 1996, NSA was able to cite a range of accomplishments, including:

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

Getting Started/Entry Points

The condition of the local public schools surrounding the NSA development stood in sharp contrast to the physical and social rebuilding of the community that NSA was spearheading. NSA's surrounding school district,

Community School District 9, had earned a reputation as one of the most corrupt and poorly performing districts in the entire city. In the early months of 1996 several parents with children in District 9 schools, who were involved in NSA activities and had learned about yet another scandal involving the members of the local school board, approached the leadership of NSA to discuss what could be done to improve local schools. With the election for the school boards in all thirty-two community school districts scheduled for May of that year, a small group of parents, with NSA staff support, launched a voter registration drive in District 9. While that effort lasted only a few months and ended up having little impact on the outcome of the election in the district, it did lead to NSA's involvement with the School Board Election Network, a citywide effort of the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP) to support CBOs' engagement of their constituencies in the school board elections.

The election experience piqued NSA's interest in exploring what role it could play in improving the neighborhood's public schools. While NSA had no prior experience with the schools, its interest was a reflection of its philosophy, as outlined in a funding proposal, that "...housing is not just bricks and mortar.' ...Our mission is not only to rebuild and maintain a sizeable portion of the housing stock in this impoverished neighborhood, but also to support the rebuilding of the social capital of this neighborhood." The organization began a dialogue with IESP about what NSA could do and how it might get started. Going door-to-door to recruit parents, an initial technique often used in community organizing to begin building a base of members for subsequent

activity, was too far outside NSA's repertoire (see box on p. 17). As with most CBOs that provide services and manage housing, NSA was used to engaging residents as clients who visit its office to access services. NSA realized that its clearest link to schools resided in its after-school program, which was housed in NSA's community center and served 60 children, most enrolled in local public schools. Why not start with the parents of those children and work to identify their specific concerns and their interest in banding together to improve the schools?

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

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

the sessions were also designed to encourage dialogue among parents. For many of the 35 parents who attended, the workshops were the first time they learned of their rights as parents and participated in small group discussions with other parents about their children's performance and experience in the neighborhood's schools. The workshops generated considerable enthusiasm among the parents. At the end of the second workshop, 20 parents volunteered to participate in a follow-up meeting to explore taking action together to improve their local schools. The *Parent Action Committee (PAC)*, a name the parents gave the group several months later, was born that night.

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

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

After several meetings in which they brainstormed and categorized problems and discussed the criteria for prioritizing them with IESP staff in attendance, PAC members decided to focus on the district's efforts to promote literacy. Clearly, by traditional organizing criteria -- is the issue concrete, specific, urgent and winnable? -- literacy was not the usual starting point.

Moreover, the PAC could not act without first conducting research. As part of their investigation, they discovered that a central strategy employed by the district was the *Golden Hour*, a 90-minute reading period that every classroom in every school was expected to implement daily. From their own observations inside the schools and from stories they heard from their children and other parents, PAC members began to suspect there was a significant gap between the district's design and the schools' implementation of the reading period.

In response to this finding, the PAC made its first organizational request. They asked for, and were granted a meeting with district personnel to discuss the *Golden Hour*. For most if not all of the parents, this was the first time they attended a meeting with district officials. The meeting, which was held at NSA, was a major disappointment for the group. Not only did the district officials not provide direct answers to the parents' questions; they completely dominated the meeting. The district personnel defended the district's programs without acknowledging any validity in the concerns raised by the PAC. There was no effort to understand the parents' concerns and experiences; instead, the district staff conducted a monologue. PAC members were not ready to take the bold step of interrupting the "authority figures." But they left the meeting feeling disrespected and angry.

Unlike the situation that a traditional parent association would face under similar circumstances, the PAC was not dependent on these administrators or the system they represented (see box on p.13). The PAC did not depend on the school system for its organizational infrastructure -- meeting space, copying machine,

computer, and telephone. Nor was the PAC alone in figuring out the next steps. Its independence of the system, combined with the staff and infrastructure support that NSA and IESP provided, enabled the PAC to avoid the two extremes that parents often get mired in, demoralization and despair about changing schools at one end and lashing out in anger resulting in non-strategic actions at the other.

The PAC went back to the research IESP staff had provided to identify more precisely the *right* questions to ask, the ones to use as levers to hold the school and district accountable. At this point, the PAC consisted of about 15 core members. The group had not yet reached out to other parents because the core members felt they needed to bolster their own understanding first. For example, the PAC had not yet examined the quantitative data IESP had assembled about the schools that would enable them to move beyond anecdotal evidence of school dysfunction. Additionally, because PAC members felt overwhelmed with trying to understand what was happening in schools across the district, they decided for the time being to focus on the school closest to NSA, PS 64. The school's composition reflected the demographics of the community; 80% of the students were Latino and 18% were African-American, and 93% were eligible for free lunch. The PAC asked IESP staff to design and facilitate a four-week training series during the summer of 1997 to assist PAC members in understanding PS 64's Annual School Report, the NYC Board of Education's school "report card" that contains demographic and outcome data, as well as the school's Comprehensive Education Plan for improving student achievement.

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

- 83% of the students were not reading at grade level,
- PS 64 ranked 657 out of 674 city elementary schools based on the results from the citywide reading test,
- the school received almost \$500,000 per year in Title 1 funding, an allocation to help schools in low-income communities improve their student outcomes,
- the school had made virtually no progress in reading over the last three years, and
- compared to schools with similar rates of poverty and students with limited English proficiency, PS 64 performed at a much lower level.

The data ended the debate. It was clear to PAC members that while parents were certainly responsible for preparing and supporting their children's learning, the school system was responsible for providing a quality education.

The target for parents' anger was clearer now. Those elected and appointed officials who ran the school system, and were paid with residents' tax money, were accountable to parents and the community. The 17% figure proved to be a powerful tool for recruiting parents. Its simplicity and power made it an effective rallying cry.

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

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

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

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

This turn outward triggered a significant expansion in the PAC's work. The group began meeting on a weekly basis, with IESP staff participating as a resource on educational issues and sharing with PAC members the organizing experiences of other CBOs engaged in similar work. NSA provided space, food, childcare, and verbal and written Spanish translation at every meeting. Up to this

point, NSA staff provided these and other forms of organizing support to the PAC in addition to their regular full-time duties. Because it was becoming almost impossible to continue this arrangement, NSA's executive director took the important step of assigning a new social worker with community organizing experience to support the PAC. Although the PAC's work was supposed to take only 25% of her time, this was a major step forward and would lead inexorably to a full-time position.

With the added NSA staff support, the PAC set out to organize a community forum to share what it had learned about PS 64 and listen to parents' and residents' testimony about the major problems in the school. The PAC also conceived of the forum as a vehicle to recruit parents to attend a PAC demonstration at the community school board meeting scheduled for the following week. Through a multi-pronged outreach strategy that included leafleting outside the school and within the NSA development, extensive phone banking from the NSA office, and presentations at local churches, the PAC drew 70 parents to the forum. At the forum, PAC leaders made a presentation on parent rights and the major findings from the PS 64 Annual School Report. The PAC then divided the participants into small groups, led by trained PAC facilitators, to discuss their concerns about PS 64. By providing useful information and encouraging parents to talk with and listen to one another, the PAC established itself as a very different organization than the parent association. A seemingly small technique -- breaking into small groups for discussion -- encouraged parents to view each other as sources of knowledge and support,

helped build relationships *among* people and facilitated their investment in the organization. The forum succeeded in attracting new members and projecting the PAC's name into the community.

At this point, NSA and the PAC reached a critical juncture in their relationship. For most of the parents, the demonstration at the upcoming school board meeting represented the first time they would participate in a collective action against a local power structure. That produced a level of nervousness and doubt reflected in their fear, "will anything happen to me or my child?" Simultaneously, NSA was developing a proposal for submission to the federal government to create a college access program for neighborhood youth. The proposal required the cooperation and support of the district superintendent. PAC members were aware of this, and waited anxiously to see if NSA would back down from its strong support of the PAC. At the last planning meeting before the demonstration, NSA's executive director pledged that NSA would follow the PAC's lead. He said that the parents and their struggle to improve PS 64 would not be sacrificed for the proposal; they would remain two separate issues. A significant level of trust was solidified that night between members of the PAC and NSA. As one PAC member said, "our fight was their fight. They really respond to the community. I lived here for 24 years and for the first time, it felt like a community." It was clear that PAC members were in full control of their organizing agenda, ranging from approving all letters sent to school system officials to choosing the tactics to be used at their public actions. NSA's public declaration that it was prepared to weather whatever potential storms the PAC's

work might create encouraged the members to take the risks their words and actions demanded.

The PAC was ready to make the failure of PS 64 a *public and community* issue, and chose the community school board meeting for its first action because the superintendent had continued to refuse to meet with them but was required to attend this meeting. Thirty PAC members carried colorful signs and placards into the meeting, and three members spoke for the PAC about the unacceptably low reading scores and several other issues identified at the community forum, including safety and textbooks. While not yet presenting specific demands for change, the PAC was publicly holding the superintendent accountable for the school's ongoing failure. Once again the PAC was told to get involved in the parent association. Despite this disheartening response, the experience provided members with a glimpse of their collective power and inspired them to keep working together. At their next weekly meeting, PAC members began discussing how to expand their base of community support and put additional pressure on the district.

Campaign to Remove the Principal: Organizing Around the Biggest Issue First

Traditionally, organizing proceeds from the identification of a general problem that gets narrowed down to a specific issue for which a demand(s) is then developed. Up to this point, the PAC's work was concentrated in the problem identification stage. The PAC began to hold *breakfast meetings* in NSA's office for parents of children who attend PS 64, small gatherings in which parents shared

their individual stories about the school. Parents described instances of their children being yelled at by teachers and attacked by other children. They talked about some teachers yelling so loud at children that parents could hear them at the other end of a long hallway. Particularly disturbing were the incidents of strangers wandering the school's hallways. Parents also described the implementation of the school's new educational programs, including several reading initiatives aimed at children struggling with literacy, in much more critical terms than the superintendent and principal, who boasted about them as evidence of the school being on the right track. The parents related numerous instances of new enrichment classes not being held or meeting so infrequently they were almost meaningless, because of very high teacher turnover and absenteeism. Finally, parents highlighted the role of the principal, describing him as inaccessible and disrespectful. They said he kept parents waiting for long periods, cancelled numerous meetings, talked down to them and showed little empathy, expressed low expectations for the children because of their class background, and blamed parents for the low level of student achievement.

The breakfast meetings helped recruit new parents to the PAC and gave the group a fuller picture of what was happening inside the school. To the PAC's frustration, however, no single issue emerged that galvanized the group to action. The thread that did emerge was a school climate that lacked coherence and leadership. There was a growing feeling that the principal was a major part of the problem, but members were reluctant to target him given how difficult it seemed to remove a principal.

To help PAC members get a fresh perspective on how to proceed in its work, IESP staff suggested that PAC members visit a school with the same student demographics that had experienced substantial improvement. With IESP's assistance, the PAC arranged a visit to a school that had previously been on the New York State Education's Department's list of lowest performing schools, referred to as Schools Under Registration Review (SURR). What could the PAC learn from that school to help it develop specific demands for improving PS 64? Through a tour of classrooms and a meeting with the principal, PAC members saw a clean well-kept building, an orderly but lively environment, physically comfortable and inviting classrooms, vibrant examples of student work on display throughout the school, well-stocked classroom libraries, students actively engaged in class projects, and a respectful tone with which teachers addressed children. One PAC member summarized her impression by saying: "When you walked into that school, you knew you were walking into a learning place." All of these things contrasted sharply with the climate and conditions in PS 64. However, one thing stood out for the visiting PAC members: the role of the principal. By all accounts and their own observations, the principal had provided the leadership that raised the expectations of the school, held staff accountable, and synergized the various elements identified above into an effective school culture. While the school was not perfect and had much room for continued improvement, the visit brought the issue of school leadership into sharp focus. It was the culminating event that galvanized the PAC into its first issue campaign. The PAC was now ready to demand the removal of the principal.

In community organizing terms, there was no question that the removal of the principal was *urgent* for the parents. There was no question it was *specific*. But was it *winnable*? (Staples, 1997). IESP and NSA staff repeatedly raised concerns about the PAC taking on such a major issue. To their knowledge, no community group had successfully organized residents to remove the principal of a public school in NYC, let alone such a young organization like the PAC that had no "victories" under its belt. Additionally, only four months remained in the school year. Was that enough time to wage such a difficult campaign? Despite these concerns, the members of the PAC were convinced that their children's school would not improve with the current principal and that, therefore, they had no choice but to fight for his removal.

Once the group reached this consensus, the members realized they needed to develop an effective strategy. The research they had been conducting over the last several months with the help of the IESP identified several of the elements. First, they had learned that the District Superintendent and the New York City Schools Chancellor had the authority to remove a principal; they became the *targets* of the campaign. They also discovered the organizing *handle* they would consistently use as the justification and rationale for their demand. As part of the change in legislation governing the NYC school system enacted by the New York State Legislature several years prior to the PAC campaign, the Chancellor was given the authority to remove principals for *persistent educational failure*. PAC members decided that if PS 64 did not meet this criteria, few schools in NYC did.

The PAC developed the remainder of the plan at a Saturday all-day retreat facilitated by IESP staff in which 20 members participated. The plan included the identification of community and political allies, a parent outreach strategy and a series of public actions to escalate the pressure on the superintendent and chancellor. The PAC kicked off the campaign with a petition drive asking for the removal of the principal. Through "old-fashioned" organizing techniques, including door-to-door canvassing, Sunday presentations at local churches, and standing outside the school and subway stations, the PAC secured over 1,100 signatures on the petition.

At the next community school board meeting, the PAC presented those petitions to the superintendent along with dozens of incident reports describing a wide range of negative experience parents had with the school. The action was covered in the local and citywide press. But once again, the superintendent responded more as a bureaucrat than as a leader committed to significantly changing the priorities and power dynamics within the district. Rather than validating parents' concerns about the school's poor educational performance, she retreated to the safety of the system's bureaucratic and historically inadequate regulatory mechanisms. She stated she would evaluate the principal of PS 64 at the same time all principals in the district would be evaluated -- at the end of the school year. The PAC remained both frustrated and determined.

Given the superintendent's refusal to remove the principal, the PAC turned its attention to the NYC Schools Chancellor. The Chancellor and the members of the Board of Education hold a public meeting once a month. In a show of

strength, the PAC organized 50 parents and community residents to travel from the Bronx to downtown Brooklyn in the middle of rush hour to attend the 6pm Board of Education meeting. They presented the Chancellor with their petitions in a highly personalized and dramatic presentation. Having read that the Chancellor was an avid gardener, the PAC presented him with two plants, one flourishing and one wilting, and two watering cans, one that had no leaks and one filled with holes. They urged the Chancellor to provide the kind of nurturing represented by the intact watering can so that their children could grow into productive and educated citizens. The action, which did not produce an official response from the Chancellor, resulted in continued press coverage of the PAC's campaign.

The PAC hoped to apply additional pressure to the Chancellor by reaching out to those sectors that could influence him; in organizing terms, these are deemed *secondary or indirect targets* (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 1991). With assistance from IESP staff, the PAC hired a consultant to write a report entitled, *Persistent Educational Failure and the Case for New Leadership at PS 64*. It was distributed widely to education policymakers, politicians, advocates and the news media.

PAC members were beginning to feel discouraged as the 1997-98 school year was winding down and school system officials continued to ignore their call for the removal of the principal. As the PAC was struggling to determine its next action in the campaign, it received shocking news: the principal of PS 64 had resigned.

What Has Happened Since

There was no doubt in the minds of PAC members that their work was central to the principal's resignation. It turned out that the resignation was actually a demotion to his previous position as assistant principal; the superintendent assigned him to another school in the district. The PAC quickly turned its attention to the selection of the new principal.

The appointment of principals in NYC is governed by a twenty-page Board of Education regulation commonly referred to as the C-30 process. It calls for the establishment of a school-based committee with teachers and a majority of parents that reviews resumes, interviews candidates and selects a list of five finalists from which the superintendent chooses the new principal. PAC members were elected to a majority of the parent seats but did not constitute a majority of the C-30 committee.

By joining the committee, the PAC confronted the dilemmas of going *inside* the system. The C-30 regulation requires committee members to sign a confidentiality pledge that prohibits them from discussing anything about the process with any individual not on the committee. The intent is to keep negative "politics" out of the process-- corruption and nepotism in particular. As a result, PAC members on the C-30 committee did not discuss what was occurring with other PAC members or at the weekly membership meetings. Consequently, the PAC lost the opportunity for a *participatory politics* in which parents and the community engage in a dialogue with school staff to create a vision for the school

they want and the leadership necessary to realize it. The PAC campaign to remove the principal was highly participatory and transparent. The C-30 process was the antithesis -- highly secretive and involving only 15 people in a school with over 1,000 children. The PAC as an organization was effectively sidelined.

The C-30 process concluded with the superintendent's selection of a candidate who was not the first choice of the PAC members on the committee. After an intense debate, the PAC chose not to challenge the decision, given the slim odds of convincing the Chancellor to overturn it. Instead, the PAC began organizing around an issue that came up repeatedly in their conversations with parents -- school safety. While the new principal initially responded favorably to the PAC's safety proposals, PAC members grew increasingly frustrated with her inability to implement them effectively. For example, supervision of the lunchroom improved for a short period after the PAC raised the issue. Within several weeks, however, the lunchroom reverted to its previous level of chaos.

In addition, the principal appointed school personnel to several positions, including parent liaison and dean for discipline, for which the parents believed they lacked meaningful experience and the requisite skills. She also introduced several educational programs into the school that PAC members felt were not justified based on the available evaluation data. While this principal was more accessible and possessed better interpersonal skills than the previous one, she lacked the combination of strong leadership skills and educational vision needed to turn around a school that has been failing for twenty years. Six months into her

tenure, in the Fall of 1999, PAC members were feeling that nothing substantial had changed in the school.

For the purposes of this paper, the narrative concludes here. Over the last year, the PAC has continued to organize with passion and determination. Fifteen to twenty members attend weekly membership meetings and many more come out for forums and demonstrations. Additionally, NSA has been successful in raising money from foundations and now has four organizers working with the PAC. In part because of this increase in staffing, and because of the consistently low performance of most District 9 schools, the PAC recently initiated a district-wide campaign. Through a highly participatory process involving parents and neighborhood residents, the PAC developed a four-point platform that calls for the adoption of specific programs for professional development, conflict resolution training, school evaluations and relationships with universities. The PAC organized a 100-person community forum with residents and local politicians to build support for its platform, and then met with the Chancellor and the local superintendent to urge its implementation. Over the last four years, the PAC has emerged as a clear political force in its school district, and has garnered a citywide reputation among community groups for its effective work and unwavering determination to improve student achievement.

Implications

The PAC's success in organizing for the PS 64 principal's removal was a stunning achievement recognized by other CBOs throughout New York City. While that victory has not yet resulted in significant improvement in the school, the PAC has had marked success in strengthening the capacity of the community to struggle for its needs and vision. A cadre of indigenous leaders has developed with the knowledge and confidence to effectively question and challenge school system officials about school performance outcomes and strategies to improve student learning. These leaders feel they have the right and the responsibility to contest the prevailing distribution of power in their community as well as in their own organization. They are becoming *subjects* of history:

Man's ontological vocation ...is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively. This world to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a given reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked and solved. It is the material to be used by man to create history...each man wins back his right to say his own word, to name the world. (Freire, 1982, pp.12-13)

As a result, the PAC is now part of the political landscape of District 9. It is a known force among community residents, school system officials and local politicians.

The commitment and quality of its leadership is one of the factors that explains how, despite the challenges it has faced, the PAC has sustained a high level of organizing and commitment from parents and community residents. Another critical factor lies in the relationship between the PAC and NSA. Before the PAC was established, NSA had already developed a high level of trust with

residents based on the quality of its housing maintenance and social services, as well as the respect it demonstrated toward individual tenants. As one resident and PAC member described NSA: "They care about people. They just don't collect rent. If you have a problem, they look to see how they can solve it *with you*" (emphasis added). NSA had improved the quality of life in the neighborhood and expanded its stock of social capital.

Using these "features of social organization, such as networks, norms and social trust..." as a foundation, NSA's support of the PAC's community organizing work represented its first deliberate effort to develop the grassroots political capital of the community (Putnam, 1994, p.6). Early in the PAC's development, NSA proved its commitment to genuine parent empowerment when it supported the PAC in the first demonstration at the community school board meeting at precisely the time it needed the district's support for a federal proposal. That commitment has never wavered; NSA has never tried to control the PAC. On the other hand, the PAC has never engaged in unprincipled or inaccurate attacks on school officials, which might place NSA in a difficult political position. The result is a remarkably high degree of trust between the members of the PAC and the leadership and staff of NSA. Both remain firmly committed to continuing the struggle for better public schools in the neighborhood.

The trust and safety that exists between the PAC and NSA is mirrored in the relationships *among* PAC members. In addition to its clear and simple decision-making process -- all decisions are made at weekly membership meetings -- the PAC demonstrates consistent respect toward parents and residents.

The PAC does not organize around issues without first engaging in a series of individual and group dialogues with parents and residents to hear what their concerns are or to test out possible new organizing issues. It is this approach that "...builds unbreakable bonds between people, creating organizational sinew..." enabling the PAC to remain strong in the face of ongoing resistance from those who hold power in the school system (McNeil, 1995, p.22).

There are several other implications for the expanding field of community organizing for school improvement that flow out of the PAC's work:

- CBOs entering this work need a long-term view of school change that recognizes significant institutional change may take five to ten years. Such a long-term view will promote realistic expectations, prevent premature withdrawal when things seem bleak, and necessitate a fundraising strategy that is of equal duration;
- For CBOs new to organizing and education, the support of the executive director is key. The work represents too radical a shift in how the organization carries out its work to manage it effectively without the strong commitment of the leadership;
- The natural starting point for CBOs lies in their existing relationships with parents and neighborhood residents, whether it be in an after-school programs, day care centers, or housing that it manages. Interestingly, approximately 25-30% of active PAC members did not have children in PS 64. But as one active member put it, "my son didn't attend PS 64 but he was in the NSA after-school program. NSA really serves the community and I am part of the community." Additional community outreach strategies should be developed to supplement these initial ones; and
- The role of training in school organizing may be more critical than in other kinds of organizing. While the limitations of standardized testing should be acknowledged, school data can be a powerful tool for legitimating parents' concerns. As the PAC experience points out, rather than demoralize parents and make them feel hopeless, it can galvanize them into action. In addition, visits to successful schools can inspire and inform parents' sense of what to fight for.

This latter point is connected to the role of technical assistance. The work of IESP's Community Involvement Program with NSA and other groups in NYC and other large cities suggests that school improvement is among the most difficult issues around which to organize. The school systems in which these groups operate are governed by complex structures that cede authority to several different bodies and individuals; this makes it difficult for organizing groups to define targets and hold them accountable. Additionally, schools with a history of failure often have dysfunctional cultures that are quite resistant to change and can easily derail school reform initiatives. Moreover, strategies for transforming and building the capacity of individual low-performing schools often bump up against system-wide barriers over which individual community groups have little power. Given these obstacles, CBOs that have little experience with community organizing techniques and/or strategies for school reform will benefit from external support developed through dialogue between the group and a technical assistance provider. IESP's work with NSA and the PAC was guided by respect for their experience and perspective as well as a commitment to finding collaborative and participatory ways for IESP's expertise to inform how the work developed.

The PAC's work also raises several important dilemmas for the field. The PAC story would constitute an unequivocal success if the removal of the principal had spurred an effective school improvement strategy that resulted in significant advances in student achievement. In actuality, the story reflects the overall stage of development of the new field of community organizing for school

improvement, which is only about ten years old. There are numerous examples of organizing work that have resulted in the removal of perceived obstacles to change within a school or district, but there are fewer examples in which that has been followed by the successful implementation of a school improvement strategy resulting in the transformation of the school into a thriving learning community. The continuing work of the New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee is no exception.

The PAC started from outside the system in as much as it was situated within an independent organization not part of the school system. Yet it did not start out making demands on school officials; the PAC began with questions. The defensive response of the various officials within the system -- principal, superintendent, community school board, and parent association leaders -- propelled the PAC into a more confrontational posture. Could that dynamic have been avoided? As long as the PAC focused on student outcome questions, how likely is it that school officials would have reacted differently?

There is clearly a significant tradeoff for a CBO working outside the political parameters established and recognized by the school system. That system labels the group as "outsiders" and defines them as illegitimate. The group is then mired in a constant struggle for parent/community access to and accountability from the schools. This dynamic also presents enormous difficulty in building relationships with teachers. When a CBO targets a school or district for poor student outcomes, no matter how hard the group tries not to indict the staff, the teachers often interpret it as an attack on their competence and

professionalism. That was the case with the PAC. Can that be avoided? How can CBOs reach out to teachers to begin a constructive dialogue about school improvement? Should CBOs reach out to teachers at the beginning of the organizing process? Can CBOs and teacher unions forge collaborative relationships to advance school improvement? The answers to these questions are critical to the next stage of development for the field. They will determine whether community organizing to improve low-performing schools in low-income urban neighborhoods is a meaningful alternative to the official parent groups established by the school system, as well as to the parent choice paradigm presented by conservative forces as the market solution to public education's problems.

The history of community organizing has been shaped by a "direct and dialectical relationship between the national context and local community organizing efforts...what happened at the national level substantially determined the overall nature of community organizing" (Fisher, 1994b, p.12). Current school organizing is no exception. While this paper explores the role of local community organizing efforts to improve failing public schools, it also reveals its limitations. Without a mass social movement to challenge the prevailing distribution of educational resources and power, neighborhood-based school improvement organizing in low-income urban communities faces a tough road. The development of the political will to ensure a significant improvement in public education in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color must build on, but go beyond the local efforts of community-based organizations like New Settlement Apartments.

In NSA's case, there are hopeful signs that this movement may be emerging. With the IESP's assistance, NSA has reached out to six other CBOs in District 9 to form a CBO collaborative for school improvement. Each CBO will organize PAC-like parent organizing groups at the schools in their section of the district. Additionally, these CBO-affiliated parent organizing groups will form a federation to address district-wide issues. The collaborative is planning a Spring 2001 parent conference to publicly announce the formation of the collaborative and is raising the funds to hire organizers.

The next level of movement building is taking place at the citywide level. The NYC Parent Organizing Consortium is a five year-old coalition of ten community organizing groups working on system-wide policy reform, with the NSA Parent Action Committee as the newest member. The hope is that the new parent organizing groups that emerge out of the District 9 CBO collaborative will also join the Consortium. Finally, a new statewide coalition composed of a wide range and number of community groups, unions, and advocacy groups has emerged to demand a significant increase in New York State's investment in public education.

Public education is currently at the top of the nation's political agenda. While conservative forces have launched an effective attack on public education's capacity for improvement, there are opportunities to develop a progressive alternative. As the teacher unions increasingly recognize that the improvement of low-performing schools is linked to the future of *public* education, can they become a more effective force for school reform? With the significant rebuilding of the housing stock in many low-income urban neighborhoods, can community-based organizations act on their understanding that the long-term health of their neighborhoods is inextricably linked to the quality of the public schools by organizing parents and residents into a potent political force? Are the more progressive sectors of the labor movement ready to organize to make the preservation and improvement of public education for their members and working people in general an issue of social justice? Can those strands come together to

ensure that American public education delivers on its historic promise to provide a quality education for all our children?

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