
ACROSS THE UNITED STATES,
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES IN MOST URBAN
DISTRICTS ARE BETWEEN FIFTY AND SIXTY PERCENT.

 **A COMMUNITY
CONCERN**

A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT COMMUNITIES WHO
REFUSE TO ACCEPT THE SYSTEM'S FAILURE,
AND ARE WORKING FOR CHANGE

A COMMUNITY CONCERN

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INTRODUCTION

A Community Concern provides an up-close look at three community-organizing efforts -- a vital form of civic participation in which youth and adults actively work to improve their local communities -- each focused on building the capacity of parents, students, community members, and educators to affect positive change in their local schools and school districts.

Although the three groups employ different strategies and have identified different solutions to the challenges facing students and schools, they share common concerns and characteristics. In particular, each focuses on developing community leaders who have the capacity to research and propose solutions for improving schools and the collective power to push officials to implement their recommendations.

Throughout the country, community-organizing groups, like Oakland Community Organizations, Boston Parent Organizing Network, and Sistas and Brothas United, the youth group of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (the three groups featured in A Community Concern), are transforming their schools and school districts. They're organizing for a wide-range of reforms, including improved home-school partnerships, safer schools, better supports for struggling students, and for the creation of new schools that are grounded in strong adult-student relationships and challenging and engaging curriculum. They're questioning the status quo and demonstrating the power of organized communities to be catalysts for change and true partners in school reform efforts. This work not only improves schools and communities, it fundamentally strengthens our democracy by engaging a broader cross section of people and communities in the democratic process.



A Community Concern is coming at an important time, as a growing body of research supports what parents, organizers, and progressive educators have known anecdotally for years -- that organized communities have a critical role to play in transforming schools to meet the needs of all students. In their 2009 book, *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools*, based on their six-year study, Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister detail the unique and powerful role that community organizing plays in school reform efforts and in reshaping the lives of the young people and adults engaged in the work.

"In addition to the skills of campaign planning, parents, youth, and community members of organizing groups develop new knowledge about schools and the political system,

new aspirations for themselves and their families, and crucially, a deep sense of their own capacity to create change through collective community action," write Mediratta, et al. "When educators and organizing groups share reform priorities and understand each other's cultures and methodologies... they can forge sophisticated, mutually accountable collaborations that provide a powerful platform for reform."

At a time when much attention is focused on the need for dramatic and sustained improvements in our public schools, especially those serving low-income students of color, we hope this film serves as an inspiration and as a guide for local communities eager to harness the too-often untapped and undervalued potential of ordinary people to develop and implement a shared vision of what it means to provide all students with a quality education.

USING THIS GUIDE

We've created this guide to provide entry points for viewers interested in learning more about the impact of community organizing on school reform. Each of the sections is geared towards one of the four core audiences of *A Community Concern*: students, parents, educators, and community organizers. However, because the material in each section is relevant to all those interested in improving education, we encourage you to explore beyond the section written for your particular demographic.

The guide is written to support viewings and discussions in a range of school, congregation, and community settings. Here are some tips for getting the most out of your viewing and discussion:

- Before organizing the event, review the film in its entirety to determine which section or sections will be most appropriate for your audience to view.
- Ideally, audiences will, at a minimum, view the opening sections of all three stories to get a feel for each of the organizing efforts before viewing the specific sections recommended for review and discussion in the guide.
- For larger gatherings, consider breaking into discussion groups to facilitate deeper conversations and sharing.
- Designate a facilitator for each small group to keep the discussion moving and ensure that all participants have an opportunity to share.
- Allow one to two hours for the viewing and discussion.



WHAT'S NEXT: TAKING ACTION

Before you conclude your event, ask participants to identify some concrete next steps they can take -- individually, or as a group -- after seeing some of the challenges and successes in the stories told in *A Community Concern*. The second half of this guide features personal reflections, written by organizers from each of the groups featured in the documentary. These contributions provide personal insight into the thinking of key members of the three organizing efforts and an update on the status of the local work. As with the film itself, we hope these writings stimulate conversation and prompt action among those interested in making a positive difference in the schools in their neighborhoods..

For more information and resources on community organizing for school reform, visit: www.acommunityconcern.com

HOSTING A SCREENING

Join others around the country who are using A Community Concern to become engaged in the critical issues in education today. The film is already providing motivation for new people to get involved, and others to continue their work in this demanding field. Viewing A Community Concern with friends and colleagues can make a difference in what happens next. People tell stories that relate to things they have seen in the film, helping to stimulate a discussion about ways to collaborate to create educational environments where all have a stake in the outcomes.

Watching a film with other people, sharing emotional moments, and raising questions helps establish common ground. Engaging in a facilitated conversation afterwards sets the stage for taking action.

You can host a screening in your organization, community center, local school, public library or at home using our tools and DVD available online at www.acommunityconcern.org.

Step 1: What is the Goal of your screening?

Identifying the purpose and desired outcome is a key step in creating your event. What do you want to come out of this event? What kinds of conversations are you hoping to have? What do the participants want to leave with after the screening?

Consider the information you would like to capture

once the event is over and how you will use it moving forward.

Step 2: Who is the Audience you want to attract?

Identify your audience. What is the size of the group you are planning for? Are you going to show this film strictly to parents, students, educators, community members, policy advocates, elected officials or a mixed group? Will the audience members be familiar with the subject of the film, or will this be new to them? Knowing who is taking part in your event will help determine how you design the event.

How will you track who will be attending? An RSVP can help you know who is intending to come.

Step 3: How will you design the Program?

Pre-screen. Watch the film in its entirety first, noting the sections that the film is divided into. The film is divided into chapters to facilitate using it for varied purposes.

Will your program be a screening and open discussion; a small-group workshop; class session; organization retreat, or fundraiser? Do you want to have a panel or a speaker as part of the event?

Choose to show the whole film, or select relevant sections or clips. Note down your own ideas and questions / activities as you watch the film. You can use the Viewer Guide suggestions, or build your own program.



Step 4: How will you Prepare for the program?

Bring in a few members of your target audience to help determine the most effective format and share ideas. For larger events, create a small committee to share the responsibilities. Partner organizations, speakers, activities and interactive opportunities are all great tools to encourage constructive thought and action, and they help to gain audience and outreach opportunities. You want participants to leave your event feeling empowered to take the next step. If you are inviting local organizers and community groups to attend the event, ask them to speak about ways in which the audience can be involved in the issue on a local or national level. You could invite the filmmaker or a person featured in the film to present. Use our Viewer Guide for ideas on activities.



Can you serve coffee or soft drinks? Are you able to provide childcare? Plan so that people will be on hand to help set up and clean up after the activity. Is there someone who can take some photos during the event?

The structure of the event will often change or adjust organically, but feeling as prepared as possible will allow you to get the most out of the event. Ask participants to identify some concrete next steps they can take - individually, or as a group - to begin implementing some of the lessons learned through the stories told in A Community Concern.



Step 5: How will you Spread the Word?

Emails, blogs, announcements, flyers, phone chain - get the important information to your target audience. For larger public events, download a customizable flyer from our website: www.acommunityconcern.org/downloads. Please send us the details so we can help promote your event: info@acomunityconcern.org

Think about your target audience when considering outreach approach - consider both online and offline strategies. How many potential audience members use email regularly, and how many rarely use it?

Step 6: How did your Event go?

Did people enjoy the activity? Were your objectives met? Do you have any success stories or generate ideas on how to improve for your next event? We have feedback forms online and in this Viewer Guide to give to your audience to fill out after the screening. Send us some quotes and summary information, and together we can track the success and impact of our work.

ENJOY!

SECTION 1: FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

Activity 1: When the System Fails

As a parent, when our child struggles in school, we often don't recognize that his or her challenges are part of bigger issues facing the school or the school district. We sometimes blame ourselves, our children, or their teachers. In this section, Oakland parent Emma Paulino recalls her transformation when she realized that the problems facing her son, MacEdward, were the result of a broken Oakland school system.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 2, watch the section that runs from 7:56 to 8:55 and then discuss the following questions:

- Have you ever found yourself uncertain about how to distinguish between a concern or challenge facing your child, and an issue that is the result of a problem with the system?
- What would help you to better understand the difference between a challenge facing your child and a systemic problem?
- How would your actions be different if you understood the problem you are experiencing to be the result of systemic issues with the school or district?

Activity 2: Change Takes Time and Requires Trust

Often, the challenges facing our schools and our districts are so huge, and opinions and practices so



entrenched that the pace of progress feels slow and the opportunities for long-term change feel bleak. In this section, organizer James Mumm discusses the importance of being able to see growth towards desired goals, even if initially things seem to have fallen short. Both Mumm and Leadership Institute Principal Marta Colon speak to the need to develop relationships of trust and partnership as groups build power and create positive change.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 9, watch the section that runs from 1:10:15 to 1:11:26, and then discuss the following questions:

- How has their relationship with a community-organizing group enabled parents and students in the Bronx to create positive change in the district and to form a partnership with the school?
- How would your local school be transformed by such a partnership?

Activity 3: Creating Schools Where Parents Feel Welcome

In 2005, Boston Public Schools, responding to the organizing work of the Boston Parent Organizing Project, created a pilot program to establish family and community liaisons in 15 schools. In this section, parent Jurett Weathers and school and district staff share their views on the critical role coordinators play in supporting parents and building their capacity to support their children and partner with the school.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 4, watch the section that runs from 28:25 to 31:31, and then discuss the following questions:

- Do you feel welcome and supported at your child's school?
- How would the presence of a family and community engagement coordinator, such as those hired in Boston, change the way you interact with staff at your child's school?
- What characteristics would you want to see in a family and community engagement coordinator? What should their primary responsibilities be?

Jurett Weathers, Parent, Boston

Organizing helped me to discover the strength within myself. That knowledge carries over to whatever I do in my life. Organizing also helped me to understand that as parents we do have a voice. We have the right to express our views about the type of education our children should be receiving and then to ask for help and support in getting it for them. That's what BPON taught me and gave me. Our work (to get family and community coordinators) changed the atmosphere in schools. For the first time, parents felt like they had somewhere to go. It changed the culture -- and not just for our school, but in many different communities.

Emma Paulino, Parent, Oakland

Before I joined Oakland Community Organizations, I was very concerned about my son, but I didn't have the language or the skills to know how best to advocate for him. I spoke with everyone at the school, but it didn't seem to make a difference for my son. Through OCO, I had a way to voice my concerns and I learned how to channel them to make a difference—not just for my own son, but for all students.



SECTION 2: STUDENTS

Activity 1: “You Get What You Expect”

Students respond to the cues they are given by the adults in their lives. They know when parents and teachers have high expectations and when they doubt the ability of a young person to be successful. In this segment, parents and educators in Oakland reflect on the profound impact on students when teachers convey high expectations for their success.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 5, watch the section that runs from 33:55 to 38:40 and then discuss the following questions:

- Have you had teachers who, through their words and actions, led you to believe you were not going to be successful in school?
- Think about one teacher who believed in you and your potential. What did he or she do to demonstrate this commitment? What difference did this make for you?
- How could you help adults understand the critical role their attitudes and beliefs have on your ability to succeed in school?

Activity 2: Charting a Path to Graduation

Each year in schools and districts around the country, bright young people leave school without graduating. Boredom, the absence of strong adult role models, overcrowded classrooms, and teaching that is geared towards simply passing a test are just a few of the factors that contribute to a student dropping out. In this segment, Fernando Carlo shares how his work with Sistas and Brothas United gave him the confidence and determination to finish high school.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 3, watch the section that runs from 20:57 to 22:22, and then discuss the following questions:

- Have you or one of your friends considered dropping out of school?
- What kind of advice would you offer a friend who is thinking about dropping out of school?”
- If you were able to participate in an organizing effort like that of Sistas and Brothas United, how do you think this experience might change how you view

school or how you think about your future and your ability to be a leader in your community?

Activity 3: Parent and Caregiver Engagement: The Big Difference

Decades of research have demonstrated the positive impact of parent engagement on students' success in school. Too often, though, schools aren't places where parents feel comfortable and welcome. In this segment, parents and educators from Boston share how the welcoming environment they're creating with family outreach coordinators is resulting in more parent involvement and better support for students.



Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 4, watch the section that runs from 30:18 to 32:18 and then discuss the following questions:

- Does your school welcome parent involvement and seek to partner with parents? What are the signs that parents feel welcome? How could your school be more welcoming to parents?

- Think about times when there have been caring adults, besides your teachers, supporting you at school. What impact has this support had on your outlook and your confidence?
- How could schools be more supportive of parents and caregivers?

MacEdward Paulino, Student, Oakland

Attending Oakland's new small schools made me grow as a person and as a student. Through the small schools I realized that there are very different types of schools, with different views about teaching and about learning. In the small school, I was surrounded by adults who knew and believed in me. They worked with me, told me I could go to college, and helped me find the right path to get there. When I was at the large high school I didn't have that support and guidance. I felt lost and confused about what I would do after graduation. I knew college would be a good next step, but I didn't know how to get there. That support makes a huge difference for all students, even those who are doing well in school.

Yorman Nunez, Student, Bronx

I dropped out of high school my freshman year. When I decided to go to college, I used everything I learned through organizing to help me reach that goal. If it weren't for organizing, I would have never thought of going to college. I always thought that there was a standard way of doing things, and that I had to subscribe to that process, even if it didn't work for me. Organizing helped me to think outside of the box.

We also transformed our idea of what education is. I used to think if you have an expansive vocabulary, it meant that you were educated. Now I realize that being educated also means being someone who stands up for himself, and for others. It means having the intelligence to maneuver through the political environment to make change. Those people are exceptional. They are leaders in our community. That is what education should be building--inspiring people to be productive citizens.

SECTION 3: EDUCATORS

Activity 1: “You Get What You Expect”

Consciously or not, educators are constantly sending messages to students -- messages about high expectations, support, and trust or messages that undermine students' confidence and leave them feeling undervalued and unsupported. A school or district culture of low expectations can create a sense of hopelessness among students, parents, and educators. In this segment, parents and educators in Oakland reflect on the profound impact for students of being surrounded by caring teachers with high expectations for their success.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 5, watch the section that runs from 33:55 to 38:40 and then discuss the following questions:

- In what ways are you sending parents and students the message that you believe in students' ability to perform at high levels?
- Reflect back on your own K-12 education experience. Was there an educator who made a positive difference in your life? How did this educator demonstrate his/her belief in and commitment to you? How is this empowering approach evident in the relationships between educators and students in your school today?
- Do you feel there are structures or conditions at your school that need to change in order for the school culture to be more supportive? How would resources and programs be different?

Activity 2: Creating Schools That Welcome, Value Parents

Parents can play a critical role in improving conditions and outcomes in schools, but in order for parents to partner with educators, they must feel valued, respected, and welcomed. In this segment, Boston Principal, Dominic Amara shares how he came to realize that parents did not feel welcome and sup-

ported at his school and discusses how his family and community outreach coordinator helped to change his practices and build a culture of partnerships.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 7, watch the section that runs from 57:26 to 59:46 and then discuss the following questions:

- Are parents welcome partners in your classroom or your school? What are indicators that they feel welcome? What are the signs that some parents may not feel welcome?
- What could you do to make parents feel welcome in your classroom or school?
- Principal Dominic Amara shares in this segment that he was unaware of the messages he was sending to parents. What can you or your colleagues do to better understand how your actions and school policies impact parents?



Activity 3: Adults Who Make a Difference

As an educator, you have the opportunity to make a profound difference in the lives of your students – in and out of school. In this segment, Leadership student Audrey Vivero shares how teacher Cheryl Chisnell provided her with the support and encouragement she needed to be successful.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 8, watch the section that runs from 47:32 to 50:15 and then discuss the following questions:

- When have you made a difference in the life of one of your students? What enabled you to make that personal connection?
- What are the systemic barriers to developing a personal relationship with your students?
- What programmatic changes would support more personal relationships between students and staff?
- What could you do personally to deepen your relationship with students?

Cheryl Chisnell, Teacher, Northwest Bronx

As an educator, I always felt like it was through math that I would connect to students and that through math students would realize their own power. Through our organizing, however, I realized that students can realize their potential through anything that affects their lives directly. Organizing changed my priorities as a teacher. I realized I had to connect with the student first, then we could get to the academics. I realized we had to have a relationship. It couldn't all be about the math.

Larissa Adams, Principal, Oakland

For me personally, the biggest impact of working with Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) was feeling less isolated as an educator. Our work with OCO gave us the opportunity to connect with parents and with other educators and to realize, 'Oh my goodness, they have the same goal we do. Together, we can change the system.'

Because of organizing, I realized someone else cared. Parents cared. Community members cared. Organizers cared. I began to feel less burned out. I started to feel like I could stick with teaching for a long time because I was working with people with the same goals.

Because of the small schools, there's definitely been a culture shift in the District, with more and more movement towards a philosophy that departments must serve the needs of schools and kids. That shift was started because of OCO and small schools.

Karen Harris, Family and Community Outreach Coordinator, Boston

Organizing has taught parents in our community how to get information and how to use that information to impact educational outcomes for their children. It's empowered them to believe that their opinions matter. In certain communities, families know how to advocate on behalf of their children. They know how to work the system. Our families struggle with that.

Organizing is also about accountability. People have to be held accountable for the education they are providing children. That's what exists in

suburban communities, but it's often missing in our community. Few of our parents have those skills to hold schools accountable. Organizing gives them those skills and teaches them how to make change happen.

The work of Boston Parent Organizing Network (BPON) to get parent and family coordinators in the schools has made a big difference. In schools where there are coordinators, parents are getting more information and they are more aware of their ability to speak up and share their views. That experience carries over when they go to a new school, too, even if the new school doesn't have a coordinator.

On a district level, we've begun to see a shift and a new focus on engaging families and communities in efforts to improve schools and student achievement. Although there is still some resistance, this focus has become more accepted throughout the district. Not everyone is a believer, but it takes a while to make changes to an entire system.

SECTION 4: FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

Activity 1: Relationships Matter

In Oakland, as in many school districts, local schools face a myriad of challenges – from aging facilities to unhealthy and inadequate lunches to chronically low student achievement. In this segment, Oakland organizers have brought together a group of angry and frustrated parents to discuss their concerns with school and district staff. After years of mounting distrust, the gathering becomes more about pointing fingers than solving problems.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 2, watch the section that runs from 3:26 to 5:43 and then discuss the following questions:

- What are key characteristics of strong, respectful relationships based on shared priorities and values?
- To what degree does the success of your local work require the building of respectful relationships

between parents, students, community leaders and school and district officials?

Activity 2: The Power of Youth

In the Bronx, parents and community members have supported the work of a youth-led organizing effort to open and then try to find a permanent home for a new high school. In this segment, youth and adults take their concerns to the New York City Department of Education where they challenge the administration's facilities planning based on a 36 percent graduation rate.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 6, watch the section that runs from 51:10 to 54:29 and then discuss the following questions:

- What unique perspectives and abilities do young people bring to organizing for school reform?
- How can adults – parents, organizers, and teachers – provide young people with the support they need to play a leading role in an organizing effort, rather than simply following a strategy defined by adults?

Activity 3: Challenging the Dominant Culture

In many schools and districts, parents are not viewed as assets – equals with whom educators can partner to make positive changes for students. Too often, the dominant culture is one that discourages parents from voicing their concerns and then collaborating with school and district staff to identify and implement solutions. In this segment, Boston organizer Caprice Taylor-Mendez speaks of her work and that of BPON parents to challenge this culture in Boston Public Schools.

Segment to view and discuss: In Chapter 4, watch the section that runs from 26:41 to 28:05 and then discuss the following questions:

- What is the dominant culture with regard to parent involvement in the schools and districts in which you organize?
- How might schools demonstrate their commitment to including parents in a respectful manner?
- How can your organization communicate this alternative vision to educators?

Emma Paulino, Organizer, Oakland

Through Oakland Community Organizations' organizing work, we not only created new and better schools, but we have raised the expectations of Oakland parents. That is one of our key legacies—parents from the flatlands, even those who aren't part of OCO, expect and demand more from our schools.

This work is about students' lives and their futures. If our children are going to have a better life, they need a good education. We have empowered parents and because of that there is ongoing pressure to continue to improve the schools and the district, especially in the middle and high school level, so that all students have the opportunities to do well go to college, and be successful.

Yorman Nunez, Organizer, Northwest Bronx

Through Sistas and Brothas United, hundreds of youth lives are different. That has an impact on the community. It may not be felt immediately, but as young people in our neighborhoods develop and become leaders, they are better than they were before and our community is better. Some of us will be small business owners and will try to promote cooperation and dignity in the workplace. Some will be teachers or Principals. The people will spread throughout the fabric of the community and we will see the benefit of them for years to come.

OAKLAND'S SMALL SCHOOL REFORM FROM AN ORGANIZER'S POINT OF VIEW

By Liz Sullivan

So many times in organizing, the victory is celebrated while the organizing story is lost. We see the breakthrough moments, but not the hard work, the people and relationships, the vision of society that led to the break-through. Forgetting the story hurts those who live at the margins of society. The poor must constantly learn anew that change is possible.

In urban school districts, the rapid loss of story is even more dismaying. The average tenure of an urban Superintendent is 2½ years, and other top administrators come and go with alarming speed. Most new administrators adopt an attitude of skepticism about any reform that was in place before they arrived. Oakland Community Organization (OCO) has fought to protect and advance the Oakland Small School Reform over and over again as it has been passed from hand to hand, through seven Superintendents and State Administrators over a ten-year period.

Our Children Were Not Learning To Read

The Oakland Small School Reform started in the overcrowded elementary schools of East Oakland in the late 1990's. OCO organizer Matt Hammer kept hearing complaints about the schools as he worked in churches along the International Boulevard corridor. He invited parents to meet, while their children were in catechism class. At first people only complained about dirty bathrooms and fights on the playground, but gradually the painful truth emerged: their children could barely read.

The problem of failing schools feels overwhelming - where does one begin? The role of the organizer is to help slice off a manageable piece of the problem. This is called developing an "issue cut" and it happens through research. The art of community organizing is to stimulate the public imagination about what is possible.

The goal of organizing is to develop leaders, especially in communities that have been rendered invisible and voiceless. Leaders create a vision of change for their community. Any person can be a leader if they are willing to listen to others and to represent

the interests of others, rather than to push their own agenda. A leader is someone who takes responsibility for the things that matter to him or her and is accountable to a larger community.

By the time Matt started meeting with the moms at the Jefferson School, OCO had been organizing on education issues for ten years, focusing on a number of campaigns, some proving more effective than others. In the late 1980's OCO fought to establish a truancy center and a truancy hotline; in the early 1990's OCO worked on career academies and established an Aviation Program at Castlemont High School; in 1994 OCO focused on violence in the junior high schools, demanding that the police prioritize the safety of students, and that the City and School District provide coordinated case management for high risk youth. In 1996 we partnered with the Oakland Education Association (OEA) to create the "Classrooms First" alliance and successfully fought to lower class size. OCO won local funding for "homework centers," and the PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing) California Project won statewide funding for after school programs. But after a decade of serious education organizing, it still felt as if we had barely made a dent.

What happened next changed everything. Matt put the Jefferson parents in the same room with the school custodians. The custodians told the parents that the school building was over-used. It had been built for 750 kids, but housed 1300. Classes were always in session, even in the summer, on a multi-track year round calendar. The custodians were clear: there were too many kids in the school.

Then a teacher gave Matt a book to read: *The Power of Their Ideas*, by Deborah Meier. Meier talks about smallness as a necessary condition for creating relationships of trust among educators, students and families. Strong relationships provide the foundation for powerful learning. This simple yet elegant idea maps beautifully onto the organizing principle that power is product of relationships. If we don't start with a foundation of strong, reciprocal relationships, then all the programs in the world won't make any difference.

An issue cut began to emerge: we needed smaller schools.

The Power of Their Ideas champions not only smallness, but newness. The idea of starting new schools meant we could free ourselves from the factory model schools that had dominated American education for over one hundred years. Autonomy is another concept that OCO distilled from Meier's writing. Important decisions should be made by those closest to the students, the local school community. This idea also maps onto a basic organizing principle: those closest to the problem should be trusted to find the solution.

Together, the Jefferson mothers read the book and imagined creating a new school for their children: what would it look and sound like? What would the children and the adults be doing and saying? What kind of outcomes would the school achieve?

When the Oakland Small School Reform began, I was a leader at the St. Anthony's Church local organizing committee. I also taught kindergarten in a neighboring city. When Matt came to my classroom, and placed a copy of *The Power of Their Ideas* in my hands, I rolled my eyes and groaned, "A school reform book?"

I tried to explain to Matt that the organization should avoid becoming entangled in the ideological battles of school reform. "School reform is a racket that publishing companies use to make money!" I declared. "Teachers barely learn one way of teaching math, when another is introduced; one way of teaching reading, when another becomes the vogue. I am tired of hearing about the next new thing that is going to transform education," I said in exasperation, "Just read it Liz!" He said calmly. "Then we'll talk." But I threw it into the trunk of my car and forgot about it.

Matt invited me to meet Lillian Lopez, a new OCO parent leader from Jefferson Elementary. I was fascinated by the sheer audacity of what Lillian and the other parents were doing -working to create a new

public school from the ground up. This work stemmed from basic principles: schools are the places where the future is shaped, therefore a vision of society must animate schools. Top-down mandates that reward compliance rather than initiative drain both meaning and joy from learning.

These mothers became the first in OCO to create a new school, but they ended up having to start a charter school, the Dolores Huerta Learning Academy, because the opposition they faced from the Jefferson staff, the central office administrators and the teachers' union was unyielding. OCO chose this charter option when we could not make headway inside the public school system.

All the wonderful new public schools, however, created by Oakland Unified School District such as Ascend, Think College Now, International Community School and ACORN Woodland, owe their existence to the charter schools that opened

first. This outside pressure is sometimes necessary because school districts function like monopolies, controlling public education within geographic and political boundaries. OCO parent leaders, however, decided early on they weren't going to settle for getting a better school for their child; rather they wanted district-wide reform that could reach every child in Oakland.

When the Dolores Huerta Learning Academy opened, the mothers kept right on fighting for a new, small autonomous school policy within the School District. Because the charter lever was used strategically, in the service of a larger vision for the whole system, it proved transformational. Charters can create competitive pressure on the public system, but in the absence of a larger strategic vision for transformation, they end up simply providing an option for some kids. In Oakland, OCO has been clear from the start that the end game is not to create pockets of good schools, nor to destroy the public system, rather to transform it.



Trip to New York

When Matt invited me to go see the small schools in East Harlem, I said yes, then dug Deborah Meier's book out of the trunk of my car. I read the book on the airplane. OCO's visit to New York City schools was a life-changing event for me. I physically saw, heard and felt the culture of high achieving schools for kids of color. I needed to breathe that hopeful air. In the South Bronx we visited a small school housed on an upper floor of a larger middle school. We had to pass through metal detectors when we entered the building, and I recognized the chaotic, tense feeling in the first floor hallways. When we got to the small school, we found a calm, safe environment. The kids talked and laughed during the passing period, but no one cursed, no one yelled, and no one punched a locker. In fact, the school had a 90-piece orchestra, and no place to store the instruments, so the instruments were displayed out in the open. Kids passed by the instruments respectfully. No one grabbed a trumpet. No one kicked a drum. Students were proud of their school, and treated the things that belonged to it with respect.

The contrast between the tone on the first floor of the building and the tone on the upper floor was disturbing. I started to realize that when we fail to provide safety in our schools, we deny our children a basic human right. Students adopt the tough attitudes of the street as a way to survive in a failing system that adults have created and adults can change. The reason the small school felt safer, was in part, because relationships were strong. Every student was known by name. It was impossible for anyone to fall through the cracks. The adults in the building worked as a team, and held a common vision and purpose. The school was clearly about something.

One of the remarkable things I learned on the trip to New York, is that the ideological battles raging in education are really beside the point. There are multiple pedagogies that can be effective. The key is for the school as a whole to embrace one method and make it work.

Taking the Lessons Home

When we returned to Oakland we got to work. OCO partnered with the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools (BayCES), who provided the educational

expertise that we lacked. I quit my job as a kindergarten teacher and became a shared employee of OCO and BayCES, creating a teacher-working group. The working group played a significant role in building educator support for small schools. Two thousand OCO leaders from across the city worked tirelessly, and won political support for a Small Schools Policy to be adopted by the Board of Education. BayCES wrote the OUSD policy that called for ten new, small, autonomous schools to be opened over a period of three years.

Along with the policy, OCO won commitments to end multi-track year-round calendars, and to build new school facilities. The School District released a request for proposals inviting parents and educators to create new schools, in the spirit of "let a thousand flowers bloom." This was the honeymoon phase of the reform, and some extremely talented parents, teachers and administrators stepped forward with proposals.

New Element in School Creation: A School Incubator

BayCES set up A New School Incubator with the goal of providing coaching and technical support for the design teams. The idea of new school incubation was an innovation borrowed from the world of economic development. Small business incubators help entrepreneurs to develop business plans, secure capital, and make strategic partnerships. We envisioned new school incubation as an ongoing process, and wanted the reform to catch on, and to eventually reach every neighborhood with struggling schools. The design teams from overcrowded elementary schools were formed through OCO organizing. Other teams emerged from the teacher working-group and still others from the larger BayCES Network. OCO parent leader Emma Paulino and teacher leader Larissa Adam formed the design team that would become the Ascend School.

OCO asked parents and teachers to share what they had learned with their own school communities. The seeds of change were being planted; design teams were being formed. This was a creative, almost revolutionary time. All of the educators involved were driven by a vision of social justice. Even with this, we learned that we had to manage the power differential between teachers and parents. On some design

teams, teachers who had been recruited by parents went off by themselves to write their proposals. Parents frequently wanted things that teachers found philosophically objectionable, such as uniforms.

Ultimately, fourteen proposals were submitted, and five schools were approved. The teams spent the fall and early winter in incubation, roughly from mid-October through early January. The teams were interviewed and the proposals scored by a panel that included representatives of the School District, BayCES and OCO. The best were sent on to the Superintendent and ultimately to the Board of Education for approval. The Principals were selected by the design teams. After the proposal was approved, the Principal and the founding design team members hired the rest of the staff.

The first round of Incubation was done on a shoestring, supported in part by the local funders of OCO and BayCES. Oakland School Superintendent Dennis Chaconas created the Office of School Reform. There were regular partners meetings between OCO, BayCES and OUSD to monitor the progress of the reform, and a memo of understanding was drafted to spell out the roles of each organization.

Accountable Schools and Standards

We discussed the need for schools to be accountable from the very beginning. Teachers and administrators frequently come from different economic and/or racial backgrounds than the students they serve, and lower expectations insidiously seep into the culture of the school. This is part of the legacy of the “isms,” especially racism. It is common for parents from low-income neighborhoods to find that their 4.0 student cannot get into magnet or gifted programs because the entire neighborhood school is working below grade level. An “A” on one side of town is not equal to an “A” on the other side of town.

Grade level standards, curriculum pacing guides, and yes, standardized tests, provide a corrective to the phenomenon of low expectations. In the ten years that I have organized in Oakland’s low-income neighborhoods, I have yet to find a parent who objects to the test itself. Parents complain about the impact of the test, the loss of art and music programs, the robotic, “drill and kill” nature of scripted curriculums, but not about the idea that there should be a reliable



way to measure that all children are being taught to and achieving mastery of the same standards.

It is one of the ironies of school reform that the very standardized tests designed by the eugenics movement to prove white supremacy at the start of the 20th century, are now used as tools to combat subtle forms of racism at the start of the 21st century. I like the way New York City’s Tony Alvarado describes the test: it is a gross measure, insufficient to fully describe the learning of individual children, rather it tells the Principal, the teacher, and the parent whether or not the level of instruction in the school is “in the ball park.” Having said this, the challenge of finding a more holistic and meaningful measure remains.

Our New Schools Start to Open

Meanwhile, the new schools we had just created were starting to open, and the challenges they faced were daunting. To honor budget autonomy, the District decided to fund the new schools on a per pupil basis rather than on a district staffing formula, so the new schools had important budget decisions to make. The first elementary schools all decided to lower class size at 4th and 5th grade, and this required trade-offs in other areas such as a smaller office staff, or the loss of a librarian or a reading teacher. There was start-up money for one-time expenses such as desks and books. Families helped put together furniture and paint classrooms. On the first day of school, the Nutrition Services Department did not know where

to send the food trucks, and the phone numbers for the new schools were not published in the District directory.

Four of the first five schools opened in temporary portables, and OCO had to keep pressure on the District to get permanent buildings constructed. The schools opened in areas plagued with prostitution, drug dealing, and violent crime. Traffic near the schools was heavy, and parents had to fight for the city to fund stop-lights and crossing guards. During the first year, a kindergartner from International Community School was killed by a hit and run driver as she was crossing the street to school. OCO formed parent organizing committees to support the new elementary and middle schools we had just opened, and we started to organize in the high schools, when catastrophe befell Oakland.

The State Take-Over

Just as the reform was getting started, the School District went bankrupt, and was taken over by the State. Superintendent Chaconas had given teachers a 26% raise and then filled every teacher vacancy, proudly opening the 2001-2002 school year with no substitute teachers serving in permanent positions. These laudable improvements, however, occurred in a system that had been normed to failure. Part of the reason that Oakland's books balanced each year was that there were always dozens, if not hundreds, of unfilled teaching positions. Early in his tenure, Chaconas tried to get the School Board to invest in a modern accounting software system, but it balked at the expense. Subsequently, the antiquated accounting and personnel systems did not reveal the looming deficit. During his second year, Chaconas convinced the Board to invest in the new accounting software, and when the data was entered and crunched, a deficit in the tens of millions of dollars was revealed. The small school reform was only a small part of the deficit, having cost the District roughly \$2 million in its first 2 years.

OCO fought mightily to keep the reform intact during the state takeover. From January 2003, when 700 parents filled the multi-purpose room at Lowell Middle School, to the citywide action six months later when 2000 parents and students spilled out the doors of the St. Elizabeth's gym, we organized doz-

ens of research meetings and strategy sessions, and made multiple trips to Sacramento, the State Capitol. Our State Senator, Don Perata, wrote language into the take-over legislation that would require any successful reform to be continued by the State. This language gave us a way to protect the new schools during State administration, and we already had evidence. Our first small schools were already out-performing the larger, traditional schools on multiple measures, including higher standardized test scores; higher attendance rates; and lower suspension and expulsion rates.

In June, 2003, Dennis Chaconas was replaced by Dr. Randolph Ward. We grieved this loss. Dennis was the first Superintendent to fully embrace the idea of new, small, autonomous schools. He was born and raised in Oakland, attended public schools in the working class Fruitvale neighborhood, and then taught in low-income neighborhoods across the city. Dennis genuinely valued his partnership with the community, and was fiercely committed to equity for kids of color.

When we lost Dennis, we thought we were in danger of losing everything. But to our surprise, the State take-over actually accelerated the reform, rather than slowing it. Dr. Ward moved quickly because he was immune to local politics. He saw that the first small schools were getting good results, so he adopted small schools as a remedy not only for overcrowding, but also for under enrollment and low achievement. Dr. Ward loved to quote Harry Truman: "It's amazing what you can get done when you don't care who gets the credit." During the 2003-2004 school year, the Executive Director of BayCES, Steve Jubb, and project manager, Katrina Scott-George joined the State Administrator's team, changing from working outside the system to working inside.

This was an extraordinary and contradictory time for the new small schools. What had been largely an outside, community-driven reform, moved inside and became the Theory of Action of the State Administrator. OCO leaders and staff felt simultaneously afraid, concerned and committed. During the 2004-2005 school year, the New School Incubator was brought inside OUSD, and renamed the New Small School Development Group. Hae Sin Thomas, the founding Principal of Ascend, became the director of the new school creation process. The formal OUSD partner-

ship with OCO was terminated, but BayCES continued to provide coaching support to the central office and to schools. One of the parent leaders who had been participating felt that I had pushed too hard, raised too much tension in the meetings, and that this was the reason that the partnership was disbanded. Others said that Dr. Ward simply didn't understand or support community organizing. We will probably never know.

When the founder of BayCES, Steve Jubb, joined the State Administrator's team, BayCES found itself in the opposite situation from OCO.

We watched from the outside, recognizing that at the heart of all this activity was the new, small school reform that we had initiated. I admit to feelings of bitterness during this period. I was afraid that the reform we created through community organizing had been co-opted by powerful interests. It seemed that the education reform elite did not truly value community partnership; rather they valued the power that OCO created through organizing.

Since the State Administrator was immune to local politics, it seemed that the community could be ignored, but this would not last for long. We could not walk away from the parents, teachers, and Principals who had accepted our challenge to envision schools anew. These powerful relationships sustained us in the work.

We believed that the struggle we had undertaken jointly was of historic proportions and that we were playing a necessary, if under-appreciated role. Perhaps this statement sounds embarrassingly grandiose, but I ask the reader to consider that at the heart of school reform is a profoundly radical proposition: social class and race should not be predictors of student success. School reform is about defeating racism and classism. School reform is about creating a just society for all. OCO was not going away. We had deep roots in Oakland, and we would outlast State Administration.

What We Learned During the State Takeover

Ironically, this is the stage of the Oakland Small School Reform that contains the most significant learning for other cities struggling to turn around failing schools. Change thrives in the dynamic tension between inside and outside forces. OCO's goal from the beginning through the present has been to create a systemic reform that could reach every child in Oakland. In order for that to be true, the system itself has to adopt the reform, to make the reform its own,

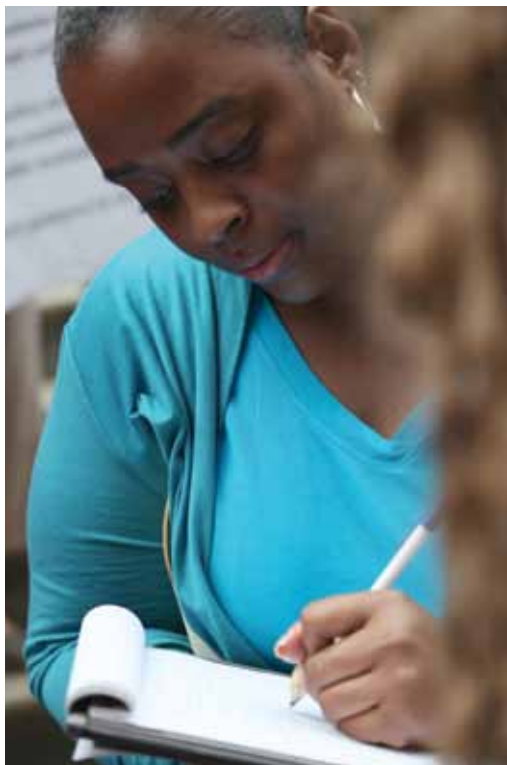
because only the system has the capacity to reach every child. So how does a scrappy outside effort located in one part of town become the vision of change for an entire district? It is a process that requires constant struggle.

The decision to adopt new school creation as a systemic strategy became operational when the Incubator was brought inside the District and renamed the New School Development Group. The schools created by the New Schools Development Group, with a couple of exceptions, have produced consistently strong academic outcomes while not resorting to the

impoverished pedagogy of test-prep curriculum.

The Community Partnership Re-emerges

The degree to which organizing theory was embedded into the process and curriculum of the New School Development Group is breath-taking. We see it in the definition of leadership that is based on reciprocal relationships rather than top down bureaucratic authority. We see it in the process of surfacing a community's pain through an analysis of the gap between "real and ideal" worlds, and in the intentional movement through an organizing cycle of one-to-one listening, research and "action," - in this case the creation of a school. It is remarkable that a School Dis-



trict could birth so many new institutions with such strong professional cultures, whose purpose is to transform society by changing the lives of children.

But this outcome was not arrived at easily; rather it involved struggle and creative tension between inside and outside forces. The lowest point under State Administration occurred in early 2005, when thirteen elementary schools that were in year four of “Program Improvement” (PI-4) under the original No Child Left Behind Act were slated to be turned-over to a charter management organization (CMO), with no parent or community engagement.

The idea that the Central Office would turn schools over to a CMO without engaging parents violated one of the basic tenets of OCO’s school reform work: schools belong to the communities they serve. We found ourselves allied with the teachers union in a fight against the State’s abuse of power. OCO fought not against charters, but rather for communities to have a voice in deciding their school’s fate. We wanted robust options to be available to these school communities, including the choice to be incubated as a new, small, autonomous school within the District. We organized relentlessly from the time the plan was announced in January 2005 until the end of the school year. Of the thirteen schools that had been slated for the charter management organization, ultimately two schools became charters, three schools were allowed to implement internal restructuring, and eight schools entered the incubator through the New School Development Group. The PI-4 Elementary Schools entered the incubator in staggered cohorts. When the District’s deadline passed in February of 2005, OCO kept organizing in the other PI-4 elementary schools, refusing to recognize the validity of the top-down process and timeline. California law required tenured teachers to vote for their schools to enter the CMO. There was significant fear among teachers that they would lose their jobs if they did not go along with the District’s plan. Indeed, the District made it known that if the schools did not enter the CMO, they would be reconstituted. OCO was constantly present in these schools throughout the spring, holding weekly meetings with parents and teachers to give them accurate information and to uphold the value of a community driven reform process.

Ultimately, only one school voted to enter the CMO.

Another school was given to the CMO through a bureaucratic maneuver. All the remaining school communities chose incubation, and entered the New School Development Group in the 2006-2007 school year. OCO was pleased with the outcome, not because we were anti-charter. We continued to support new charter design teams that had a strong community base. We were pleased with the outcome for two reasons: first, because the fight had re-ignited the community’s passion for reform, and surfaced new, strong parent leaders; and second, because families had been able to decide the fate of their schools.

Looking Forward: Uncertainty and Hope

Today, the once dismal Oakland landscape, where most flatlands schools scored below 500 on the State’s Academic Performance Index (API), is filled with hope. OCO helped start 49 new public schools. OUSD is the most improved urban School District in California for six years running, and Oakland’s API growth consistently outpaces the growth of the State as a whole. Perhaps because most small schools have chosen pedagogical approaches that tend towards constructivism, the upward trajectory has been steady but gentle. Many flatlands schools have grown more than 150 points, and are now in the 700’s on the API. Four new small schools have now broken through into the 800’s on the API: Think College Now, Greenleaf, Manzanita SEED, and Acorn Woodland Elementary School (AWES), OCO will not be satisfied until all Oakland schools are over 800 on the API, including the high schools. One regret, however, is that the District Incubator was dismantled so rapidly, that the theory and practice of the New School Development Group remains largely unstudied and unknown in the broader school reform world.

OCO’s role now is to build strong local organizing committees in a subset of member schools, both in-district and charter, to work on community issues during a time of great financial hardship for families. This part of our mission aligns well with Superintendent Tony Smith’s vision of schools as community hubs. We also have a citywide education committee that is working to protect and advance the reform especially in high schools, in an ever-changing political environment at the city, state and national levels.

In My Eyes

When I flew to New York with Matt and Lillian in 1998, my grandson Anthony was a toddler, and now he towers above me. Back then, my hair was brown, and now it is grey. In the years that I have worked on small schools in Oakland, three other grandchildren have been born, and one has died. When I look at my city, sometimes I see a hopeful place where change is happening, and sometimes I see a place that is hopelessly mired in crime and ineffective politics. But then I remember that there is a new set of leaders coming up in Oakland, young people being groomed in new schools in every flatland neighborhood of the City, and this thought sustains me.

As Oakland's new schools mature and start to feel secure in their instructional approaches and their academic outcomes, we face new opportunities and challenges. These include the question of succession when the founding Principal leaves. How are new leaders either developed from within, or selected by the District so that the integrity of the school's vision stays intact? As new elementary and middle schools begin to produce students who are at grade level, the press for excellence from below creates another opportunity and also a challenge: will the District respond by re-investing in the high schools, or will large numbers of students leave the District, headed for charters and private schools?

Counting charter schools, 80 new public schools were opened in Oakland in the decade from 2000 to 2010. At the same time, there was a substantial drop in enrollment as families left Oakland for the Central Valley. The recession has caused state budget cuts that total \$1000 per student over the last three years. This means there is a need to consolidate schools, perhaps at a more rapid rate than the gentle pruning that was originally envisioned. How can this happen without destroying the hard won success for which parents have fought? New schools are sources of inspiration and hope in stressed communities that have been hard hit by the recession. Will the poten-

tial for schools to become true centers of community be realized?

Oakland is ten years into a major school reform effort with impressive results, yet we have largely eluded the national spotlight. The phenomenon of short-term memory deficit operates on every level of the educational bureaucracy. The California State Department of Education seems unaware of Oakland's success, despite the fact that substantial portions of the reform occurred under State Administration. At a community meeting this winter, when presented with the fact that Oakland is the most improved urban School District in California for six years running, the representative of a national foundation exclaimed, "Really? I didn't know that!"

Yet something important has happened here - something that could help other cities and districts with struggling schools in low-income neighborhoods.

I have a little fantasy that I like to play out in my head. It is the year 2020, and every school in Oakland is above 800 on the state Academic Performance Index.

When visitors walk through the halls of the schools, the classroom doors are open. Students' projects adorn the walls. The happy hum of learning spills out from every classroom, as students work cooperatively in small groups. When visitors pop their heads into classrooms, it's difficult to find the teacher because he or she is squatting down among the children, engaged in thoughtful discourse about real world problems. The visitors wonder how Oakland managed to become one of the highest achieving districts in California, but because of the persistent problem of short term memory deficit, the visitors turn to the most recent innovation implemented by the District, and then begin to promote it as the "Oakland Miracle." The visitors completely miss the story of long-term community driven school reform...our struggle with the angel through the night. While this is surely unfortunate for the districts and philanthropists who will now seek to replicate the "miracle," yet as a community organizer, I feel a certain peace... because it's amazing what you can get done when you don't care who gets the credit.



TALKING WITH FERNANDO CARLO

Youth Organizer, Founding Member of Sistas and Brothas United and Design Team Member of the Leadership Institute High School.

One afternoon, after Fernando finished running a Youth Organizer workshop at Families United For Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE) where he works, I spoke with him about his work, his past experiences, and his thoughts about organizing. Here are excerpts of this conversation.



Today we did an exercise with the group I am working with now at FUREE. We talked about what is a community, and what kinds of institutions a community needs to survive. The students said schools, supermarkets, shelters, housing complexes, and a community center with all these different programs and services.

There were no metal detectors, cops, or overcrowded classrooms in the high schools that the students designed. It was all about small groups, computers and books everywhere, enough teachers and staff, a counselor for every student, all kinds of after-school and tutoring programs. These are all students going to school now - low income students of color who want this stuff. It is not like these students don't want to learn.

The challenging question I posed was: What communities look like this, and why don't our communities look like that? That was kind of when it sunk in for everyone. The conclusion they came to was that in our neighborhoods, we don't have all the things that

we need because we don't control the situations to make them happen.

After that, we jumped right into the idea of organizing. One of the students said, we can't get that stuff because that is a lot to get. Then another student challenged him before I could even say anything in response. He said, 'the idea is not to get everything right away, but it is over time. We can't get everything overnight, but if people came together, if everyone in the community came together, and said we want this, and fought for it, we would get it a lot quicker than four or five people fighting for it.'

I encourage their belief in how real this is. I have personal stories of success to share with them. They go to the computer lab, and research SBU, the Leadership Institute and even me. One student in the beginning of the workshop was not paying attention. At the end of the day he was asking, 'yo, how can I really get involved?'

We build the skills of organizing into the idea of building communities. When we all agree on the definition of community, we go through what is organizing and why we do it. One thing that students in my groups all agree on is that a real big issue in our communities is that people don't talk to each other. I try to get deeper into that. I ask them, 'what do you mean - do you mean more than just talking?' They say yes, people really need to connect and learn where we each are coming from.

Then I introduce the idea that we do these things called 'one on ones', really uncommon conversations. I ask the group, how often do you have a conversation with someone where you understand their history, and what they care about for real? How often do you have these kinds of conversations with people? Young people tell you not often, or not right away. Then I challenge them saying, wouldn't you agree you need to know those things in order to build a tighter relationship between you and that person so you can trust and rely on each other. They usually agree and are interested in finding out what that is all about.

Fernando's own history is at the core of his work. He was one of tens of thousands of New York City

high school students who was at risk of dropping out of school.

My zone high school was John F. Kennedy H.S. in the Bronx. When I first got to Kennedy there were 4,000 students. I never saw a school that big before. At first I thought I was at the wrong building. There were eight floors. It didn't feel like school to me.

In class, all we were doing was being taught exactly how to pass a test, but students really want school to be a place where we learn all kinds of stuff, so that we know more than enough, so that when we take a test it is not a problem. Slowly, I just didn't go to school anymore. I started leaving one class early, and the next day I just wouldn't go to that class at all. Then I would go home, and act as though everything was fine. It wasn't that I completely dropped out – I would "go to school" and just not show up to class. I would hang out outside all day. The way the system works is really horrible. Nobody knew I was not going to school until months and months later.

When I first wasn't going to school, and my mom found out, she got really upset. She said, 'how can you go from getting straight A's in junior high to someone who doesn't go to school?' She even got one of my friends who I knew for a long time, who was going to college, to come to my house and speak to me to see if he could kick some sense into me. I told him, I'm just not going to school and you can tell me whatever you want. I just don't want to be in school. The classes are so overcrowded – how do you have forty teenagers, or just forty students period in a room, and expect them to learn?

But I said, okay, I'll try going back to school, but what I actually would do is stay in the lunchroom all day. Nobody in the school did anything. All they ever did was send cutting cards to my house. It was so bad that they couldn't put the all the dates on the card. And I'm not the only person who was like that. A lot of people were.

Laura Vazquez had been hired as an organizer for the Northwest Bronx Coalition in the Kingsbridge Heights office. At first she worked with the youth on neighborhood safety issues, and then she started building support for a rally against a proposed filtration plant.

They were trying to build a filtration plant in the reservoir that was right down the block from where I lived. I

was interested in that. I started meeting people from my neighborhood who I didn't know, and we started hanging out in the Kingsbridge office on a regular basis. We didn't go to school, but we were always in the office. We were in the office talking about all these random problems we had in school, and Laura overheard us. She said, "you guys have all these problems in school, why don't you use it?"

Fernando and the group in the Kingsbridge office took this challenge seriously. Through their association with the Northwest Bronx Coalition, they were able to get a meeting with the Bronx Superintendent of Schools.

We gave him all our testimonies about everything that needed fixing in the schools. He told us about himself, and it turned out he had actually worked for the Kingsbridge Heights Neighborhood Improvement Association as an organizer. So he said I know how you guys do things. We just need to pick a date so that I can get back to you as to what is going on with the situation.

After that we tried going back to school more because it was like, we're complaining about these issues, and we need to make the effort to go back to school. We wanted to, so we could be there for the change, but we had already missed a real good chunk of the school year, and most of us remained way behind.

During the winter I went to a bunch of Northwest Bronx trainings, and learned how to do all these different things like outreaching, putting together a campaign, all that kind of stuff.

Summer came, and we found out about the Summer Youth Employment Program, a NYC program for summer jobs. We got the Heights Office set up as a site so kids could come and get our training, and be involved in our work. So we had a group of fifty teenagers in a space that was built for ten or fifteen people. After a while we had to start having meetings in the park. It became our first Summer Institute.

I think a lot of the teens liked the idea because it was teens working with teens. It was something different and it was unheard of - us working together and changing the neighborhood. We did the same trainings that we got from the Coalition over the winter, but we remade them so that they were a lot friendlier, and more interactive for the teens.

At the same time as we were doing all this, we talked to people at Kennedy and Walton High Schools, about student/teacher relationships: how they work in the classroom and how does this affect the student performance and the teacher performance, both their needs. Because we had done all the facilities stuff before— gotten locker rooms fixed, escalators, the door knobs, windows, got books, guidance counselors, school safety agents, people starting calling us, and asking us to come and do a training or help us organize a campaign.

We were like Wow – word is spreading far! We didn't



even think it went outside our block or the Bronx, but it was going as far as DC. We traveled to DC, and people told us all their issues, and we told them exactly what we did, and put them through some similar trainings. We didn't realize we were doing something completely new – where a group of youth went to another organization made up of youth and adults, and taught them how to organize.

We were able to join the Cross-City Campaign. Youth organizing groups from different cities all over the country met in California, and had this really amazing conference. We shared victory stories, and we shared strategies. We talked about how this work is hard, and how this work impacts things outside what we are working on. I was talking with kids from Texas, Chicago, and LA – I didn't know people were doing the same kinds of things in those places.

This was a time of major growth for Fernando. He was not only having successes in organizing, but

he was able to take these lessons personally, and find a way to graduate from high school.

By that time we had grown out of the Kingsbridge Heights office. We had too many people, and we had to move. We came up with our name. Sistas and Brothas United (SBU). We came up with a design for a Board, and figured out what the Board seats meant. We were getting into the evolving of our organization, actually creating our youth organization.

What was different when we started SBU was that I was allowed to think. In school, I wasn't allowed to think or interpret anything. I was only allowed to receive information. We were taught scales or tips or techniques to pass tests. We weren't given knowledge to understand our own situations, and come up with our own opinions.

It took a while to get comfortable with that idea of challenging the norm, and to think outside the box. It took a while to understand that if something feels in any way or shape wrong, if it is causing harm or stress to a specific group of people, it is okay to think of a way to make it a better situation. I think that is important to a young person's development.

At that time my mother knew I was involved with an organization, but she was kind of confused. She asked, 'how do you do all this work, but still hate school?' Four years had passed, and I still had not graduated from high school. Slowly it started kicking in personally - you're doing all this good work, but you're nowhere in school. I started thinking about that a lot more seriously. I thought, I am doing all this work from the organizing standpoint, but for me as an individual, for my education, I'm not doing anything. I am trying to create all these opportunities for other people, but I need to do it for myself as well.

Fernando was introduced the Principal of the Satellite Academy.

I was eighteen at that time, trying to get into a high school. Most students graduate when they are nineteen. I was like, 'I can handle it.' I said I can really do it. I got into that school, and because of that school I ended up graduating from high school. Yes, its taken me a long time, but I went and graduated high school. I have a high school diploma. I try to tell people that change is possible – there is always change and you can do something.

Fernando and SBU were aware of the movement in New York City to create new small schools.

At that time, I was seeing that there were all these new high schools opening up, and I said, let's find out how this happened. We found out there was a whole process people had to go through, writing a concept paper, and getting a team together. So I was, alright, we can get people. We decided that we want the students to do community organizing as a basic part of the school.

There were lots of times when we would go back and forth, having arguments on what should be what, or if its possible to have certain things. Then, it was okay, what time of the day are they going to do that? How is it going to be done? Where are they going to get their training from?

All we did was come up with more and more questions, and more and more stuff for us to do, and that is when it got really hard, really challenging for everybody. We had done some high school reform stuff, fixed some of our schools, did rallies, had gone to other groups, trained other groups, did all this amazing stuff, but now we are faced with the biggest, newest challenge that we had so far –to create a high school. If we are always trying to fix our current schools, how do we make a school that is not going to end up like one of those? That was always the biggest thing - how do we make sure it doesn't end up like our other schools?

We came up with the how the student government is run, what kind of teachers we want, what kind of staff we want, what kind of relationship we want the school to have with SBU and the Coalition, what kind of relationship we want the school to have with Fordham University, and who controls what things in the school. It was all consensus. We didn't move ahead with anything unless everyone around the table agreed that is best for the school. Designing a school is really hard. Some of our doubts were getting teachers who believe in community organizing, getting a Principal who believed in community organizing, get-

ting the Department of Education to believe that this is realistic, that they should fund a school that does this kind of stuff. We knew that the way most schools are run, there is not that much freedom, and there is no real student voice.

So when you have a group that is always on your behind to do this and this and that, and now you are going to let them administer a school where students are working to take ownership of their learning, this was a real worry to a lot of us - especially me.

The school was formed and they named it The Leadership Institute. On the Opening Day, Fernando spoke to the whole group. This is an excerpt from his speech.

We all come from a place where there are lots of decisions to be made, and it is really unfortunate that when those decisions are made, we are

not always present – to voice our opinion, to let them know what is going on where we come from. It is really more unfortunate when those decisions affect our schools, our education, our housing, our streets – things that are going to affect us day to day every single day of our lives.

This is a school made from the community for the community. Having a school like this that is part of the culture makes you guys a lot more powerful. You're getting into a whole different world. This organizing thing is very different and it is very empowering. You learn a lot of new things, and you change things in the community and that is so unheard of.

My hope is that the Leadership Institute takes youth organizing from here (indicates a pinch) to a whole other level. You guys have no idea what a big part of the future you are, and I really want to congratulate you on the first day of school, and thank you.

After four years, and its first graduating class, the school has come a long way, but it still isn't the school that the SBU students planned. Fernando thinks back to when they started the school.

I often find myself thinking about the Leadership Insti-



tute we envisioned - a high school with all these amazing ideas - and what it is today. I've met freshmen from the Leadership Institute who had no idea there was such a thing as Community Action Projects, so for me that was kind of - oh, damn. I kind of felt really responsible. Perhaps we did not have the structure or the support to pull everything off, at that time,

The reality of the situation is that schools are underfunded, they are in really small spaces, spaces they shouldn't be in. What that does for the morale and culture within the school can really damage the hopes and dreams. I think a big part of it is long term planning. This does not mean keeping everyone involved forever, but for the purpose of having a plan. I think the key is not only for the students to be learning about organizing, and for the school to be very supportive to students about the learning process, but to think beyond the life cycle of the first set of students, to the life cycle of the institution itself and its mission. We were just focusing on making sure it was all about what we really believed - which was really good when we were opening it, but we didn't come back to the drawing board early enough to say we need to do some long term planning. Every time a problem arose we all assembled and tried to deal with it, but we were planning and dealing with things as they happened as opposed to planning ahead of time.

But I do know there are a lot of good things happening in the school that are not happening in other high schools. I was a part of a group led by Ginette Sosa where we had meetings with all the students who weren't on track. This was a very long process, but the purpose was to help students come up with plans so that they could get the credits they needed to graduate.

Yorman Nunez and I had lunch-time sessions with students who had behavior issues to try to identify activities in the school where they could get involved. We shared stories about our own high school experiences, hoping these students would realize they have a unique opportunity and maybe weren't giving it a chance. This was our first effort to deal with these types of problems instead of suspending students, which is what other high schools usually do.

Being connected with a community organization with deep roots in the neighborhood is key to the Leadership Institute sustaining its commitment to

work towards its original vision. Laura Vazquez, now the co-director of the Coalition, Allison Manuel, the Coalition education director and Fernando are starting to formulate plans to bring back the community organizing culture that was originally envisioned when it was founded.

This year, Allison, Laura and the Principal, Marta Colon are going to bring back Town Hall meetings and start building up the school culture. Allison will start with a themed day about youth leadership, how it led to the creation of the school, and what the school they're going to stands for. This will lead to creating a space for youth to develop their ideas about organizing.

What's important to keep in mind is that the school grows everyday. It takes time to develop all the support programs students need, and at the same time, empower students to do it themselves. They now have a detailed tracking system for each students' college plan, which Northwest Bronx Coalition staff Ginette Sosa and Crystal Reyes have put in place. One thing that I'm doing is meeting the freshmen class before school starts, and talking to them about the history of SBU and the history of their school, hoping this will inspire their curiosity. I feel hopeful that the school can develop into what we envisioned. We all have to keep putting in the work, and map out a plan with students, teachers and organizers so we know how to get there.

Fernando is always thinking about his work, and how he is moving forward.

I think I am still trying to figure out why I do it every day. Today we came out of a session, and that question came up again - people were talking about everybody's commitment, not only to the organization I am in now, but to the idea of organizing, how long we all have been doing it, and all that. I think it is special because it is people coming together to make the lives of everyone better.

If we want to develop people who are really going to lead the future, and take care of our country, then we need to make sure that we are really developing people who can think - who can think, process and challenge - not just other peoples' ideas, but the everyday norm. Realistically, what is normal to all of us now is not okay. Overcrowded schools are not okay, Underfunded schools are not okay. Budget cuts to summer youth programs are not okay. Immigration laws that

have been passed are not okay. All that stuff is not okay. Just because adults tell us – and I do not want to sound like all adults are evil – but just because the people who are at the top and run stuff say it is okay, that doesn't mean it is. I think young people are the best people to challenge those ideas.

I think some people honestly believe that organizing doesn't work. I think that comes from the cultural norms where we come from. You know what they are: you don't bother people, you don't ask questions, you don't challenge authority, you don't have conversations about grown-up things.

I don't have the capacity to work with every single young person who might want to do this. I would love to if I could. In the session we did at the end of today's workshop, the FUREE staff said they like the work I am doing. The numbers have risen, but not just the numbers, the quality of what they are doing. Renee, for example, was speaking in front of about 150 people, which was a big deal for her, and she was really nervous. I rehearsed her speech with her, and tried to get her to speak from her experience. Now she is at the point where she calls the youth, and gets them together to have meetings. I was away, and a FUREE staff member said, 'the youth just had a meeting, and it was amazing.' When I returned, it was they who presented it to me – 'hey Fernando, this is what we came up with, and this is what we need you to help us to do.'

I have come to a real good understanding that everyone has a learning curve. There are a couple of ways you can do this – I mean you can just get a group together, and tell the students what to do because you believe, in all your wisdom and experience, that it is the right thing to do. Or you can get a bunch of students

together, and you can really cultivate a space where they are learning from each other, and they are learning together and you are creating spaces for them to educate, plan, to practice through trial and error. This is the place where we want all young people to be.

For me, my job is always to make sure that I am creating a space for young peoples' voices to be heard. As long as I can maintain that priority, whatever challenges come, we can deal with. I can be the best of myself to help them deal with the challenges.

I was always excited to think what does a big youth coalition look like, and how does that function. There have been a number of youth coalitions and alliances, and a lot of them are great. Seeing an organization like AEJ form and the groups that are involved in it was no surprise. It is all these groups who have been doing work for so many years and pushed for education changes in New York City.

I think coalitions are really important because most of us believe there is a movement, and it is not of one person, it is not of one group, it is a movement to change our world. I have a long history in organizing and I know how tough it can be to keep the voices of the individual groups strong as they form coalitions, and that is one of the things I have been personally scared about - making sure the peoples' voices are heard through coalitions is the reason we are in alliance. It should never be one organization trying to change the world. The more people there are, the more representation we have of different communities, cultures, lifestyles, religions, any way people can identify, the better representation we have of all that, the better we can decide as a group how to live productive lives.



AN ENGAGED PARENT LEADER AND SCHOOL REFORM

Boston Parent Organizing Network (BPON)

By Caprice Taylor Mendez

Cold rain becomes bone-chilling with the strong gusts of wind in Boston's Mission Hill, making Maria's umbrella useless. The weather, after 6 PM on a Tuesday night near the December holidays in 2005, was a good enough excuse for anyone to skip an additional two - hour meeting. Despite not owning a car and having to travel via bus to catch the train and switch to another train, Maria was committed to discuss with her peer BPON parent leaders and organizer the proposed school-based family engagement staff job descriptions. Our goal was to identify the ideal role and accountability structures for the school-based Family Community Outreach Coordinator's (FCOC) job description, soon to be proposed to the Boston Public Schools. Three decades of research confirms that family and community engagement has a positive effect on student achievement, as well as improved student behavior in home and school, but the structures to implement it were still not in place.

This was an important place to be. After parents mobilized, attended meetings with the Boston Mayor, with individual City Councilors, went to School Committee and City Councilor hearings, parents are having a voice in shaping the FCOC job descriptions as well as structuring the accountability system. We wanted to require the FCOC positions to have a performance evaluation tool that valued feedback from parents, Principals, and the office of the Deputy Superintendent of Family Community Engagement. BPON parents fought hard for the Deputy Superintendent position a few years prior, and now we were fighting to place a Family Coordinator in every Boston public school.

We were forewarned, by the New York City Family Engagement Pilot Project evaluation provided by a New York friend, that school Principals, with limited staff and resources may use the new staffer as a potential filler-in when a cafeteria staff person is out sick, or if there is a need for a truancy officer, or even an assistant Principal. All of these roles are clearly important to assist in having a strong functioning school, yet none would allow time for a school-

based staff person to focus on building strong relationships with the hundreds of parents and families, while coordinating a partnership with the numerous teachers in the classrooms and outreaching to community-based partners. The FCOC position required 100% time commitment in the effort of building the bridge between home and school, despite potential language barriers.

"Sorry I came late", Maria gasped in Spanish as she shook off the rain from her coat. "After three months, I finally managed to get a meeting with my daughter's teachers. It is so important that other parents don't have to go through what I have been experiencing."

"Maria, you came just in time." I added in Spanish. "Please introduce yourself and explain what you have



been going through." The simultaneous interpreter spoke into the transmitter in English to the parents who did not speak Spanish. We switched the use of the headsets for the first time. Normally the non-English speaking parents wore the headsets.

"My daughter was a good student - A's, and enjoyed going to middle school. In September, she started high school and hated waking up to go to class. Every morning for the past three months, I had to coax her out of bed. I decided to accompany her to school every morning, taking the bus and train with her. I just wanted to make sure she made it through the school doors. I requested a meeting with her teachers, so that we could figure out what was going on and change things. I always asked my daughter what was wrong,

but she never told me. I was worried about her, and about her studies.”

“It took three months for the meeting to take place. I would call the school, but could not leave a message. No one spoke Spanish. I do not speak English well, so it was also difficult for some of the teachers to understand me in person. I am glad it finally happened, but it was alarming when her teachers told me that my daughter had already missed courses three times, five times, and even ten times. Apparently she was skipping classes and sitting in the school cafeteria. No one noticed this, and thought she was home sick or had some excuse for her absence. My daughter is now behind in her school work. The more often students are absent and feel disconnected, the easier it is for them to drop out of school. All this time, my daughter thought that she could out-smart the adults in her life. I care so much about her education, but some of the teachers just assumed I accepted her absenteeism from class.”

There was no one to function as a Family Coordinator at the school Maria’s daughter attended. An FCOC could have prevented such a communication break-down from happening. More importantly, Maria and the teachers wanted to work together to get her daughter back on track. An FCOC could have helped much earlier to make this happen, saving the District summer school dollars.

Angie Wilkerson, an African American parent leader, spoke up “We also need the FCOCs to help provide translation services. I am sitting here listening to Maria’s story. I know she is saying something with passion. Luckily, I have someone translating her words. I can’t imagine how it feels as a parent who does not understand English, trying to work with the schools to help their child, and not being able to because of language barriers. Their basic rights are taken away in supporting their child if the school does not provide help with the language. We need to make sure that translation support is a required role for the FCOC in all of the job descriptions. ”

After countless meetings between BPON parents and City Councilors, the Mayor, School Committee members as well as the Superintendent and other School District staff, the BPON recommendations were adopted. Parents, with the support of BPON organizers, were well prepared at the meetings. We

had already spoken with the Boston Teachers Union, and received their blessings to go ahead with our advocacy effort, despite the fact that these positions would be considered management positions, and therefore non-union jobs. This was a key win because the job hours needed to be flexible to accommodate for the times of availability of when parents were not working. In a District with many low-income households, parents are often working more than one shift a day, or non-traditional hours like midnight shifts. This was a very important victory for BPON. As Abby Weiss wrote,

Early proposals called for teams embedded in student services... Superintendent Payzant set aside this model in favor of a plan, put forth by community organizers, that elevated family and community engagement to a new level of importance within the district. (Harvard Family Research Center vol. xiv spring, 2006)

BPON’s voice was clearly heard.

An Imperfect World, Organizing, and School Reform

The BPON organizing model says to the parent, “Wait, why fight for ADEQUATE resources for your child ALONE?” According to the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University and the Alternative Schools Network in Chicago, Illinois, nearly 6.2 million students in the United States between the ages of 16 and 24 dropped out of high school in 2007. This report, “Left Behind in America: The Nation’s Dropout Crisis,” concluded that *Americans without a high school diploma have considerably lower earning power and job opportunities in today’s workforce. Over a working lifetime from ages 18-64, high school dropouts are estimated to earn \$400,000 less than those that graduated from high school. For males, the lifetime earnings loss is nearly \$485,000 and exceeds \$500,000 in many large states. Due to their lower lifetime earnings and other sources of market incomes, dropouts will contribute far less in federal, state and local taxes than they will receive in cash benefits, in-kind transfers and correctional costs. Over their lifetimes, this will impose a net fiscal burden on the rest of society.*

With only 60.7 % of Boston’s African American students and 52.6 % of Latino students graduating in

2009 from the Boston Public School's (based on the cohort rate), the stakes are high for parents in the Boston Latino and African American communities, and for society as a whole. We are at the bottom of the ocean together, despite the slight increase of barely 3% in the graduation rate for 2009.

I firmly believe that education organizing for improving our schools is a fundamental tool at our disposal. When we talk about public school education and its current critical status, many researchers and policy makers cite these dire statistics. Yet, behind those numbers are children, parents, families, neighborhoods, schools and a larger society. The children receive messages from all these groups – resulting in either support or additional barriers.

In a student's life, there is the classroom, the home, and the neighborhood. Most importantly, a student has their inner core that stores all their hopes, dreams, and aspirations as well as the hurts, fears, and doubts. We adults can debate all we want about what factor or which key player influences children the most. We can label children at-risk and/or blame the parents, the school or even the child for choosing the "wrong friends". Yet, the people most affected are the best informed to name the barriers correctly, as well as provide innovative and impactful solutions to an imperfect world.

I grew up in such an imperfect world. My mother was determined to succeed in the U.S. She studied for ten years to grasp a new language, English, to take her GED, since her Guatemalan degrees were not valid in the U.S, and to go to college. She enrolled in college when I was a senior in high school, first becoming a Dietary Technician and then graduating as a Social Worker, obtaining straight A's. I knew that I had to perform as well, seeing that I had it easier being raised learning English.

But I was pulled out of social science classes from

kindergarten through 4th grade to attend phonetics class. I missed out on geography, social studies, and who knows what else because my first language at home was deemed to have created an inadequate accent in English. I was told, during my first month in high school that the Advanced English Literature was too advanced for me. I convinced the teacher to give me a chance, and my grades were always one of the top two in the class. I was told in the end that I was a hard worker while my friend, also in the top two, was told she was intelligent. I graduated with honors, went off to Boston College, found jobs in social justice, and started attending Harvard University for my Masters.

On my first day in Harvard's Leadership, Management and Policy class, we introduced ourselves. The second person stood up. The blonde haired, blue-eyed woman said, "I am here because I am working to get certified to become a Superintendent of a public school system. I was a middle school teacher in Virginia in two different schools.

The first was difficult. I taught upper middle class Caucasian students, and the soccer moms felt they could tell me how to run my classroom. I left hoping to make a difference in the lives of those who needed me, but the new school was even more frustrating. Many of my students were Guatemalan, and Guatemalans don't care about education."

I was in Harvard, one of the designated Mecca's for our country's future leaders. I realized on my first day, I would have to face ignorance there as well. Which is worse: being an invisible group to many, or being judged by the labels placed on the group you are part of?

In order to stay enrolled in college, I worked three jobs and paid 100% of my Boston College tuition through loans and a few grants. Working towards my Masters at Harvard required me to obtain another Student



Loan as well as balancing work and studying full-time. I thought, “How dare she speak about me, my family, and relatives in such a way to a room full of education leaders who may never know a Guatemalan?”

Once she was done, I controlled my voice not to show my anger. “I am Guatemalan, raised in New Haven from a family of five children. I went to school with many first generation immigrant families. Often the parents did not speak English. My Dad held three



jobs so his children could attend Catholic schools for the access to quality education. My Mom left her eight brothers and sisters, her parents, friends, and anything familiar to her so her five children could have greater educational opportunities in the US. I am here at Harvard proving that the most important factor for my parents in raising their family was so their children could obtain a strong educational foundation. They sacrificed so much for us, much in the same way all of the parents of my friends did for them. Education is core for many of the Guatemalans who live in

the U.S. as well as for many of the other Latino, Portuguese, Italian, Irish immigrant families I grew up with.”

I asked the class, “anyone else here from Guatemala? Why am I the sole Guatemalan in this prestigious course? How many of us in this class are immigrants? How many are from low-income communities? I was not the hardest working, nor the smartest in my family. I was just luckier. Luck should not be a factor in who obtains quality education and has access to opportunities. I am here at Harvard to assist in promoting policies and structures for systemic change that diminishes the harm of ignorant leaders, and removes luck from being the determining factor of a child’s and adult’s success in life.”

At Harvard, with my course work packed, I stumbled across a Community Organizing course. At the end of the day, community organizing is the sole tool I have found that provides individuals with skills to navigate this imperfect world. Organizing is a tool for systemic change, impacting policies concerning the quality of life within a community. Organizing simultaneously provides a vehicle for participants’ self-development and internal awareness.

Well-intended meaningful individuals, such as the many who dedicate their careers to working within the school system, may miss opportunities to strengthen our classrooms. No one is perfect. With organizing, the very people on the receiving end are given the space to express what they see as working, as well as the areas that need improvement. Organizing provides long - term impact, allowing entire groups of people to utilize tools to address obstacles in a society with limited safety nets for those born into low socio-economic situations.

Founding of BPON

In 1999, after attending a Boston School Committee meeting on the school budget, a group of well-connected parents were appalled to hear the number of decisions being made without parental input. They knew it was time to bring the voice of parents back into the public school decision-making process. Making decisions about their children’s futures without parental input, or knowledge was not acceptable.

The Boston Parent Organizing Network was formed in 1999 to organize, develop and support parents

and families who are marginalized by class, race, language, disability and immigration status, to work with and hold Boston Public Schools accountable to provide an excellent education for all students. This is critical because the large majority of parents in Boston Public Schools are low income, with many BPS parents holding two jobs and still struggling to pay the high living expenses. Three quarters of BPS students receive free & reduced-price meals in school (65% free, 9% reduced). English is not the first language of 38% of the students, and almost every classroom in Boston's 138 schools has students designated as English Language Learners, yet less than half of the classrooms have a teacher who is trained in teaching English Language Learners. These students come from more than 40 different countries.

When BPON was founded, it was a network of local community organizations. The goal was to strengthen the impact of individual organizations to address specific areas of education reform, including: Legislative Advocacy, Parent and Teacher Relations, English Language Learners (ELL), Special Education (SPED) and Individual Education Plan (IEP), School Transportation, Drop-Out Prevention, and the Code of Discipline. Fundamental to BPON's mission is that the reforms they fight for should be adopted by the school system itself. Without that step, their work will not reach all the children in the Boston Public School system.

Parent Organizers: The Key Ingredient to Successful Organizing Efforts

As the former BPON Director, I worked directly with the parent organizers from the community based organizations that provided the space, resources and numerous hours of staff time dedicated to supporting families in addressing quality of life issues. I know first-hand that it is not a 9-5, five-day-a-week job.

Parents seek out organizers because organizers have the credibility of being able to speak their language, understand their life challenges, and assist in solving many of their difficulties when dealing with bureaucratic systems. The organizer shows parents that they are not alone, and can help prevent other families having to go through similar challenges.

The organizers meet with parents in schools to share information that the professional policy makers have.

Information is power. Parent organizers are the key bridge in BPON, providing parents with information in a timely fashion in the appropriate language. This means removing the layers of "Public School System speak" to terms that every parent comprehends.

Organizers create the space for parents to share best practices on topics from 'how to navigate the Special Education system' to 'how to best reprimand their adolescent child.' Organizers do not tell parents what to do, but give them the information and tools to decide what is best. Organizing, people power, helps amplify the parental voice into the systemic policy making process.

From Cold-Anger to Education Reform with BPON Parents

Maria, Angie Wilkerson, and countless other parents with their real life experiences and insights are the potential and often untapped allies of public schools. BPON parents highlight gaps that need to be filled. BPON parents were the ones who knew that the FCOC Job Description must include flexible working hours so that parents can meet with the FCOC during the weekends, at night or early morning, depending on the parent's work schedule. We also knew the job entailed having access to resources beyond what one staff person could do, and we encouraged this to be part of the evaluation also. Positive results were seen as early as the first year of the FCOC pilot initiative. A high school flagged as underperforming, improved within just one semester of the FCOC getting the job. High-stake standardized test scores came back with an immediate improvement because the FCOC worked to build a team of informed parents. Parents shared ways to support their child at home in preparation for the test, and fewer students skipped school on the test day than had in the past. FCOCs led in the development of parent math workshops. Many parents felt unprepared to help their children with math homework, especially as methods of teaching math had changed so much since they were in school. These workshops proved so successful that this FCOC led practice was adopted by BPS as an official Best Practice. In the first year of the program, one parent had the idea of sending home the Open House invitation with individualized schedules for each student and the names and room numbers of their teachers. That way parents would come to Open House with

a clear “map” of where to go and who to talk to. Her school had 700 students, and about 80 hours were spent preparing the invites, but our teachers reported an unprecedented eighty percent increase in attendance for the Open House. Prior to having FCOCs in schools, it was often left to the very student experiencing academic troubles to explain to their parents in their language, what the teacher was saying about their performance. FCOCs changed this.

As an organizer in education reform, I know the difference parents make in school reform. The FCOC story is just one of the countless organizing wins that is not widely known. Every school year in Boston, during these tough economic times, parents are in the classrooms, at home assisting students with their homework, and in the School Committee meetings and the chambers of City Hall advocating for the rights of all students to have a quality education.

To truly achieve that no-child-is-left-behind, families and schools must constantly work together every year. Resources and policies must be in place to support this endeavor regardless of the various cultures, languages, and issues faced by families in tough socio-economic situations. To obtain an effective partnership between home, community, and school, the process is the end goal. Education policy makers will never be able to sit back and relax, believing that they found the solution to education reform. Education reform entails flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of children and families. Every school year new children enroll, new families are part of the school community, and our social context shifts. When a child walks into the classroom, he/she walks in with his/her life story, the noise from their neighborhood, the heart beat of their home, often in rural and urban areas with the struggles of living in low-income communities. Every school year, those bridges to understanding and partnerships need to be built. Schools and school districts have to welcome families into their buildings and



respect the knowledge that they bring in the effort of educating the whole child.

I had a City Councilor ask me when we were fighting for the FCOC positions, “Why should we pay for an FCOC when parents should care enough to get involved in their child schools? We don’t need an FCOC to make that happen. My wife is very involved in our children’s schools; no-one pays her, nor is there an FCOC is the school.” He did not mention that his family could afford to have his wife be a stay-at-home-mom. This meant that she could attend most school related events and meetings during the standard school hours. His wife also spoke English fluently, and did not have to learn another language at the average age of thirty to discuss their child’s social or academic struggles.

All parties, families and schools must be committed to respecting each other as partners on behalf of the success of our children. Some ask ‘why do we have to assist an adult to engage with teachers, participate in school governance, or communicate and advocate for their child?’ But haven’t we all been, at some point in our lives, unsure how to solve a problem and not know where to turn to for help, or know who had the power to change the situation?

Parents witnessing their child doing poorly in school, knowing that the child’s future hangs in the balance, can feel helpless. If you never addressed issues with a teacher before, who do you talk to? Parents often feel that their child’s ISSP (individualized education plan) reflects low-expectations but are unsure what to do. They ask “Who do I talk to? The teacher? The Principal? Who else is involved? Who are their supervisors?” In the case of children enrolled in Special Education, it may be different people who need to address the concerns.

With the never-ending challenges that teachers and school staff face, how does your child’s individual situation make it to their priority list? How can you feel confident that your concerns or suggestions will be

heard and implemented? What do you do when you notice the issue goes beyond the one classroom, and is something district-wide?

This is why we are committed to organizing. Organizing not only empowers individuals, but removes the sense that you are alone in a struggle. It gives people a degree of control in a world that does not usually ask their permission to raise their rents, or that threatens to take them away from their children because they do not have immigration papers, or whose child is shot because they were living in the wrong place at the wrong time in a neighborhood's history. Organizing feeds the human spirit and addresses issues in order to improve society as a whole.

BPON's Journey and Development

It was an honor supporting the work of BPON parents and the organizers for four years from 2004-2007. A few of my responsibilities included guiding the development of a shared vision for education reform, defining clear advocacy goals and strategies, and supporting in the implementation of the plan. It was an amazing experience being part of a greater movement. We challenged ourselves to find ways to strengthen the work, support a greater number of parent leaders, and increase our impact in education reform despite the limited available resources.

During my time at BPON, we started to realize that the original BPON structure was not serving our mission in the most effective way. BPON organizers were employed directly by their community based organization, rather than BPON. BPON provided grants to the community based organizations (CBO) to cover approximately forty percent of a community organizer's time, and that time was to be designated to education issues. Gradually we realized that we weren't accomplishing as much as we knew we could because there was no uniform structure of accountability.

Added to this was that sometimes the organizations didn't have enough money to make up the full salary, and the already underpaid community organizers were facing serious economic hardship. This constrained BPON's capacity by limiting the time organizers could dedicate to the BPON advocacy and organizing plan. Less time to work with parents on education reform meant a reduction in the number of parents leaders in education reform. Because they were stretched

thin, the organizers had little flexibility, and thus were less able to respond to things that needed immediate attention.

Organizers are the key access points into BPON for parents. They invest significant time supporting parents, balancing assisting individuals with working towards systemic change. It takes time to develop strong parent leaders. Many parents start by attending meetings, but with training, grow into taking responsibility, and bring new parents into the organization. When organizers leave, the organization must rebuild these relationships and the trust once again. As we support low-income communities to have tools to improve their quality of life - have food, money for rent, strong health and access to education, we are keenly aware of the costs of what it means to be one pay check away from needing assistance to pay rent or buy food.

Diversity across language and cultural groups has always been a strong part of BPON's mission. The diversity also included varying styles or models of organizing. Some groups defined an effective organizing model as having the capacity to fill a room with hundreds or thousands of constituency members when a "public accountability session" was held.

Another organizing model measures part of its impact by the number of parents who are deeply informed on the issues at hand, can facilitate group meetings, navigate systems, make key strategic organizing and policy advocacy decisions, and essentially be the organizer.

With time, these parent leaders can go outside of the group, recruit and train a greater number of parents than the first model.

We felt that the BPON mission had the greatest chance to succeed if we combined aspects of both models, but for that we needed to be able to control our own accountability. In 2009, with the leadership of the new BPON directors, Myriam Ortiz (Executive) and Olu Crayton (Associate), BPON took a bold step and restructured the network. BPON now hires organizers directly as employees. This has allowed BPON to increase its own ability to move education reform forward as a main priority; and have greater flexibility in defining the BPON organizing strategy in education reform.

BPON has played a key role in the creation of the Parent University, a newly formed program of the Office of Family and Student Engagement of BPS which helps parents increase their understanding of how children learn and develop; what their children should be learning; how to help their children get what they need to succeed; and how to bring other parents together to work for school improvement. The sessions aim to empower parents to become leaders and advocates for student learning. Parents learn how to frame the 'right questions' to get to the answers they need to move their advocacy efforts along. At the core of the University is the concept that organizing skills make different issues winnable.

By supporting the concept of organizing for school reform, BPS recognizes the added-value provided by parents engaged with schools. BPS acknowledges, in this effort, that parents' direct experiences with the schools and the knowledge they have regarding their child's needs and strengths can provide deep insight in ways to improve our schools to attain high student achievement. As written in the Harvard Family Research Center Journal:



Many school districts can learn from Boston's experience of implementing a system to support family and community engagement. First, school districts must listen to the diverse voices of parents and community members and co-construct a family and community engagement strategy with them. Much of the story of BPS's progress can be traced to the outside forces that exerted pressure on the district and to the district's willingness to listen to and negotiate with them. (vol. xiv spring, 2006)

Recently, BPON parents successfully promoted the creation of a new code of conduct and a newly formed Code of Discipline (COD) Advisory Council to monitor the COD implementation within the Boston Public Schools. When Associate Director Olu Crayton came to BPON in 2009, she started meeting parents and interviewing FCOCs and other important stakeholders within BPON. One of the most crit-

ical issues for middle school and high school parents was the way in which many schools were dealing with discipline issues and how this was resulting in many students missing classroom time because they were getting suspended and/or expelled for little infractions that didn't necessarily require such drastic measures. After revising the Code of Discipline, BPON leaders submitted recommendations to the District for a new Code of Conduct, and for the formation of the first COD Advisory Council in the state. The COD Advisory Council will include parents; and will guide the professional development of School staff, ensuring adherence to the rules and regulations in implementing discipline, with the best interest of all students in mind.

Children are the most vulnerable part of a family unit. Education is core for their success in life. We need well-informed citizens to sustain our democratic way of life that includes a large middle class. We are losing ground, and weakening our democracy. We need to support our government and hold it accountable to support the common good. Organizing gives us a key tool for this endeavor. By having parents organized and engaged at a

deeper level in education reform, public schools can increase the base of supporters who are strong advocates for quality public education, and provide key insights to meeting the needs of our children.

The work of an organizer is often like going to the place of a crumbled building, and pulling those who survived out from under the rubble. The survivors' heart beat may be faint at first, stuck in the shock of being immersed in the pain of it all. By listening to the heart, the organizer then picks up on the basic beat, adds more sounds as they weave a new melody together. The organizer then takes that melody with that of the other survivors they found amidst the rubble and compose a new song together. Songs can carry dreams far into the realm of reality.

PRINCIPAL SELECTION PROCESS - OUSD

By Liz Sullivan

One of the most interesting aspects of the Oakland story is that an outside reform movement transitioned inside and became systemic, and this became a critical factor to the success of the entire movement. Here is an example where we see this clearly.

OCO has always resisted the top-down imposition of strategies in communities that have been historically neglected, but we learned that a process can be led by the District, and be successful, when this process is embedded with respect for the community. Fundamental to this is leadership with a critical understanding of the importance of community partnership and democracy.

At the beginning of the Small School Movement, certain attitudes were imprinted into the genes of the new schools and into the movement itself. BayCES had a focus on racial equity and OCO insisted that educators treat parents as partners rather than as clients or customers. The way we selected our Principals was dynamic and participatory. It occurred when the school community had been identified, but no design team yet existed. Inspiring educators with powerful visions attracted teachers and parents to the design team. As the design team formed, and the school plan was developed, it became clear that there was someone on the team who others wanted to follow.

The problem with this, from the District's point of view, is that the Principals felt completely accountable to their communities who had chosen them, but not accountable to the District. This situation came to a head with a small high school that was created in the second round of incubation. The school in question had a Principal on paper, and an actual leader who was empowered by the team to make decisions. When the Superintendent asked to meet with the person who was in charge of the school, he could not get a meeting with the true leader. Only the paper Principal would meet with the Superintendent. This enraged Superintendent Chaconas, who then began to push OCO and BayCES, saying that the District needed to be the one who selected the Principal. OCO resisted the idea of the District selecting the Principal because we felt this would lead to bureaucratic thinking and top-down control. We had lots of

evidence that our way worked: the first small schools had rock star Principals. But before this issue could be resolved, the state take-over happened.

Once the State was in charge, there was no question about who would choose the Principals. In our case, however, Hae Sin Kim Thomas had agreed to be the leader of the District's New School Development Group. Her belief in shared leadership was forged in the early days of our movement, and she ensured that an organizing definition of leadership became institutionalized in the new schools through the Incubation process.

Under the leadership of Hae Sin and her team, the New School Development Group created a method of Principal selection that put the community at the center, well-positioned to hold the District accountable for selecting and developing leaders with an orientation to equity and democracy.

The community did not select a particular leader for an individual school; rather parents vetted a pre-screened pool of candidates through a day-long process of role plays and interviews, and scored them on a rubric that measured attitudes toward students, families and teachers, as well as knowledge of instruction. The District made the ultimate match of Principal to school community, a subtlety that while often missed, provides a critical example of how an outside reform becomes systemic.

This turned out to be much more powerful than having to fight individual battles over Principals, school by school. When the District embodies community values in the selection process, the Principal feels committed to those values and empowered to act on them

We saw the results of this immediately. When OCO first started organizing in the schools, we sought to form strong bonds with Principals. We courted school leaders, and sometimes we were successful in winning their trust. But the process of entering into relationships with Principals was always initiated by OCO, rather than by the Principals themselves. Principals generally operate within a bureaucratic structure where power flows in a downward motion. So any Principal in the traditional system who entered

into a relationship with OCO was taking a big risk. The Principals that were chosen to lead design teams through the New School Development Group had a completely different attitude towards OCO because they were getting a completely different message from the District. Organizers would receive phone calls out of the blue:

“Hi my name is Aaron Townsend, and I am the leader of a design team for the Havenscourt community. I would like to set-up a time for myself and the other design team leader, Brandee Stewart, to meet with you. We want to see how we can partner with OCO.”

Wow. All the organizers got phone calls like this.

We would turn in our chairs and look at each other, smiling. Huh...so this is what respect feels like. The value of community organizing was being recognized, by the District itself.



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Film Credits

Main Production Credits

Producer/Director: Susan Zeig
Editor: Gary Winter
Director of Photography: Slawomir Grunberg
Narrator: Maria Hinojosa
Consulting Producer: Barbara Abrash
Music: Richard Fiocca with Cenzo
Web Design and Graphics: Ted Glass
Outreach Co-ordinator Leah Sapin

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The Walter & Elise Haas Fund

Additional Funding

East Bay Community Foundation
Hazen Foundation
Research Foundation of Long Island University

Fiscal Sponsor: Women Make Movies

Short Bios

Producer, Susan Zeig is a long time social documentary maker and Director of Film at Long Island University's C.W. Post Campus. Her work has been broadcast nationally, is in distribution in educational, community and labor union circuits, and purchased for the collections of over 200 Universities, and 25 Public Library systems. She has raised grants for these projects from the C.S. Mott Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Barr Foundation, the Irvine Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, New York Foundation on the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Humanities, New York State Council for the Arts, the Hazen Foundation the Film Fund, and the Research Committee of Long Island University.

Consulting Producer, Barbara Abrash is a teacher, curator and independent producer. She is the Director of Public Programs at the Center for Media, Culture and History and the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, and a Media Fellow at the Center for Social Media at American University. Her films include *Indians*, *Outlaws* and *Angie Debo* (PBS, American Experience), which won the Eric Barnouw Award of the Orga-

nization of American Historians, and *Perestroika from Below* (Ch4/UK). Her publications include writings in journals such as *Wide Angle*, *Cineaste*, *Radical History Review*, *Independent Documentary* and *Visual Anthropology Review*.

Director of Photography, Slawomir Grunberg has shot over 50 documentaries, four of which received Emmy Nominations. His independent works focus on critical social and political issues, and in 2000 he won the Emmy Award for his documentary, *School Prayer: A Community at War*. His Director of Photography credits include *Legacy*, which received an Academy Award Nomination for the best documentary feature in 2001, and *Sister Rose's Passion*, which won the Best in Documentary Short at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2004 and received an Academy Award Nomination for the best documentary short in 2005.

Editor, Gary Winter, is an editor of the CBS show, *48 Hours* since 1999. He is also the editor of the Warner Brothers feature film, *My Dog Skip*, and many television documentaries including the CNN 20th Anniversary Special, *Discovery Channel's Medical Breakthroughs*, *The Warrior Tradition* for the History Channel, *Ida B. Wells*, for *American Experience*, PBS and *A Century of Country* for TNN/CBS.

Narrator, Maria Hinojosa is a broadcast journalist who has worked for CBS, NPR, CNN, NBC and PBS. She was Senior Correspondent for the PBS magazine show, *NOW*, host of PBS show, "Maria Hinojosa: One-on-One", host of NPR's *Latino, USA* since 1995, and the host of the NBC public affairs show, *Visiones*. She is the author of *Raising Raul: Adventures Raising Myself and My Son and Crews: Gang Members Talk with Maria Hinojosa*. She has also won many awards including the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, the National Association of Hispanics Journalists' Radio Award and the National Council of La Raza's Ruben Salazar Award.

Web Designer, Ted Glass is a graphic designer and web developer whose work can be seen at: www.tedglass.com

Outreach Co-ordinator, Leah Sapin is an independent producer and outreach consultant who has worked with the BBC, Sundance Channel, Radical Media and Al Jazeera English. Recent outreach projects include *POV's* three-part *Adoption Stories* series on PBS, *Media That Matters* Festival collections 2007-2009 and *Cinereach Film Fellows* 2009-2010. Producer credits include work-in-progress feature documentary: *Pretty Old*, and short narrative *Swimming Away*.

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