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Community organizing and educational change: a reconnaissance

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Abstract Ten years ago community organizing as a form of educational change had only begun to challenge traditional models of school reform. Yet a decade later, community organizing has led to important changes in school and community relationships that have been documented by scholars in the areas of education, sociology, social work, and political science. Current US President Barack Obama, a former organizer who worked on the South Side of Chicago, has given new visibility to community organizing. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) has approved the creation of a new Special Interest Group (SIG) on the topic of community and youth organizing. This article traces the origins, spread, and impacts of community organizing on educational change, arguing that it provides an important repertoire of practices for change leaders.

Keywords Community · Power · Change · Schools · Reform

Ten years ago, we knew almost nothing about the potential of community organizing to catalyze educational change. Exactly two books had appeared on the subject. The first of these—my own *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* (1997)—documented and analyzed the rise of a network of "Alliance Schools" in Texas. Affiliated with Saul Alinsky's group, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and supported by State Superintendent of Education Lionel "Skip" Meno, the Alliance Schools were a coalition of over one hundred schools that were brought together to create new ways of assisting poor and working-class families to engage with schools to raise pupil achievement. Scattered in a crazy-

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quilt fashion about the state from high-immigrant communities like the *Segundo Barrio* in El Paso to older African-American neighborhoods like Oak Cliffs in Dallas, the Alliance Schools marked an exciting new departure in the application of community organizing strategies to school contexts.

The second book, political scientist Marion Orr's *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore, 1986–1998* (1998), described the manner in which another IAF group—Baltimoreans United In Leadership Development (or BUILD)—was creating civic capacity to improve schools in Maryland. As a declining industrial city with an almost entirely African-American student body in their public schools, Baltimore appeared headed on a downward trajectory during this period as it was outshone by regional competitors like Washington, DC, and New York City. Its school system was famously corrupt and ineffective. Yet BUILD was able to create a "Commonwealth Agreement" with civic and business leaders to guarantee jobs for district high school graduates and to facilitate their transition to higher education that became widely adopted by other American cities. Just how it did this—with racial politics at the center of a city marked by concentrated poverty and almost apartheid-like segregation of the black community from the white—was the focus of Orr's spellbinding account.

Other than these two books there was no scholarship on the topic of community organizing for educational change. Joyce Epstein's (1992) model of parent involvement in schools was widely cited by scholars, but its colorless and ahistorical description of factors such as positive home conditions, volunteering, and communication scarcely seemed to convey the dynamic, power-laden confrontations and negotiations typical of community organizing. Community involvement was to be nice, civil, and deferential. Parents were to be consulted, not collaborated with. Schools had their agendas, and if parents were to be involved, their roles were to be supportive. Meanwhile, the rapid rise of marketplace models of educational change reconfigured parents as clients, consumers, and customers, not civic actors and initiators.

And how do things look 10 years later? At first glance, it is unbelievable just how much things have changed. In January 2009 a former community organizer, Barack Obama, became the 44th president of the United States, and his gritty, on-the-ground descriptions of organizing on the South Side of Chicago (Obama 1995) have been read by millions. Three scholarly conferences on community organizing and school reform have been held at Harvard University, a Special Interest Group (SIG) on the topic has been established in the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and one leading scholar's best estimate (Warren forthcoming) is that roughly 500 of over 800 community organizing groups are now working in the area of educational change in the US. The community organizing strategies piloted by the Alliance Schools–such as home visits to parents, "house meetings" of groups of teachers with parents, "research actions" with school board members and academic experts, and "accountability sessions" with business and political leaders—have been adapted and extended in hundreds of other settings, many of them through collaborative initiatives with school districts and teachers' unions.

Hence, we are faced with a striking paradox: although conservative educational politics dominated the US national agenda from 2000 to 2008, the field of

community organizing for educational change exploded in the same period. A variety of contextual factors—such as the rise and ease of new information technologies, the compatibility of organizing strategies with other forms of social entrepreneurship such as charter schools, and even the rise of more precise ways of tracking and disseminating pupil achievement data—appear to have contributed to this surprising turn of events. Information technology has enabled organizing groups to communicate with one another with lightening speed about successful actions, and because many of the largest groups—such as the IAF, the People's Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), and the Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now (ACORN) have hundreds of affiliates in virtually all of the major US cities, news can spread virtually instantly among organizers. Likewise, although charter schools in many ways might seem to be antithetical to the traditional emphasis of community organizers on strengthening key institutions of the welfare state such as schools, the rise of numerous social justice academies affiliated with community-based organizations (CBOs) has enabled organizers to get much more traction in the educational sector than was previously possible in more bureaucratic environments. Finally, even pupil achievement and teacher quality data have been helpful to organizing groups, which have used them as "handles" to spark conversations with educators about pupil learning and to develop new teacher training programs to prepare low-income parents to transition into the profession (Shirley and Evans 2007).

All of this new flurry of activity at the school and community level has created enormous interest among scholars, such that increasing numbers are focusing their research and graduate-level courses on this area. Mark Warren at Harvard, initially trained as a sociologist, has turned from his first masterly overview (2001) of the multifaceted political agenda of the IAF to focus exclusively on community organizing and educational change throughout the United States (Warren 2005; forthcoming). Milbrey McLaughlin at Stanford, dismayed by the findings of "misery research" (2008, p. 176) indicating the inability of policy reforms to impact school site issues without considerable grass-roots leadership at the local level, has come to focus her latest research (2009) on community organizing as a powerful resource for knowledge utilization and capacity enhancement. Jeannie Oakes, John Rogers, and Martin Lipton, at the University of California Los Angeles, have broken new ground (Oakes and Rogers 2006) by reconnecting community organizing explicitly with the democratic theorizing of John Dewey (1916) and extending it in new directions that blend on-the-ground research with equity-driven change strategies. A cohort of scholars affiliated with Brown University and the Annenberg Institute (Mediratta et al. 2008) have developed a sophisticated blend of research strategies that have pushed beyond the earlier almost exclusive reliance on qualitative research to include hierarchical regression analyses that document strong correlations between high levels of intensity of community organizing in Alliance Schools in one city (Austin, Texas) and pupil achievement gains on Texas' standardized tests. Other scholars (Evans 2009; Ginwright et al. 2006; Su 2009a, b) have documented the rise of youth organizing as an important new component of community organizing. Finally, scholars also are tracking how tools from community organizing are now being applied to state-level reform initiatives

(Oakes et al. 2008; Renee 2006), some of which are affiliated with the popularity of a new group entitled Stand for Children, led by Jonah Edelman, the son of Marian Wright Edelman, the leader of the Children's Defense Fund (Evans 2009).

And just who is doing all of this community organizing for school reform? Some of the hundreds of CBOs are race-based, like BUILD, while others are focused on immigrant rights and second-language learners, like Padres Unidos in Denver. Others, such as the Jamaica Parents Organizing Project in Boston, focus on areas of particular interest, such as services for children with learning disabilities whose immigrant parents speak limited English. Some CBOs raise funds through individual membership dues, while others conduct "congregationally based community organizing," with dues paid by religious institutions. Some, such as the IAF and PICO, have modulated the confrontational politics that characterized Alinsky's original approach (Alinsky 1946, 1965, 1971) and now seek a more relational and sustainable form of leadership development over time (Chambers 2003; Wood 2002). What unites the different groups is a frank acknowledgment of the role of power in educational change and a set of strategies, largely but not exclusively derived from Alinsky and the IAF, that they use to shift power relationships to enhance the capacity of poor and working-class people to influence their children's educational opportunities.

Most of the research on community organizing and educational change (Evans 2009; McLaughlin 2009; Orr 1999; Osterman 2002; Putnam et al. 2003; Shirley 1997, 2002; Warren 2001) has been based on case study analysis, which has allowed scholars to track the myriad and contesting ways in which community organizers worked to improve school conditions. These accounts provide vivid depictions of the struggles entailed in community organizing with up-close descriptions of the whole host of problems—unsafe neighborhoods, the close proximity of crack houses across the street from to elementary schools, and parents working overtime on jobs that fail to provide a living wage or health care—that besiege poor and working class communities. The narratives have often been both brutally honest about the challenges of educational change yet also inspirational in terms of the abilities of ordinary people to improve schools given the right political guidance and support.

Still, there appeared to be a need for more rigorous scholarship on community organizing and educational change that would allow for more precise kinds of information about the impacts of organizing on schools. This lacuna began to be addressed in 2002 when the Charles Stuart Mott Foundation funded the Institute for Education and Social Policy, then at New York University and now at Brown, to begin a systematic investigation into the diverse modalities of education organizing and their impacts on pupil learning. The research findings have just been published (Mediratta et al. 2008) and are significant both in generating new knowledge and in setting a new standard for the customization of research design to the kinds of interventions made by CBOs.

In terms of research design, the Annenberg team identified seven urban school districts and targeted schools that were working closely with CBOs for in-depth study. Their research methods included 321 interviews, 509 teacher surveys, 124 youth member surveys, and 241 surveys of non-educators involved in community organizing for educational change. School district pupil achievement results,

graduation rates, and enrollments in college preparatory courses were also studied to illuminate correlations between organizing strategies and orthodox measures of educational improvement. Among the findings were the following:

- People Acting for Community Together (PACT) in Miami used a congregationally based organizing approaching matching parents with partner schools to focus on literacy instruction in elementary schools, and those schools improved from 27% pupils at proficiency in 2001 to 49% in 2005, far outpacing a demographically similar comparison set of schools in grades 3 and 4;
- Measuring the intensity of collaboration with the local IAF affiliate, Austin Interfaith, the Alliance Schools in Austin, Texas with higher levels of faculty engagement in education organizing showed larger percentages of students meeting minimum standards on Texas' state test when controlled for student SES, limited English proficiency, and after controlling for the effect of baseline test scores;
- A campaign by the Oakland Community Organization broke up that city's largest and most dysfunctional high schools, with the new, small schools showing improved graduation rates, increased enrollment in college-preparatory coursework, and improved ratings on California's Academic Performance Index;
- On a survey distributed across seven sites, young people who affiliated with education organizing projects reported on a higher level of civic engagement than a national comparison group and organizing experience was a significant predictor of enhanced academic motivation ($p = 0.004$).

Perhaps the most interesting finding of the research team was that community organizing is correlated with higher levels of social trust within schools and between schools and community members. Previous research has found social trust in schools to be a prerequisite for raising pupil academic achievement (Bryk and Schneider 2004). Surveys of teachers in the Alliance Schools in Austin showed that schools that had high levels of involvement with Austin Interfaith had higher levels of teacher–parent trust, sense of school community and safety, an achievement oriented culture, and parent involvement in the school than schools with less involvement. High levels of community organizing were also associated teacher–teacher trust, teachers' commitment to their school, and teachers' peer collaboration. The survey data indicate that organizing appears to be associated with a dilution of the individualism (Lortie 1975) and privatism (Little 1990; Zahorik 1987; Zielinsky and Hoy 1983) among teachers that research has found to be inimical to the creation of learning-enriched schools (Rosenholtz 1989). Given organizers' stated rhetoric about drawing individuals out of their isolation and creating new political capacity for attacking tenacious social problems, the survey data point to significant success in achieving these goals.

On the basis of the foregoing observations, one could argue that we are now approaching an important confluence between a rising tide of community organizing efforts and broader developments in theorizing and enacting educational change. Yet it is important to acknowledge real discrepancies and tensions between CBOs and schools. CBOs, for example, have to go through all of the prosaic everyday

struggles for survival of any nonprofit group or intermediary institution, and while educators can be sympathetic with parts of a CBO's activities they may nonetheless dissent when it comes to supporting their entire agenda. In my study (2002) of Valley Interfaith in South Texas, for example, I found that even though the community organization always supported teachers at school committee meetings around issues of salary and compensation, teachers bridled at the exhortion of their school administrators that they in turn should sacrifice their weekends or evenings to support Valley Interfaith's "accountability sessions" with business and political leaders in regard to housing, employment, and health care.

Other issues have surfaced in regard to the congregationally based community organizing of the IAF and PICO. Some educators fear that the engagement of churches, synagogues, and mosques in school politics can only bode ill for their autonomy and professional discretion. I once was a speaker at a district-wide professional development day for teachers in Houston, Texas, and the local IAF group had prepared to do training on community engagement. On that event a minister gave an opening homily to the teachers that clearly violated the separation of church and state guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution, and was accordingly resented by some of the teachers in attendance.

Community organizing, then, like any change strategy, offers a variety of different tools to educators and activists, but these need to be applied judiciously in the right context with full respect for the range of diversity in contemporary communities. An example from the United Kingdom of how this can be done has been documented in *The Fourth Way*; *The Inspiring Future for Educational Change* (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). We describe how the high-immigrant, low-income community of Tower Hamlets in London used several different organizing approaches to become the most turned-around Local Education Agency (LEA) in the UK. One strategy involved working with imams in neighborhood mosques to emphasize the importance of regular school attendance during prayer services. Another approach entailed grassroots mobilization to offer extended school services to children and families in regard to English language instruction and health care outside of school hours. Yet another component related to the use of workforce remodeling to hire and train community members as educational professionals, so that children began to see adults from their own communities as part of the everyday life and cultures of their schools. Directly contravening the emphasis on "deliverology" espoused by government leaders (Barber 2007a, b, p. 70), Tower Hamlets educators developed bottom-up strategies to create civic capacity that would be stretched across the school and community and endured through all of the different ups and downs and ins and outs of different ministerial reforms and prescriptions.

At the same time that these community organizing strategies were being piloted and modified as needed, Towers Hamlets educators skillfully mediated government testing and curricular mandates by accepting the reality of top–down pressures while resiliently setting their own learning goals and measuring them closely and consistently. Educators learned how to study and interpret data without responding to it reactively and substituting endless assessment and test preparation for deep and meaningful learning. Struggles in one school, such as a secondary school that went

into "special measures" (or "corrective action" in the US educational terminology) after taking in a large population of newly arrived Somali immigrant youth were seen as a collective responsibility for the LEA to address that had ramifications for all educators and all community members rather than an unfortunate outlier in a district that otherwise had its act together.

Tower Hamlets demonstrates the power of a sweeping educational vision, when supplemented and adapted by skillful teachers, engaged parents and community members, to improve urban public education today. Yet even here the lessons are incomplete for a broader agenda of educational change for the future. Just as the current fiscal crisis is leading to a fundamental transformation of state and economy in the US and abroad, so must education change to correspond to the new context of an increasingly globalized world. One can lament and protest the "decline of the local" (Foster 2004) and seek to contravene this through a thousand tactics, but any vision of community organizing that fails to acknowledge the dense web of interconnections within and across communities will be dangerously parochial and poorly prepare children for the future.

For this reason a well-conceptualized and capacious theory of educational change will have to pull on multiple change strategies, freely borrowing while mindfully adapting them to any given school or district context. In the US context this would mean retaining high levels of federal leadership in the area of school reform, but transitioning from the habit of commanding and prescribing characteristic of the Bush years to a more flexible and responsive approach that recognizes and encourages the untapped skills of communities and states to address their own challenges. It would mean the creation of dynamic lateral learning organizations that can help educators to learn not just within their own schools and districts but also across them, with particular emphasis placed upon breaking down the barriers that separate urban and rural school systems from suburban ones. The systematic gathering and studying of data should be maintained and in some instances increased, but in other cases, the fetishizing of data (Shirley and Hargreaves 2006) should lead to reductions of tests and transformations of accountability systems so that educators have more time to teach in ways that are personalized and precise. All of these later challenges will require a tenacious pursuit of what Linda Darling-Hammond (2008) has described as "the professionalization agenda," so that the incredibly complex nature of teaching today is understood and supported by the public at large.

It would be easy to learn the wrong lessons from community organizing for educational change in the scholarship that has been conducted to date. In many of the case studies to date (including my own), scholars have documented an older heroic model of charismatic school leadership which was decisive in too many instances, and schools struggled when these bold and dynamic principals were promoted or moved on. Even with a former community organizer as chief executive or as president in the US, the reality is that community organizing cannot, on its own, transform education. Education is also far too complex and nuanced of a field for any single political perspective or even the most gutsy and determined activists to attain an exclusive purchase on the many problems of reform. When adapted and

infused into a broader repertoire of change strategies, however, community organizing has much to offer for the way ahead.

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