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Study suggests positive impacts of community organizing on education

By DUANE M. ELLING

Community organizing can make major contributions to improving student achievement among young people from low-income and underserved neighborhoods, according to findings from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) at Brown University.

A preview of results from the six-year, Mott Foundation-funded exploration of the contributions of community organizing to school improvement, was unveiled this week by a panel of experts at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting in New York City. Approximately 200 participants attended the session, which featured Kavitha Mediratta and Seema Shah, co-authors of the new study, along with Charles Payne from the University of Chicago, Jeannie Oakes from the University of California-Los Angeles and Christine Doby, a program officer for the Mott Foundation.

The study was initiated in 2001 at eight sites across the country, with data collection and research by AISR.

Norm Fruchter, director of the Community Involvement Program (CIP), says the study confirms the important role that community organizing can play in shaping the future of communities, including improvements to school systems. Participation in organizing efforts also increases civic engagement, and knowledge and investment in education issues among residents of all ages, he says.

“Education reform is about changing the life outcomes of young people, particularly in low-income neighborhoods,” Fruchter said. “Organizing helps families discover and use their power to make those changes both meaningful and sustainable.”

In addition to substantiating the role that education-related organizing plays in improving students' educational outcomes -- including graduation from high school and increased college enrollment -- the study found that such efforts strengthened school-community relationships and stimulated changes in policy, practices and resource allocation.

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The seven communities currently participating in CIP included Austin, Texas; Bronx, New York; Chicago; Los Angeles; Miami; Oakland, California; and Philadelphia. Each site received \$100,000 per year from Mott to support the education organizing work and participation in the study.

"As education organizing began to grow in scope and depth, there were indications that student outcomes were being affected. However, there was no research-based documentation of these efforts," said Christine Doby, Mott Program Officer.

"Our funding was used to begin building a body of research and a discipline of research investigation on the role of community organizing in school reform. The findings reinforce our understanding of the important role that communities play in improving learning outcomes for kids in poor schools."

CIP's preliminary results are available in *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: A Preview of Research Findings*, at the Annenberg Institute's Web site. The full study is expected to be released this summer and will include an analysis of the specific organizing strategies used in each community.