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## Community Organizing Produces Positive Effects on Student Achievement, Educational Practices and Policies, and Resource Distribution

### Findings of Landmark Six-Year Study from Annenberg Institute for School Reform

October 5, 2009 -- Providence, RI -- Sophisticated community organizing at the grassroots level in seven American cities contributed significantly to improved student achievement, better educational practices, and more equitable resource distribution, expanding school capacity and equity in historically underserved communities.

These are [key findings of six years of research by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform](#) at Brown University, conducted with support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The study, led by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister, documents the impacts of seven community-based organizations on urban schools and districts. “[Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: A Case Study Series](#)” provides in-depth descriptions of the organizing campaigns of the seven groups (<http://www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>). Findings include:

- **Austin Interfaith (Austin, TX)** led organizing efforts that resulted in improved student performance on the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS); new funding for parent support specialists, after school programs, bilingual education services, professional development opportunities; and training for schools on parent and community engagement practices.
- Organizing by **Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (Bronx, NY)** and its youth affiliate, **Sistas and Brothas United**, reduced school overcrowding through the addition of 14,000 new classroom seats in the northwest Bronx and helped win a city-wide initiative to hire veteran lead teachers to mentor and support new teachers.
- The efforts of Chicago ACORN, now being continued under the leadership of **Action Now (Chicago, IL)**, led to better teacher recruitment practices for schools in low-income neighborhoods and the passage of the statewide Grow Your Own Teachers Act (2004) to improve teacher retention by training residents of high-turnover neighborhoods as teachers.
- Efforts by the **Community Coalition (Los Angeles, CA)** led to the adoption of a school board resolution mandating the A-G college preparatory sequence as the default curriculum provided to all LAUSD students; \$153M for repairs to schools in South LA and other high-needs areas; and \$350M to reduce overcrowding in South LA by building 4 new middle schools and 2 new high schools.
- **People Acting for Community Together (Miami, FL)** won the implementation of the Direct Instruction literacy program in 27 low-performing Miami-Dade schools, resulting in an increase from 27% to 49% (1998–2005) in the percent of students meeting state standards—a faster rate than at schools without the program; improved school climate in schools using DI, including a stronger sense of community and safety, achievement-oriented culture, teacher parent-trust and parent involvement in schools; and secured a \$7.25M legislative appropriation to expand DI statewide.

- The efforts of **Oakland Community Organizations (Oakland, CA)** led to the creation of 48 new small schools in Oakland's most under-served communities. Small schools reduced overcrowding and increased parent involvement, and since the 2000-2001 school year, these schools have achieved higher scores on the California Academic Performance Index (API) than the large schools they replaced. There also are early signs of increased graduation rates.
- **Youth United for Change** and **Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project (Philadelphia, PA)** helped establish small high schools which demonstrated higher rates of student attendance, decreased dropout rates and increased numbers of students who identify themselves as college-bound; and led campaigns which produced increased student access to rigorous curriculum, expanded access to counseling to promote graduation and college entry, library resources, new computers and Internet access in classrooms, and new school buildings.

Across the seven sites, the research found that effective organizing transformed the relationship parents and students had with education decision makers and policymakers. Parents and youth were both empowered by their participation, and were much more involved and engaged in - and knowledgeable about - their local schools and the education system.

The rigorous, mixed-methods research approach assessed the processes and impacts of organizing efforts over time and included interviews, observational data, surveys, and analysis of school demographic and outcome data.

“Community organizing for school reform has grown tremendously in the past decade, yet it is an under-researched and relatively undocumented phenomenon. Its impact on student educational outcomes has long been debated, and now we can point to consistent evidence, across multiple data sources, that effective community organizing can indeed have significant positive effects on student learning,” said Kavitha Mediratta, principal investigator of the study.

Community organizing for school reform is defined by initiatives that build power by mobilizing large numbers of people; focus on accountability, equity, and quality; use direct action tactics to apply pressure on decision-makers; and aim to transform the power relationships that have produced failing schools in low and moderate-income neighborhoods and communities of color.

This study found that these successful community organizing groups shared certain characteristics:

- Forwarded solution-oriented approaches -- identified, researched and presented sound solutions to educational challenges;
- Created groundswell of support -- motivated grassroots stakeholders to identify problems, find common interests, organize together to forward their agenda and generate buy-in from parents, students, and community members;
- Instituted leadership training for parents and students -- to teach them to effectively communicate their concerns and solutions and engage with policymakers;
- Established and persistently nurtured one-on-one dialogs and relationships with policymakers, school district leaders, and school-based educators. Served as “critical friends” - working both as collaborators and challengers to accomplish their goals;
- Combined system-level advocacy for policy improvement with school- and community-based activities to maintain the enthusiasm and engagement of parents, students, and community members in reform efforts.

“This study shows that effective community organizing efforts can transform the relationship between schools and communities and can alter the underlying power dynamics that determine schooling outcomes,” continued Mediratta.

“We’ve seen that people - through effective organizing and coordination - really do have the power to produce desired student educational outcomes and help achieve long-term, systemic change in education. We believe that investing in successful community organizing groups can result in positive educational outcomes for historically disadvantaged populations.”

*Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes*, a full synthesis of the study’s findings, will be published by Harvard Education Press later this month. Orders for the book can be placed online at <http://www.hepg.org/hepg/book/109/CommunityOrganizingForStrongerSchools>.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform ([www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)) at Brown University is a national policy-research and reform support organization with offices in Providence and New York City. Its focus is on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools by helping to build systems that coordinate educational supports and services—at school, at home and in the community—to provide all children with equitable opportunities and high-quality learning experiences.

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, established in 1926 in Flint, Michigan, by an automotive pioneer, is a private philanthropy committed to supporting projects that promote a just, equitable and sustainable society. It supports nonprofit programs throughout the U.S. and, on a limited geographic basis, internationally. Grantmaking is focused in four programs: Civil Society, Environment, Flint Area and Pathways Out of Poverty. Besides Flint, offices are located in metropolitan Detroit, Johannesburg (South Africa) and London. The Foundation, with year-end assets of approximately \$1.96 billion, made 558 grants totaling \$110.4 million in 2008. For more information, visit [www.mott.org](http://www.mott.org).

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