



Annenberg Institute
for School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

Organized Communities, Stronger Schools A Preview of Research Findings

THE STUDY SITES

For the past six years, the Community Involvement Program, now part of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, with funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, has been studying the impact on student outcomes of community organizing for school reform in seven communities. Below are summaries of the education initiatives of the seven organizations studied.

Austin Interfaith (Austin, TX) became involved in education issues through its support of a local bond package in 1990. In 1992, Austin Interfaith's parent organization, the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, won a commitment from the Texas State Education Department to create the Alliance Schools Network, and to provide funding for professional development, parent leadership training and afterschool programs in Texas schools. Since then, Austin Interfaith has worked directly with sixteen high-poverty low-performing schools in the Austin Independent School District, and has helped schools to implement new academic enrichment programs, teacher professional development and parent leadership training, and health services. District- and state-level work has focused on increasing district supports for high-poverty schools, increasing equity in statewide school funding, and proposing alternatives to district and statewide test-based accountability policies.

Chicago ACORN (Chicago, IL) began its education organizing following the passage of the 1988 Chicago School Governance Reform Act, which created new parent-majority councils and leveraged private foundation funding for parent leadership training. ACORN helped parents get elected on local school councils and provided training for local school council members. In order to increase the number of highly qualified teachers in inner city neighborhoods, in 2001 Chicago ACORN initiated a campaign that resulted in a statewide "Grow Your Own" initiative to recruit and prepare teachers for hard-to-staff schools. Other education efforts include advocating for facilities improvements in local schools, creating new small schools, and increasing district transparency—particularly regarding Chicago Public Schools' "Renaissance 2010" initiative to replace low-enrollment and low-performing schools in rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods with new schools. *Note:* In early 2008, the staff and board of Chicago ACORN left the organization to form a new organization, **Action Now**, that is continuing the education organizing and other work they initiated while part of ACORN.

Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment (Los Angeles, CA) was founded in 1990, to address social and economic conditions in South Los Angeles. Initial education organizing efforts focused on mobilizing local support for a statewide school facilities bond referendum. In 1997, the organization and its youth

organizing arm, **South Central Youth Empowered thru Action**, began organizing high school youth into school-based campaigns to improve neighborhood high schools. Initial campaigns focused on facilities improvements and college access tracking. Major campaigns include: winning passage of a bond act to bring more facilities resources to South LA schools, increasing academic rigor in the college preparatory curriculum and demanding access for all LA Unified School District high school graduates, expanding access to guidance counselors, and discouraging military recruitment on campuses.

Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project (EPOP) (Philadelphia, PA) began working in schools in 1993 to recruit community residents into neighborhood improvement efforts. The organization initiated school improvement campaigns in response to parent concerns about school safety and facilities. The organization subsequently developed school-based campaigns in five high-poverty elementary schools on a variety of issues, including access to full-day kindergarten and improved reading instruction. In 2001, EPOP began organizing at the district level and developed campaigns demanding greater parental access to school information, data, and staff, and equity in school funding.

Youth United for Change (YUC) (Philadelphia, PA) formed in 1993 to improve high school education in Philadelphia. School-based chapters of YUC have fought for and won school facilities repairs, college preparatory curriculum, youth voice presence in school improvement planning, positive student discipline strategies, and increased access to guidance and college counseling in local high schools. In 2002, YUC launched what became the organization's longest-running campaign to transform large failing high schools into campuses of small schools. The organization has also mounted district-level campaigns to improve testing practices and school safety and disciplinary strategies in Philadelphia high schools. YUC is affiliated with EPOP.

Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC) (Bronx, NY) formally initiated an education committee in 1995 in response to parent frustration at extensive and ongoing school overcrowding in the school district. Initial campaigns focused on alleviating school overcrowding through facilities improvements and securing funding for new school construction. **Sistas and Brothas United (SBU)**, the youth organizing arm for NWBCCC, began as a youth committee in 1999, and became an NWBCCC affiliate in 2000. Major adult and youth campaigns include: addressing school facilities and overcrowding, promoting school safety improvements, expanding student access to guidance and college counseling, increasing school funding, and improving teacher quality and professional development. In 2005, SBU opened a new small high school, the Leadership Institute, in partnership with the New York City Department of Education.

Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) (Oakland, CA) began organizing to address school safety after concerns were raised in church-based local organizing committees in 1989. Early campaigns focused on school-level issues, such as drug-free school zones, as well as district-wide policy to expand school-to-work and class size reduction programs. In 1998 OCO formed an alliance with the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools to develop and advocate for a district-wide strategy of new small autonomous schools. In 2000, the district passed a new small schools policy that required

substantial parent and community engagement in small school design and implementation. To date, the district has opened 48 new small schools. Through the PICO California Network of faith-based community organizations, OCO has secured billions in state funds for afterschool programs, school repair and construction, and parent/teacher home visits.

People Acting for Community Together (PACT) (Miami, FL) began organizing for school reform in 1995, when congregation members identified poor school performance as a critical issue facing their communities. Since then PACT has led campaigns to improve schooling outcomes in low-performing, high-poverty elementary schools in the Miami Dade County Public School District. The organization's most high-profile campaign brought Direct Instruction into 27 low-performing elementary schools in the district between 1997 and 2005, when the program was eliminated by new district leadership. Since then, PACT has developed campaigns advocating for increased school funding, higher academic standards, and greater access for low income families to the state's voluntary pre-kindergarten program.