

Partners for Change: Public Schools and Community-Based Organizations

Mark R. Warren

Community-based organizations can play important mediating roles to break down isolation and connect schools and the communities they serve.

Some of the research upon which this article rests was collected with Soo Hong, Carolyn Leung, and Phitsamay Sychitkikhong Uy, doctoral students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

What sense does it make to try to reform urban schools while the communities around them stagnate or collapse? Conversely, can community building and development efforts succeed in revitalizing inner-city neighborhoods if the public schools within them continue to fail their students? Urban schools and communities share a common fate. Yet, until recently, school reformers and community builders have worked in isolation from each other.

Indeed, twenty years ago, one would be hard-pressed to find a community-based organization (CBO) that was actively working on education issues. Now, however, most CBOs realize that educational success provides the key to the future economic well-being of the children they serve. Furthermore, many would like to attract middle-class families back into their urban neighborhoods, and they would like to keep families who improve their status from leaving the neighborhood behind. They cannot achieve those goals if neighborhood schools are failing.

Many public schools, for their part, find themselves disconnected from the neighborhoods they serve. As Pedro Noguera (1996), among others, has

noted, teachers and school staff typically commute to their schools and have little understanding of or connection with the lives of their students outside of school in their families and neighborhoods. Yet, educators increasingly realize that they cannot succeed without a more holistic approach. They understand that children cannot learn well if they lack adequate housing, health care, nutrition, and safe and secure environments – or if their parents are over-stressed as a result of low wages and insecure employment (see, for example, Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1997). And they increasingly recognize that parental involvement in the education of children can improve learning (Henderson & Mapp 2002).

Community-Based Organizations as Relational Intermediaries

School leaders typically lack expertise in how to provide services to families or engage them in meaningful ways. Many CBOs, however, have established roots in neighborhoods around schools and stronger connections to families. More than schools, CBOs have an appreciation for the cultural and social assets of communities, and this is critical to fostering meaningful partner-

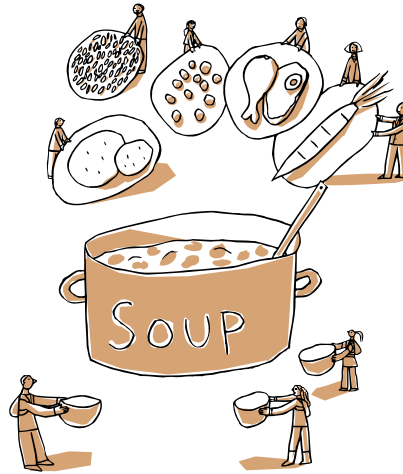
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ships between schools and families. As a result, CBOs can play an important intermediary role in building relationships between families and their children's schools where they do not typically exist.

As school and CBO leaders have come to understand their mutual interests, a wide range has emerged of initiatives that seek to forge collaborations between CBOs and public schools. These partnerships can take different forms, but it is useful to contrast *service* and *organizing* approaches; schools have much to gain from both types of partnerships. My research has focused on the value of the social relationships built through both types of these collaborations.

Some CBOs bring their expertise in serving the needs of low-income families to schools. This is the central idea behind community schools, also known as full-service schools. In these partnerships, CBOs work with schools to provide health services in the school building to children, their families, and, sometimes, the broader community. They also provide after-school programs for children and adult education classes for their parents.

But something more than service provision happens here. As families enter the school for needed services, they begin to form relationships with each other and with school personnel, building what scholars call *social capital*. In fact, many community school advocates argue that services should not simply be “add-ons” to an otherwise unchanged school. Rather, as teachers consult with health-care providers and build relationships with parents, they



understand their students better and can, therefore, improve the way they teach children.¹

Community organizing groups focus, first, on the building of social capital itself – that is, on generating participation and leadership by parents and other members of the school community. For example, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) trains over one hundred “parent mentors” each year across nine neighborhood schools. The parent mentors meet regularly to share their concerns with each other and receive leadership training from LSNA organizers. As they build their capacity and learn to collaborate with educators, they develop initiatives to help the school better meet the needs of children and their families. Parent leaders developed through the LSNA program have gone

¹ See, for example, my discussion of the Quitman Street Community School in Newark in Warren (2005). For a broader discussion of community schools, see Dryfoos, Quinn, and Barkin (2005).

on to work with educators to open community learning centers at the schools and play important roles in a variety of other programs.²

Social Capital: Building Capacity for Change

In whatever ways schools and CBOs collaborate, the building of new relationships appears critical to school change. In recent years, social scientists have been actively engaged in showing the many benefits of relationships, or social capital (see, for example, Saegert, Thompson & Warren 2001). Like financial capital (money) and human capital

sage from all the adults around them – in the home, in the school, and in the neighborhood as they are walking home.

Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2002) have shown that schools with higher levels of trusting relationships are better able to move forward with school reform initiatives. This is, in part, because social capital in the form of strong relationships also promotes civic engagement. In other words, parents and other community members are more likely to participate in activities when they know other people and trust them. School leaders often get frustrated when they send flyers home for events and few parents show up. Yet research has consistently shown that people are most likely to attend a meeting when someone they know personally asks them to come. Absent real relationships, flyers don't work well. With a network of social relationships, schools build a collective resource for action.

It is not necessarily easy to build social capital where it is lacking, especially the kind of “bridging” relationships that cross lines of difference. Efforts to build trust and to foster meaningful collaboration between and among principals, teachers, parents, and community members need to confront power differentials across the groups. If not, reform efforts can be derailed by mistrust and unresolved conflicts, as Bryk and Schneider (2002) have shown, or parents can withdraw if they feel they are being treated as pawns rather than respected as change agents.

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(education), social capital is a resource that can help individuals or groups achieve their goals. In other words, when people are connected and know each other well, they can work together to make their schools and communities better.

This kind of “social closure,” as it is called, helps raise healthier children. For example, in community schools, parents and teachers can set standards for student behavior and learning expectations and then work together to make sure children get the same mes-

² For a more extensive discussion of the work of LSNA, see Warren (2005) and Brown (2007).



Relational Power: Addressing Difference

The concept of *relational power* offers a useful way to approach issues of power in school-community collaboration. Relational power can be contrasted with *unilateral power*. Unilateral power emphasizes “power over” others – the capacity to get others to do your bidding. Yet relational power emphasizes a different aspect, “power with.” It reflects the power to get things done collectively. Unilateral power is zero-sum, typically with winners and losers. By contrast, relational power should reflect a “win-win” situation.

Utilizing the concept of relational power can be helpful, first of all, because it puts issues of power and difference on the table. School personnel are notoriously resistant to discussion of issues of race and power. In fact, Mica Pollock (2004) has called schools “colormute.” Moreover, many teachers do not feel very powerful themselves; rather, many, especially new teachers, report feeling isolated and overwhelmed (Johnson 2004). Nevertheless, teachers have greater education and status in

relation to low-income parents of color, and they hold a powerful position in relation to a parent’s child. In fact, many urban teachers hold deficit views of low-income parents of color (Valencia & Black 2002), seeing them as uncaring about education or as part of “the problem.”

Building meaningful collaboration based upon mutual respect requires addressing these stereotypes. In fact, many studies show that dealing with conflict, rather than avoiding it, leads to stronger collaboration (see, for example, Heckman, Scull & Conley 1996). Community organizing groups, like the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), bring expertise on relationship building across lines of race and class. The Texas IAF network has build partnerships with over 120 schools across the state.

In my research on these “Alliance Schools,” as they are called, I repeatedly heard community organizers state that the tension that occurs initially in open

conversations is necessary and healthy (Warren 2001; Warren 2005). Many parents in low-income communities have failed in school themselves. Moreover, as John Diamond and Kimberly Gomez (2004) have shown, many African American parents mistrust teachers and have serious concerns about racism. Teachers are sometimes afraid to deal with these issues, fearing that open conflict will lead to defensiveness and hurt feelings. So the context of collaboration matters, as does an openness to change. Under guidance from professional organizers, teachers and parents can agree to talk about these issues for the purpose of finding a way to work together. Ultimately, they share an interest in improving schools to better serve the children for whom they both care.

My research has also suggested that building relationships *among* parents helps create better conditions for meaningful participation with educators. This point is critical because schools typically view parent involve-

ment as individualistic: it's about a parent's support of her own child at home or about the connection between one parent and her child's teacher.

However, on her own, a low-income parent typically lacks the status and education to collaborate as an equal with her child's teacher (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau 2003). But as parents come together to share their experiences, as they do in LSNA, they gain the confidence to raise their concerns, and they start to form a community. When parents view themselves as a collective group and their families as a community bounded by similar interests and desires, a potential foundation to act collectively for the benefit of all children can emerge. Drawing upon mutual support, parents can enter schools as actors ready for more powerful and meaningful forms of collaboration with educators.

The Principal as Collaborative Leader

Although the community organizer plays a key role as intermediary and catalyst for change, the principal also plays an important role in fostering collaboration. Traditionally, principals have served as gatekeepers for schools, fending off community “interference,” and acting as top-down, “unilateral” administrators within schools (Goldring 1990; Hollister 1979). Newer thinking advocates the advantages of *distributed leadership* within the school (see, for example, Spillane 2006) – a more collaborative style of engaging teachers akin to notions of relational power. Community partnerships, however, entail yet a further step – toward engaging non-educators as leaders in the school community, which requires principals to cross boundaries and share their power even more broadly.

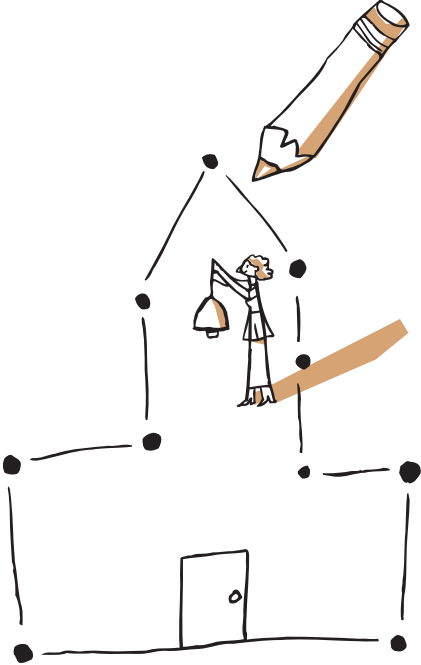
Increasing parent power through collaboration does not require that teachers lose their authority as experts in education. But it does require that teachers enter authentic processes of relationship building and engagement with parents and community leaders.

There is tension here. Principals need to recognize that teachers have expertise in education *and* that parent and other community leaders have a legitimate role to play in decisions about educational issues. Increasing parent power through collaboration does not require that teachers lose their authority as experts in education. But it does require that teachers enter authentic processes of relationship building and engagement with parents and community leaders. Rather than approaching parents with the agenda of teaching them how to be better parents or simply to support the school's agenda, the relational approach engages parents around their own interests and values and respects their contributions. In this process, both educators and parents grow and change, potentially forming a learning community together.

High-stakes testing regimes have put tremendous pressure on principals. These regimes often work to narrow the purposes of schooling to producing increases in scores; they can crowd out the space for the kind of collaborative experiments discussed here. Investing in building social capital takes time. Yet it promises a more holistic approach to student learning and development through the broader strengthening of community and civic life. Despite the pressure of testing regimes, many school leaders are beginning to see their school as one of a set of institutions that can anchor poor neighborhoods in partnership with other community organizations.

A Broader Vision of Collaboration

So far in this article, I have focused on change at the individual school level. However, that perspective is, ultimately, too narrow. Individual schools can do a



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better job of educating inner-city children when they form partnerships with locally based CBOs. However, it is patently unreasonable to expect that this partnership alone can compensate for the effects of poverty and racism.

Urban schools suffer from a lack of resources tied to their location in poor communities. They often have less-qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, older buildings in need of serious repair and upgrading, inadequate textbooks, and outdated facilities. Meanwhile, the socio-economic conditions faced by families in these communities lie in deep structures of inequality and power differentials in American society. Governments at many levels could address low pay, inadequate health care, the lack of affordable housing, and many other conditions *if* the political will existed to do so. In other words, poverty is a problem of power – or the lack of power.

Partnerships that go beyond individual schools to the district level could help move collaborations towards a scale more commensurate with need. School districts can direct extra resources to support innovative projects between CBOs and schools and allow the kind of flexibility in policies that partnerships often require. The Austin Independent

School District, for example, has provided this kind of support to the IAF's Alliance Schools network in Texas. More than that, school administrations could work with citywide networks of CBOs to develop strategies to foster partnerships across the district. Chicago Public Schools, for example, has worked with a network of philanthropic, corporate, and community organizations to adopt a districtwide strategy to build community schools.

Ultimately, however, addressing the structural inequality in American education and community life requires building a political constituency for a combined agenda. As Jean Anyon (2005) has suggested, a movement for education reform might provide the backbone for advancing a broader social agenda for urban families. Collaborations with broad-based community organizations whose constituents have their children in urban schools can supply the foundation for the political effort necessary to address school and community inequality.

Some kinds of partnerships between schools and community organizing networks show real promise in this direction. The Texas IAF network, for itself, brings community resources into schools to help them improve. However, it also brings schools out of themselves, engaging parents and teachers in collaborative efforts

with other community leaders to build affordable housing, improve health care, and foster economic development.

School-community collaborations at the individual school level can, in fact, provide a foundation for larger political constituency building. My research has suggested that people, especially those without human and financial capital, are more likely to engage in civic and political life through their social relationships. The first step in this process is for people to build face-to-face relationships at the most immediate level – for example, in their neighborhood schools. Through that experience, they can gain the skills and build the confidence conducive to participation in wider efforts in their cities and beyond.

That experience, in turn, can help parents, teachers, and community residents become stronger leaders at the school and neighborhood level. Larger collaborations for systemic change are still rather rare. However, partnerships between individual schools and CBOs provide some of our best hope for creating the kind of change we need – both in individual schools and communities and in our broader society.

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