

Why Community Organizing?

In 2000, a group of community organizers and public school parents involved with Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) undertook a simple, yet profound, task. They sketched a map of their city. First, they charted elementary schools located in the wealthy hills section of Oakland. Then they mapped schools in the low-lying flatlands of the city. For each school they noted the number of students attending and its ranking on the state Academic Performance Index (API). The map revealed dramatic disparities between smaller, higher-performing schools in the hills and overcrowded, low-performing schools in the flatlands. Schools in the hills ranged in size from 240 to 370 students, compared with student populations of up to 1,400 in the flatlands. While hills schools boasted API rankings at the top end of the performance scale, flatland schools were almost universally ranked at the bottom. In bold letters, the map's headline asked, "Is This Fair?"

Oakland Community Organizations' question crystallizes an obvious but often neglected truth: the world is pretty much in agreement on what educational experiences children need and deserve. Educators, municipal leaders, parents, and even children have an intuitive sense of the schooling environment and opportunities that foster children's academic, social, civic, and physical development. Anyone who doubts this point need only visit schools in our nation's wealthier communities to observe the high-quality schooling that supports children's success.

This is not to say that all children learn the same way, or that inner-city schools should replicate the strategies of their affluent or suburban counterparts. The enduring question that decades of school reform have failed to solve is how, as a nation, we can ensure that inner-city schools—what writer and researcher Norm Fruchter calls “the basements of opportunity in American schooling”—provide the kind of educational experiences students need to flourish.¹ Put simply, how do urban schools develop the capacity to deliver educational opportunity to the students who need it most?

THE PROBLEM OF POWER

Why are low-performing urban public schools the way they are? Groups like Oakland Community Organizations believe that the poor conditions and outcomes of urban public schools stem not from a lack of technical know-how, but from the differential distribution of power in society by class, race, gender, and the like. Poor communities, like those in the flatlands of Oakland, have overcrowded schools with dismal levels of academic achievement because local residents lack the political power to force systems to invest the necessary resources and capacity in these schools.

The premise that community conditions are shaped by political power, and that improving undesirable conditions requires building the power of neighborhood constituencies, draws on a long tradition of social justice organizing in the United States. The civil rights, women’s liberation, immigrant rights, and labor movements all used organizing strategies and imparted methods, tactics, values, and norms that shape community organizing today.

Though school reform organizing builds on this history, it is also grounded in theories of social capital in economic and educational attainment. First conceptualized by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, *social capital* refers to the benefits gained by individuals through the social context of community life.² Trust, shared values, and a sense of obligation and connectedness between community members provide the basis for social networks through which community members can gain benefits from their relationships with those around them and, in return, facilitate benefits for others. Social networks are not static but they can be reinforcing—that is, social cohesion is shaped by the degree to which members perceive gains as having material or social value and are willing to invest in maintaining them. To the extent that individuals in the network have access to

economic resources and cultural capital, such social networks can open up new possibilities for community members; for example, these networks can help youth find summer employment opportunities, or help parents identify good schools for their children.

Within the field of public education, social capital theory has helped to elaborate the positive and negative effects of social context on educational outcomes. Instrumental studies in the 1970s and '80s explored the influence of racial isolation on the opportunities available to youth of color, and the ways in which familial cultural capital shapes children's educational opportunities, capacities, and outcomes.³

But the concept of social capital captured national attention when Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam applied social capital theory to the relationship between levels of civic engagement in public life and the economic well-being of communities and nations. Drawing on a study of civic life in Italy, Putnam observed that functional communities have high levels of social capital and generate new social capital for members through their participation in voluntary associations. Applying this finding to American life, Putnam noted a decline of participation in traditional forms of associational activity (like bowling leagues and the PTA) that, he argued, threatened to have grave consequences for the economic strength and social vitality of the United States.⁴

Putnam's theoretical and empirical assertions regarding social capital have been the subject of some debate, particularly for their failure to address the "complex set of power-laden relationships—both internally, within communities, and externally, between actors in the communities and the rest of the world," that profoundly influence the outcomes of social capital for community members.⁵ Nonetheless, social capital's rising prominence in democratic political theory during the 1990s brought new legitimacy to community organizing, which had been previously associated with radical activism. Along with a host of community building and community development projects, community organizing gained support among scholars and funders for its potential to build new social capital by increasing public engagement in civic life and, in doing so, increasing economic opportunity and reducing social isolation for racially and economically marginalized communities.⁶

Although the principles of community organizing are consistent with social capital theory, organizing for public school reform brings two core propositions to the fore:

- First, building new social capital, while necessary, does not mean that communities will possess the *political* capital needed to rectify inequity and ensure educational opportunity for its members. How political capital flows, and to whom it flows, determines who reaps the benefits of the wealth of economic resources in the United States—and who does not. From a community organizing perspective, the central problem is not the lack of social capital in poor communities and communities of color, but rather the lack of democratic control over how economic and cultural resources (which enrich the benefits communities gain from social capital) are distributed and deployed.
- Second, because what happens in schools is so deeply intertwined with the social and economic conditions of communities, organizing groups conceive of and pursue school improvement in the context of community improvement. Organizing groups thus embed education reform activities within a larger frame of strategic political action to assert stronger accountability over existing resources in their communities and gain access to new forms of capital. Creating the kind of educational opportunities comparable to those found in affluent communities begins outside of schools, not in the form of services or advocacy for families, but through community-based efforts to build power.

What Is Community Organizing?

In community organizing, power is defined as the ability to act. A key source of power in low-income communities is the capacity to mobilize large numbers of community members to challenge political priorities that keep things the way they are. Developing an organized constituency is labor-intensive, ongoing, and iterative. The process begins with the strategic development of relationships between people who are directly affected by low-performing schools. Whether through neighborhood outreach, in which organizers knock on doors of residents, or through institution-based strategies, in which organizers identify and meet people through informal networks in churches or schools, organizers aim to engage people to actively confront and change unjust conditions.

In school reform organizing, parents, students, community members, and sometimes educators are invited into a group process in which they

discuss concerns and analyze causes of problems in their schools. Often this process involves research activities, such as conducting surveys, examining school data, consulting academic research and experts, and meeting with decision makers to explore issues and the feasibility of various reform proposals or “demands.” A crucial component of the organizing process is the *power analysis*—that is, an assessment of who has the institutional authority to make decisions concerning organizing demands, and which allies might be mobilized in support of the organizing group’s campaign.

Organizing groups use the power of numbers to gain the attention of decision makers. But their persuasive sway stems not only from the ability to mobilize large numbers of people directly affected by poor schooling quality, but also from members’ knowledge of schooling issues, the strength of their proposed solutions, their relationships with influential allies, and the legitimacy of their demands for justice for poor and disenfranchised communities. Each “win” draws in new members, strengthening their development as organizational leaders, and building cohesion within the group. The growing base of supporters and sense of shared purpose expands the organization’s power and enables it to take on more complex issues and ambitious campaigns.

This book explores the potential of the community organizing as a strategy for public education reform. Does the effort to equalize power relationships contribute to improved educational outcomes for low income urban students of color? If so, in what ways is community organizing transforming public schools, and under what circumstances?

Drawing on a six-year, mixed-methods, national study of community organizing, we discuss how community organizing is influencing the capacity of schools to educate students successfully. What lessons can be drawn about promising strategies for successful organizing in different contexts? What are the implications for alliance building with educators? In Part One, we examine the field of education organizing nationally and offer evidence from our study on the impact of organizing on districts, schools, and student educational outcomes. Part Two explores how groups are organizing to improve schools, with a focus on delineating the strategic choices and organizational characteristics that foster successful initiatives. In Part Three, we consider the implications of school reform organizing for increased civic engagement in communities and stronger school-community alliances for sustained and lasting reform. We close with a discussion of challenges facing this burgeoning field as it enters a new era of American politics.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To date, research on community organizing for school reform has been mostly qualitative, and includes numerous reports, as well as excellent and detailed book-length analyses of organizing efforts.⁷ But few research studies have assessed the effect of community organizing on local schools and communities. Our research offers the largest and most comprehensive longitudinal analysis to date of the relationship between community organizing and student educational outcomes.

Beginning in 2003, our research team collected and analyzed a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data on the school reform organizing of eight groups nationally. All are mature groups with at least five years of education organizing experience prior to the start of the study. These groups, listed in table I.1, were also selected for their variation across different organizing models, the diversity of their core constituencies, and their geographic location.

Researchers reviewed documentary information on organizing campaigns and “wins” and interviewed a wide range of stakeholders in each site, including educators who were targeted by organizing groups’ campaigns (see table I.2). The voices of the organizers, educators, parents, and youth we interviewed during the course of our research are interspersed throughout this book. We also surveyed organizing group members and teachers, and examined publicly available administrative data on the schools involved in each group’s campaigns. These data were analyzed to understand perceptions of the impact of organizing across multiple stakeholders, and to guide our analysis of student educational outcomes.⁸

Like most community change efforts, community organizing for school reform is multidimensional in scope, involving a diverse set of actors in a range of tactics to promote reform. Our mixed-method multisite case study design responds to three challenges inherent to such complex initiatives:

Causality:

Research designs typically used to establish causal inferences between actions and outcomes are not particularly useful in assessing the impact of community organizing for school reform, given the dynamic nature of organizing and schooling change. Randomized field trials that assign schools to “treatment” and “nontreatment” assume a level of control over context that is not generally the case in organizing initiatives. Organizing groups make decisions based on the real-time priorities of community members

TABLE I.1 Study sites

Study site	Youth organizing	National network
Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC)	Sistas and Brothas United (SBU)	
Oakland Community Organizations		PICO National Network
Chicago ACORN *		Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now (ACORN)
Austin Interfaith		Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)
Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH)		Gamaliel Foundation
People Acting for Community Together (PACT) (Miami)		Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART)
Community Coalition (Los Angeles)	South Central Youth Empowered thru Action (SCYEA)	
Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project (EPOP)**	Youth United for Change (YUC)	PICO National Network

*Note: The work described in this book was carried out by Chicago ACORN until January 2008, when the director, staff, and board left ACORN to start a new group called Action Now; they are continuing the education and other organizing campaigns they initiated while affiliated with ACORN.

**Note: In 2009, EPOP separated from the PICO National Network.

and the urgency of problems in their local schools. Intervention strategies are constantly in flux, as are the set of schools targeted for reform.

Even if a true experimental design were possible, asserting organizing as the “cause” of schooling changes is inherently suspect, given the many contextual factors also in play and the difficulties in controlling for these factors through statistical methods. High turnover of superintendents,

TABLE 1.2 Data sources

Data sources	Scope of data
Archival documents	Review of materials produced by the organizations, including grant reports, training materials, and brochures, to understand organizational practices
Adult member survey	241 respondents from the core leadership of seven groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measured level of involvement in organizing and impact of involvement on civic and school engagement
Youth survey	124 youth members from the core leadership of three groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measured level of involvement in organizing and impact of involvement on political and community engagement and school motivation
Observations	75 observations of leadership development sessions, public actions, and negotiations with policymakers
Interviews	321 interviews of parents, youth, organizers, school- and district-level educators, and other education stakeholders to understand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational theory of change and trajectory of organizing campaigns • Impacts of organizing on adult and youth leaders • Impacts of organizing on district- and school-level policies and practices
Teacher survey	509 teachers in Oakland, Miami, and Austin (sites where intensive school-based organizing had occurred) using a matched comparison design: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measured teacher perceptions of school climate, professional culture, and instructional culture • Analyses of teacher characteristics found no significant differences in demographics or years of teaching experience between teachers in target and comparison schools.
Public administrative data	Analysis of district-level data such as graduation rates, dropout rates, and demographic data to assess school district context and measure student outcomes
Media coverage	1,700 articles of local media coverage on education to understand shifts in policy contexts

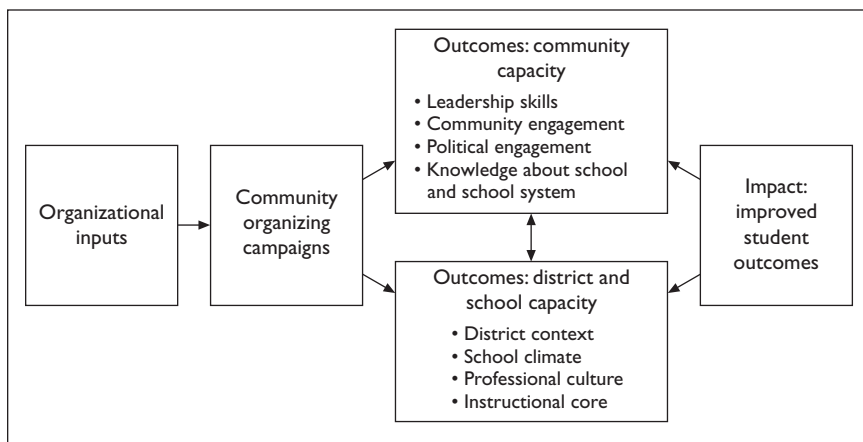
principals, teachers, and students; the presence of other reforms at the school; and the ebbs and flows of organizing itself that occur over time potentially confound the results of statistical analyses.⁹ In our study, inferences in support of our research hypotheses are based on the consistency of evidence across multiple data sources and analyses, rather than the establishment of a causal link between the actions of organizing groups and the outcomes they promote.

- *Context:* Whether focused at the school, district, state, or federal level, education organizing demands and strategies are influenced by the historical moment in which groups emerged, their organizational capacity at any given time, and the opportunities for successfully moving an agenda in their political environment. All of these factors shape how organizing groups operate and the reform interventions they define. In our study we reviewed a wide range of organizational documentation and media coverage to understand how leadership transitions, new reforms, policy initiatives, and other factors in groups' contexts influenced organizing campaigns. Though we draw insights about the potential of organizing across the eight study sites, we caution the reader to bear in mind the intrinsically context-specific nature of organizing work.
- *Construct validity:* *Construct validity* refers to the extent to which research measures are appropriate to the phenomenon under study. Clarifying the phenomenon can be difficult in an organizing context, where strategy and interventions are rarely fixed. Our research draws extensively on the literature on community organizing and education reform. We also engaged in a collaborative research process with our sites to test the legitimacy of our research questions, design, findings, and conclusions. Such dialogue was necessary to ensure that groups' intimate knowledge of their work and the local school, district, and community contexts informed our methods, data collection instruments, and understanding and interpretation of the data.

Mapping Organizing Theory to School Change

With the above methodological caveats in mind, our research asserts a theory of action for how community organizing groups work to reach their school reform goals. This theory of action, shown in figure I.1, proceeds

FIGURE 1.1 Theory of action



as follows: In the initial phases, organizing groups recruit and convene community residents, parents, and young people impacted by low-quality schools to develop relationships with each other and discuss and define problems and solutions. Engagement in organizing campaigns deepens the skills and leadership of community members involved in the effort. Parents, youth, and community residents develop an awareness of their power to create change through collective action. They develop the confidence and skills to articulate their self-interest and speak on behalf of their community. And they expand their understanding of how to address schooling problems.

Through cycles of campaigns, organizing groups build their organizational power to influence district priorities and operating procedures. To the extent that organizing demands focus on increasing equity, quality and accountability in public schools, greater organizational influence can generate new policy and resource allocations that expand the possibilities for reform in schools serving low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Successive campaign victories combined with increased parent, youth, and community engagement in schools can also help generate improvement in the capacity of schools to support successful student learning.

Community capacity and school system capacity are dynamically related. Greater knowledge of schools among parents or youth, for example, increases their ability to propose strategies for improvement in schools. Similarly, greater awareness among school leaders of the community organization's mobilization power and political influence increases the likelihood

that they will acknowledge community proposals for change. Communities and schools with these expanded capacities interact to generate improved student educational outcomes.

Our theory of action offers a simple and linear conceptualization of the path to educational improvement, although, as we will discuss, the organizing path to change is far from simple or linear. The organizing process is often quite circuitous, and is interspersed with inspiring gains and frustrating setbacks as groups search for ways to transform schools into the enriching environments their communities deserve.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Part One examines the emerging field of community organizing for school reform through the experiences of the eight organizations in our study. In chapter 1, we discuss historical influences on how groups work, elaborating on the ways in which Saul Alinsky's work, together with the traditions of farm-worker organizing and the civil rights and women's movements, shape organizing methodology today. We then examine why organizations began organizing for school reform and trace the arc of the developing field across the past two decades. Community organizing groups' entrée to education issues often came through problems at the nexus of neighborhood revitalization and school improvement, such as drug-free school zones and school safety, or through members' concerns about the poor quality of their children's schools. Over time, education organizing shifted from a focus on local school problems, such as overcrowded or crumbling school facilities and the lack of crossing guards, to pursue district- and statewide campaigns for larger-scale systemic reform.

In chapter 2, we examine the evidence of the impact of community organizing on districts, schools, and student educational outcomes. Our research found that organizing campaigns increased the responsiveness of district leaders to the concerns of low-income parents and community members; secured substantial new resources and ensured their equitable distribution; and introduced new policy to improve curriculum, school organization, teacher recruitment and preparation, and parent engagement. At the school level, organizing groups' involvement led to improvements in school climate, professional culture among educators, and schools' instructional core (resources and strategies). In three sites where school-based organizing was sustained over a number of years, we found evidence of improved student achievement as measured by standardized tests and graduation rates.

Part Two delves into the strategies that organizing groups have developed to move complex reform campaigns. Chapter 3 discusses how organizing groups have balanced district and school-level strategies. Drawing on the work of three sites—Austin Interfaith, Oakland Community Organizations, and People Acting for Community Together in Miami, we argue that pressure and engagement at both the school and system levels is essential to achieve reform. In chapter 4, we turn to the role of coalitions in moving equity demands at the system level, highlighting campaigns led by Youth United for Change in Philadelphia, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition in New York City, the Community Coalition in Los Angeles, and Chicago ACORN. We discuss how and why organizing groups have convened broad-based civic coalitions as part of district- and state-level campaigns, and examine how organizing groups' participation in civic coalitions influences reform priorities and coalition dynamics. In chapter 5, we examine the challenges of scaling up reform, exploring the competing pressures of “going deep” to change the normative beliefs of educators, district leaders, and local stakeholder organizations about the capacity of communities they serve, while also “reaching wide” to develop the political relationships necessary to initiate, expand, and sustain reform.

In Part Three, we discuss the implications of education organizing for longer-term community capacity and alliances with educators. Chapter 6 examines how organizing groups, through the careful development of grassroots leadership, build new community capacity in the form of social and political capital to demand justice. In addition to the skills of campaign planning, parents, youth, and community members of organizing groups develop new knowledge about schools and the political system, new aspirations for themselves and their families, and, crucially, a deep sense of their own capacity to create change through collective community action. In chapter 7, we explore the relationships that organizing groups have built with teachers, principals, and district officials and identify the conditions that facilitate or hinder collaboration between organizing groups and educators. When educators and organizing groups share reform priorities and understand each other's cultures and methodologies, we argue, they can forge sophisticated, mutually accountable collaborations that provide a powerful platform for reform.