

From Private Citizens to Public Actors:  
The Development of Parent Leaders through Community Organizing

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### **Introduction**

The value of parent engagement in schools in low-income communities is now broadly recognized (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Mainstream understanding of parent engagement, however, assigns a relatively limited role for parents (Warren, Hong, Rubin & Uy, 2009). Traditional approaches, often referred to as parent “involvement,” emphasize an individualistic and relatively passive role for parents (Shirley, 1997). Parents are mainly involved around their own child’s education, supporting the school’s agenda through home-based activities and occasional school events.

Many educators, however, are coming to recognize the need to move beyond traditional forms of parent involvement toward meaningful engagement of families in the life of schools. In these models, parents are not only *supporters* of their own child’s learning — as important as that is — but also *advocates* and *decision makers* at the school and district level. Some educators, for instance, have called for the development of “demand parents” — parents who are capable of advocating for their own child, as well as other children in the school (Crew, 2007). Demand parents support their own child, while also demanding systemic improvements and holding schools accountable for change.

We extend the concept of demand parent to one of *parent leader*. In our view, parents need to support their own child's education, but that role is one of private citizen. School improvement, however, is a process that occurs in the public sphere and requires the building of social capacity or social capital for change. Schools require parents who are leaders in the sense that they are capable of participating in school change processes with other parents and with educators. ~~Demand parents might be individual advocates for school change.~~ Leadership is a relational concept (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) that goes beyond demanding change as an individual. Rather, it implies working with others in collective action.

Schools in low-income communities typically struggle to engage parents in meaningful ways. Public schools may, in fact, not be well suited to build strong forms of parent leadership. Most school personnel have limited expertise and training in this area, as evidenced by the 2012 "MetLife Survey of the American Teacher," in which both teachers and principals identified family engagement to be one of the most challenging aspects of their work (MetLife, 2013). In addition, inequalities rooted in race and class differences between a mostly white and middle class teaching force and a mostly low-income group of parents of color may inhibit educators from playing the role of fostering leadership among parents (Olivos, 2006).

Community organizing groups, however, are expert in creating social capital and leadership development. By community organizing, we mean a process whose purpose is to build relationships and power for people themselves to create change in their communities (Warren, Mapp, & Community Organizing and School Reform Project, 2011). Community organizers bring people together to take action around issues they identify. Many community organizers follow the "iron rule" of organizing: Never do for others what they can do for themselves. While most community organizations provide services for people, community

organizing groups focusing on helping people develop the skills and knowledge to work together to create change for themselves – to win more resources for their communities, to advocate for policies that meet their needs, and to organize so that public institutions like schools are more responsive and accountable to community needs (Warren, 2010).

Classic community organizing strategy involves demanding change “from the outside”. However, as organizing groups began to turn their attention to public education reform in the nineties, they soon realized that outside strategies were insufficient because institutions of public education often lacked the capacity to change in response to outside demands. Instead, organizing groups had to find ways that parents and other community members could work with educators to contribute to school improvement (Warren, 2005). In the end, most groups settled on a nuanced strategy: on the one hand, they would demand improvement and hold schools and school systems accountable for real change; on the other hand, they would support improvement strategies. In their work with parents, then, organizing groups helped develop a form of leadership that combined “demand” with meaningful roles in school improvement efforts (Warren, Mapp & the Community Organizing and School Reform Project, 2011).

In this chapter, we focus on how community organizing groups create transformational change at the individual level in parents so that they are capable of playing leadership roles in schools and communities. The chapter draws from research conducted as part of a larger study on community organizing and school reform, whose findings are reported in the book *A Match on Dry Grass* (Warren et al., 2011). The purpose of the larger project was to describe and analyze how effective organizing groups worked to improve quality and advance equity in public education. We and our colleagues developed case studies of six organizing groups across the country that had made a significant impact on improving public education in their localities. We

found that organizing groups create transformational change at the individual, community and institutional levels. By this we mean that concrete policy wins (transactional change) constitute only part of what organizing produces. The deeper change is transformational in that it changes the way people think and act. Although practices in the organizing groups varied in important ways among the six groups, transformative change among parents and other participants emerged as a powerful process shared by the groups.

We began the larger study with some expectation that leadership development would be important to organizing. But we left with a much more profound appreciation for how processes of personal transformation lay at the heart of organizing efforts. Indeed, we might say that personal transformation represents the heart and soul of community organizing. It provides the spark that ignites school and community change.

### **Theoretical Context**

A growing body of research has identified community organizing as a vehicle for engaging parents in meaningful and powerful ways in public schools. Previous research on parent leadership shows how the process of organizing connects parents to each other in ways that provide support and boost confidence (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Evans & Shirley, 2008; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009), and that builds parents' political skills and knowledge of the educational system (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2005; Shirley, 1997). Deep relationships and shared leadership structure this kind of parent leadership (Hong, 2011). Few scholars, however, have examined the processes of this development from the *parent's* perspective.

Parents in our study report that mutual support, confidence building and the acquisition of skills and knowledge are critical to leadership development. By listening closely to the accounts of parents, however, we argue that the heart of the process is a transformative change in how parents think of themselves and act. We characterize that transformation as one from private citizen to public actor or leader. Schools typically treat parents as private citizens, almost as consumers of educational services for their child. In low-income communities, parents often see the struggles or failures of their child in school as their child's individual problem. Organizing groups bring parents together to share stories, a process in which parents begin to see problems and failures as systemic in nature. Addressing these issues requires collective action in the public sphere of schools and community life. In this chapter, we identify and describe the core processes that parents reported through which organizing groups help parents emerge as public leaders in school communities.

### **Data and Methods**

Data for this chapter come from the qualitative, multi-case study of community organizing efforts at school reform in six locales across the United States mentioned above (Warren et al., 2011). Data include in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 60 parents (primarily black and Latina women) who participated in the six community organizing groups. As part of the larger research project, we asked questions designed to trace the development of their participation through their experiences in the community organizing groups. We coded the interview data using a combination of inductive and deductive codes and then compared the themes across the participants in the study.

In this chapter, we focus on parents and analyze transformative change in greater detail. For presentation purposes, we feature two parents from one of the organizing groups in the study, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (the Coalition). We supplement this data with interview material drawn from other parents in the study. Although organizing methods vary across the six groups, we are confident that the groups broadly share the six core processes that we identify in this chapter and that contribute to transformative change in parents.

The Coalition is a multi-issue organizing group that was founded in response to the widespread arson that swept across the Bronx in the 1970s. The Coalition includes individual members, religious congregations like churches and more recently mosques, as well as neighborhood associations and other groups. The organization is very diverse in racial and ethnic composition, including African American, white, Latino and other participants from newer immigrant groups from Africa and elsewhere. The Coalition was historically best known for its work to build affordable housing and foster economic development in the Northwest section of the Bronx, an large area encompassing a quarter of the borough's forty-four square miles.

In the nineties, the Coalition turned its attention to the state of public education. It launched a youth organizing group called Sistat and Brothas United, which led the effort to open a new organizing-themed high school called the Leadership Academy. Meanwhile, much of the Coalition's education organizing has been focused on relieving the severe overcrowding endemic to public schools in the Bronx. For years, the Coalition has led a campaign to convert an abandoned armory building into a multi-use community institution to include a set of new schools. When it learned that New York City's department of education allocated classroom space assuming a whopping 64% four-year dropout rate, the group declared that the city was "planning for failure" and launched a campaign to expand the number of classroom seats across

the district. The Coalition's efforts to increase school construction and to reform the process for creating new schools led directly and indirectly to the addition of over 14,000 new seats across the city. Parents played a key role as leaders in all of these efforts.

### **Results – Core Processes of Transformational Change**

In the following sections, we identify and describe the processes through which organizing groups create the transformational change that enables parents to move from private citizens to public actors capable of leading change efforts. Through the story of three parent leaders in the Bronx, as well as quotes from parents at other organizing sites, we highlight six interrelated processes: listening, building parent community, mentoring, encouraging risk-taking, learning through action, and linking the personal and political. The six key processes occurred across all six case studies and were identified by the majority of the respondents. Moreover, the processes are interrelated and so, for explanatory purposes, we group some of them together in the presentation below.

#### **Listening & Building Community**

Miguel Gomez had two children attending PS 279, a K-8 school in the Bronx, when he was introduced to the Northwest Bronx Coalition. A regular participant in parent-teacher conferences, Gomez was invited by a Coalition staff member to attend a meeting about the organization's effort to address overcrowding in New York public schools. He had already seen first hand how overcrowding was negatively affecting the schools in his neighborhood, and the chance to do something to change it piqued his interest.

My main goal, in my whole life, is my kids' futures. So I was like, "Well, maybe I can be part of this project. I don't know, help a little." This was one of those

moments in life that you could have some impact on the future of the community.

Once you mention the community and once you mention the kids' futures, I'm sold.

So Gomez began attending regular Coalition meetings with other parents from local schools. He reports being impressed by the dedication of the parents who made time to come.

When I go to those meetings I feel like people really care. I'm talking about people coming from work like myself. You wish you could just sit down and relax and have your dinner, but you decide to go there and stay half an hour or one hour discussing our community needs, and that's something to be appreciated.

Amanda Devecka-Rinear, the Coalition's education organizer at the time, led the parent meetings. Gomez recalls an exercise during the first meeting, in which Devecka-Rinear asked parents to stand up and tell the group something that they liked in the community or school, and something that they wanted to change. Gomez spoke about the lack of cleanliness in the school cafeteria, and the need for better technological resources. Other parents mentioned the need to improve "teacher professionalism" and alleviate overcrowding, both of which resonated with Gomez. He found that despite the diversity among parents, many of their issues were the same.

When you go to these meetings, you have this rainbow of communities coming along from Africa, South America, even some Asians you see in this neighborhood. You're like, "Wow. I'm absolutely part of a big thing." You see all of these people from all over the community, and how things are affecting us at the same time when we have different backgrounds.

Devecka-Rinear facilitated conversations among parents about how to strategically address shared concerns. As Gomez explains, “The way she approached things was to be realistic: to make a list, to work on the things that we can improve the quickest, and that we can get the community to rally around.” Devecka-Rinear also shared information about ongoing Coalition campaigns, including an upcoming rally to demand new school construction. She asked parents to take on active roles, sending out letters or making phone calls to mobilize community members for the rally. Within two months, Gomez was actively engaging other parents.

I went to this school last week to speak to the parents there and explain our project. I explained that they should come along to our rally today, that we have many common things among us immigrants. Many of the things that are affecting their school are affecting ours.

Gomez points to organizer Devecka-Rinear as a source of inspiration for his involvement.

She’s very enthusiastic. She’s very passionate about her job and it can spill over to you somehow. I’m feeling the enthusiasm also, having someone like that around. The kind of work I do during the day is very demanding, so whatever time I have is spent with her and her project. Wherever she sends me to, or says “I need you to do this for me,” I’ll be there.

Miguel Gomez’s story resonates with many of the other stories we heard about how and why parents become involved in organizing. Parents come to organizing with a strong desire to support their children’s education, as well as many concerns about the schools and communities within which their children learn. The role of the community organizer is, first of all, to *listen* to the motivations, values, interests, and concerns of parents. Organizers — who may be local

parents themselves — are not telling parents what they should want, but rather offering parents an opportunity to pursue their values and desires in collaboration with others. For many parents, this may be the first time that someone other than close friends and family members has truly listened to and validated their ideas and concerns about schools. Organizing groups in our study have developed a variety of listening practices, including one-on-one meetings, “house meetings” that bring together multiple parents, and “listening tours” in which organizers and leaders travel from place to place in order to hear community members’ concerns.

The second key process we see in Gomez’s story is *building parent community*. Organizers initiate relationship building among parents through the sharing of personal stories and concerns. Through this process, many parents learn that their individual problems are actually shared concerns, caused not by individual failures but rather the systemic inequities of public institutions. Organizers then facilitate parents moving from identifying shared problems to designing strategy for taking action — what can this group of parents do right now? Rather than listening to concerns and then trying to fix them, the organizer puts the onus back on the parents, who begin to see themselves as part of a community dedicated to change. Organizers often suggest immediate opportunities for involvement, and encourage parents to reach out to other parents, further broadening parent-to-parent networks.

As parents begin connecting and working with one another towards educational change, organizers assist them in building leadership skills. This is not done, however, in a classroom, but rather in the context of action. Parents learn by doing, as they are both supported by organizers and other parents and pushed to move outside their comfort zone and take on leadership challenges. Like Gomez, many parents find themselves taking surprising new steps into the public realm.

## **Mentoring, Encouraging Risk Taking, & Learning through Action**

Desiree Pilgrim-Hunter, whose daughter attended a perennially overcrowded Bronx high school, did not see herself as a leader. Having been permanently disabled and unable to work, Pilgrim-Hunter began attending Coalition meetings as a way to meet people and feel more connected to the community. There she met Coalition organizer Ava Farkas, who encouraged her to get involved.

[Ava] never ever said to me, “Oh, I think you’d make a great leader,” because, had she done that, I’d have run for cover. Because that was not the way I saw myself. But she would invite me to many Coalition activities and meetings, and then she would ask me to do some part of the agenda, and I would look at her and say, “I don’t like to speak in public. I don’t want to do this.” And then she’d say, “But you can do this.” And I was like, “Oh, well, I’ll give it a try.”

As she continued her involvement in meetings and events, Pilgrim-Hunter was offered formal training opportunities to increase her leadership and organizing skills. For example, she went on a leadership retreat with the Coalition where she received practical training on how to work collectively towards social change.

Up until the point that I met up with the Northwest Bronx [Community & Clergy Coalition], it was always these conversations about, “Oh, this is wrong and that is wrong, and that is wrong, and there’s nothing you can do.” And all of a sudden I was introduced to a conversation that said, “This is the problem, let’s work out a solution together,” and, “Yes, you can do it, and this is how you do it.” It wasn’t

just a lecture at me, it was fundamentals, actually showing you how you do this.

From that point, I was convinced I wanted to stay involved in all of this.

However, many of her most important learning moments took place in the midst of action. Farkas pushed Pilgrim-Hunter into situations where she could take a leadership role. “Ava kept throwing me into it. She suddenly starting saying, ‘You’re going to speak at this meeting with a local elected [official].’ Well, that threw me completely.” Pilgrim-Hunter describes a meeting about the Coalition’s effort to construct new schools at an abandoned local armory. The meeting included elected officials, heads of local businesses and non-profits, and other community leaders. Initially, she explains, she was intimidated. “I was completely taken over by the suits: just the impression they made, the image of power.” Then she heard a comment that angered her, and she spoke up.

I went like this on the table – boom – really hard, and I remember thinking to myself, “They look impressive in their suits, but these are some of the dumbest people I have ever heard, and I cannot believe that they don’t care about people in their community.” The stardust was there when I first walked in the room. By the end of the meeting, I wasn’t too overwhelmed by them anymore...I looked at the gentleman and I said, “Don’t you work for the people?” From that day on I developed a solid relationship with him as a passionate community leader who would not take “no” for an answer. I gained his respect because I would put his feet to the fire every time he tried to wheedle out of something.

Farkas and Pilgrim-Hunter maintained an ongoing mentor-mentee relationship, with Farkas offering advice, support, encouragement, and a loving, firm “push” to move Pilgrim-

Hunter out of her comfort zone. Farkas supported Pilgrim-Hunter in conducting research on community issues, and followed up with her as she helped Pilgrim-Hunter coordinate organizing activities. For example, Pilgrim-Hunter was charged with conducting one-on-one meetings with other parents and community members, after which she met with Farkas to debrief in order to improve her practice.

The Coalition continued to invest in Pilgrim-Hunter, paying for her to attend a week-long leadership and organizing training in San Diego where she was challenged to confront some of her self-esteem and confidence issues by delving deep into her own personal history. When she returned, another organizer suggested that she help start a leadership development program for the Coalition. Soon she was training parents and other community members in organizing techniques. Pilgrim-Hunter discovered that she had an unrecognized gift for listening and soliciting stories from others. She also joined the Coalition's governing board, where she began learning about how to build and sustain organizations.

Today Pilgrim-Hunter sees herself as a leader — speaking at events, meeting with politicians, and even running for the New York State Senate — though at times she still struggles with her new identity.

Leadership is organic, and that's something I'm just learning now. It's not something you affect. It is not something you just put on like a coat. You either are or you aren't, and you either accept it or you don't. It's taken me a while to get there. I would never have seen myself as a leader. I grew up as this shy little girl. People scared me. It was so painful for me that I would not talk for days at

time, or I would go hide in my room. I'd do everything else, but I didn't interact with people. So this is so counterintuitive.

In Pilgrim-Hunter's story we see many of the common themes that emerged from our interviews with parent leaders. Once engaged in organizing, parents are supported in transitioning from involvement to leadership. While formal training plays an important role in this process, much of the *learning occurs through action*. Parents gain skills as they practice them — speaking at events, meeting with policymakers, or engaging fellow parents in organizing. They conduct research on community issues and develop deeper understanding about the workings of educational institutions. Through these processes, parents discover strengths and skills they never knew they had.

This developmental process is facilitated through one-on-one *mentoring* from staff organizers or more experienced leaders. Organizers support parents by sharing resources, teaching leadership skills, and offering individualized feedback. They affirm parents' strengths while creating opportunities for new learning. In order to foster growth, organizers *encourage risk-taking* among parents. They create opportunities for parents to take on leadership roles, and support them in facing fears and obstacles. As parents increase their presence as actors in the public sphere, they take on a mentorship role in relation to other parents, and often work to address community issues in conjunction with education. This growth process requires careful scaffolding — balancing a “push” towards increasingly challenging and diverse tasks, with the support parents need to carry the tasks out successfully. Ultimately, this process leads to profound changes in parents' sense of self.

### **Linking the Personal and the Political**

As has been well documented, parents involved in community organizing develop practical skills such as how to run a meeting or address the media, and increase their knowledge about how to navigate educational systems and advocate for students. At the same time, parents we spoke with described much more profound changes. As parents move from private citizens to public actors, they begin to think and act differently in both their public *and* personal lives. This is not simply a side effect; organizers help parents to *link their personal growth with their political action*. Parents are supported in developing holistically, not only as leaders but also as people. For example, the parent mentorship program at Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), another group featured in our study, asks emerging parent leaders to set personal life goals, such as learning English, applying for a driver's license, or getting their GED. As program coordinator Silvia Gonzalez explains, the parent mentorship program,

Pushes you to be a leader and to reflect on your experience — at home, at school, in your community — and to think about what you can do to contribute, what you can do to build yourself up, and what are those personal things like the goals in your life and the dreams that you have that you can work on...we believe that it takes that to get to action. And action will change the community.

For many parents in our study, the most important result of participation in an organizing group is an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem. Parents commonly describe themselves as having previously been timid or shy, intimidated by school staff or afraid of speaking in public. With pride, they explain how this has changed due to their involvement in organizing. As a parent leader with One-LA, a group in our study from Los Angeles, put it, "Now, since I'm more involved I have more courage. Before, I didn't even have the courage to speak up. Now, I know my rights, because I've been to the district and I volunteered for the school." Parents also

describe a shift in how they understand themselves in relation to their communities. Some develop an increased sense of accountability to their school or neighborhood, and shift from advocating for “my” children to advocating for “our” children. Others begin to see themselves as a part of long-running organizing traditions such as the civil rights movement, the Chicano movement, or faith-based social justice movements.

With newfound skills and confidence, parents feel empowered to take on new challenges in terms of their educations and careers. Some find new jobs as organizers or teachers, some run for public office, and some continue their formal education. A parent leader involved with People Acting in Community Together (PACT), an organizing group in our study from San Jose, said that as “a person I’ve grown, and as a mother, and as a student. I went back to school, and that was something they would always talk about. So, little by little, I took some classes here and there, and I owe it all to PACT.”

Parents also speak of ways that their development as leaders has affected their home lives. Pilgrim-Hunter said that she uses her organizing and relational skills to address tension among family members. Meanwhile, a parent from One-LA described a shift in how she viewed her role as a wife and mother.

I’ve realized that one should not shut oneself in a vicious circle, just going about the daily routine as a homemaker — the routine of cleaning the house, cooking, doing the laundry. I don’t want that for myself. Even though I’m not so young, I want to do more, something I feel pleased with more, that I’m serving someone or, I can help someone.

For community organizers, these personal transformations are not peripheral outcomes. Rather, they are understood as central to the development of powerful parent leaders who can sustain their commitment to educational justice.

### **Implications: Towards a Paradigm Shift**

The core processes identified here that help to transform parents from private citizens to engaged public actors make important contributions to our understanding of what it takes to engage families in the improvement of educational opportunities for their and other people's children as well as in the improvement of their schools and communities. Federal, state, and local education policy makers and practitioners continue to struggle to develop guidance, policy and strategies that can lead to innovative and effective family engagement initiatives. Our research suggests the need for a profound shift, not only in the practices used to engage families, but also in the core beliefs, perceptions, and expectations that educators have about families from diverse racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. The processes described earlier suggest the following paradigm shifts necessary to create the type of parental leadership development and personal transformation so essential to school, district and community transformation. All educators – including teachers, school leaders, district officials and policy-makers - have a responsibility to consider how they can think and act differently so that the value of family and community engagement can fuel school transformation.

#### **From a deficit- to an asset-based lens**

Too often, those engaged in the education reform discourse focus on the dysfunction of families in low-income communities as the cause of student and school failure. Many blame parents for the problems of their children and assume that families of color and those from low-

income communities do not care about their children's education (Olivos, 2006). These assumptions lead to low expectations about parents' interest in or capacity to be engaged in their children's education. Unfortunately, few educators inquire about, let alone admire, the strengths of parents who work long hours in low-wage jobs or struggle to survive on unemployment, who raise families in crowded and substandard housing conditions, who sacrifice to put food on the table for their children, and who counsel their children daily about how to navigate often perilous relationships with immigration, law enforcement and school officials. Many parents, it turns out, play active roles in faith communities, sports teams, and neighborhood organizations while others provide informal, day-to-day support for their friends and neighbors.

Through the organizing process, we see a laser-like focus on pinpointing and then expanding parents' assets and strengths. Rather than seeing families as unskilled, dispassionate, and disinterested spectators to the problems in the schools and communities, organizers like Devecka-Rinear and Farkas work through a lens that sees families as capable and eager agents of change and, as such, approach parents with dignity and as full citizens. This lens enables organizers to listen to families concerns, connect them to other families who share similar concerns and with activities aligned to their interests, and then, with support and guidance, encourage family members to engage in activities to stretch and develop their leadership skills. These findings reveal the social capital that can be built when school and education reformers see all families, regardless of their race, socioeconomic, or educational backgrounds, as knowledge-rich and valuable actors in the improvement of schools and communities.

### **From a program to a people/relational focus**

In order to attract families, many schools and school districts develop and schedule a plethora of events -- open houses, parent-teacher conferences, talent shows, literacy and math nights, pot-luck suppers, and multicultural nights – all programming designed to lure families to the schools in the hopes of making some connection and sharing information with families (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Some schools and districts offer a variety of incentives such as transportation, childcare, food, and in some cases, cash and prizes to entice “hard-to- reach” families to attend these events. Although these events are important, far too often most of the attention and energy is spent on the detailed programming of these events, rather than on the building of the important relationships that, as suggested by our findings, serve as the primary incentivizing and motivating factor for many parents.

Organizing starts with relationships, rather than programming and activities. The organizing process seeks to connect parents to each other as well as to educational stakeholders by creating opportunities for them to engage in conversations to share stories and concerns. By embracing a relational focus to the work of engaging and partnering with families, schools can purposefully and intentionally create opportunities in the local community as well as at the school for parent-to-parent as well as parent-to staff relationship building and networking. These relationships help motivate and sustain parent participation and contribute to the social capacity for school improvement.

### **From a dissemination to a developmental approach**

Many events held at schools or other educational organizations for parents are designed to disseminate information to families about school policy, rules, regulations, and academic and behavioral expectations (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). Information is regularly distributed to families

via email, regular mail, and children's backpacks. Some districts and schools hold workshops or classes to help parents better support their children's academic and social development, but many of these events use a format where teachers or school staff talk "at" families versus "with" families. Although important, these information dissemination processes can be isolating and overwhelming for some families. In some circles, these events are referred to as "fix the parent" outings, designed to ensure the responsiveness of the families to the directives handed down to them by the schools (Mapp, 2013).

Educators who care about parent engagement and cultivating parent leadership often focus on the development of skills and knowledge. Indeed, for parents to become effective actors in school reform, they need knowledge about education issues and how districts and schools are run. However, for parents to become *leaders* in school communities, they also need to develop skills such as how to run or chair a meeting or speak at public forums. The organizing groups in this study focus on building this whole range of skills and knowledge, but they do even more: they take a holistic developmental approach, providing opportunities for parents to think differently about themselves.

Organizers scaffold and support emerging parent leaders as they try out new skills. Parents respond to this support and confidence in their abilities by trying out new things that they themselves once thought impossible. Educators familiar with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPG) understand the process of learning new skills with the support, encouragement, and high expectations of facilitators or peers (Vygotsky, 1978). As a person progresses through the ZPG, she increases her ability to work independently by first mastering tasks with help and support and then learning to do these tasks independently. By creating opportunities for families to receive support, encouragement and coaching from staff and other

parents, schools and community organizations can build the capacity of parents to work together with other parents and with teachers to help lead school improvement initiatives.

### **From an individual to a collective lens**

Schools typically reach out to parents as individuals, directing the focus and attention of any communication between home and school on the parent's child or children. In contrast, organizing builds the leadership of parents in the context of community ties. Organizing groups look for parents, as well as youth and community residents, who are connected to others through relationships in their neighborhoods, religious organizations and schools. Parent leaders are not expected to solve problems on their own or to direct others in a unilateral fashion. Indeed, a key part of becoming a parent leader involves building the capacity to connect with others and engage them in action.

Our findings suggest the value of shifting the dynamic of school-based family events from an individualistic focus to a shared community focus. These events can be structured so that parents have an opportunity to build relationships with other families. They can build these relationships through conversations in which they share their concerns as well as their hopes and dreams for their children; they can also discuss and contribute to conversations about educational issues that affect the whole school and community. This collective focus creates a sense of shared community and belonging that sustains participation, builds social capacity, and strengthens commitment to act for the wellbeing of all children in the school community.

### **From top-down to inclusive school reform processes**

Education reform is typically undertaken as an expert-driven, top-down enterprise with a one-size-fits-all approach (Payne, 2008). Many education reform initiatives taking place in cities

such as New York, New Orleans, Chicago, and Philadelphia have been sharply criticized for not being sensitive to local social and cultural differences in schools and communities (Layton, 2013). Top-down approaches often lack a strategy for engaging the hearts and minds of teachers and other staff at the school level, and completely ignore the important role parents can play in school change initiatives.

Our findings suggest the benefits of learning from community organizing to create a more inclusive school reform process that engages parents as well as educators at the local level. As parents build relationships through action, they come to craft and refine reform initiatives usually in collaboration with educators on the ground. In these ways, parents (and teachers) take ownership of the processes of change. Strong organizing efforts always anchor reform strategies in the relational processes they develop. In this way, reform agendas are rooted in the specific conditions faced in local schools and communities and the specific values, interests, and passions of actors on the ground.

What can education reformers do to shift from a top-down paradigm to a more inclusive approach to school improvement? Some districts around the country are intentionally seeking out collaborations with community organizing groups. For example, districts such as Baltimore City and Boston have collaborated with community organizing groups to facilitate community conversations about school reform decisions *and* to develop parent leaders within communities that have been historically excluded from decisions about schools (Mapp, 2012). By purposefully collaborating with organizing groups and engaging all stakeholders in the school community – parents, teachers, young people, and community residents – educators can create opportunities to develop wide-spread stakeholder ownership of the processes of change, leading to reform initiatives that are deep and lasting.

This work can be challenging for school leaders who are under pressure to raise test scores quickly or face multiple other demands on their time and attention. This work requires a shift in mindset and perception about the role of families and community members in the process of improving schools and communities. Many school leaders are not from the community and lack understanding of where to begin this work. In addition, there may not always be willing community partners who have deep connections to families and are willing to invest in the long and hard work of changing schools. However, most neighborhoods have a broad array of community institutions that can serve as a starting point for community engagement, from churches to YMCAs if not specially organizing groups. If school leaders grasp the value of long-term investments in social capital, that in fact family and community engagement can play an essential role in school improvement, and if they can see the possibility for the kinds of strong forms of parent engagement that we document, then many more may be willing to take the risk of a first step out into the community.

### **Conclusion**

Educators and others who care about engaging parents in meaningful and powerful ways in our public schools have much to learn from community organizing approaches to leadership development. We cannot say for certain that the core processes identified in our research will work with all parents and everywhere. However, we found them applicable across all of our six cases, which included parents of both genders in African-American, Latino and diverse ethnic communities in both urban and rural areas in many regions of the country. Of course, community organizers would be the first to suggest that any approach to engagement be tailored to local context, local concerns and local values and traditions. However, we have no reason to believe that the core processes we have identified would not be applicable in many if not the large

majority of public schools, at least those serving primarily low-income and communities of color. Indeed, core processes like listening are designed precisely to make sure that local concerns and context are heard and incorporated into change processes.

The problems facing our public schools in low-income communities are connected to deep-seated structural inequalities in our society. Addressing these issues will require a broad movement that includes teachers, education researchers and school administrators; however, it will also need the participation of parents, young people and other residents of the communities our schools serve. Community organizing offers an approach that builds relationships and power for transformational change in our schools and communities. It does so by cultivating the public leadership of parents as they themselves undergo powerful processes of personal transformation.

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