

*The Strengths and
Challenges of
Community Organizing
as an Education
Reform Strategy:
What the Research Says*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Nellie Mae
Education
Foundation

Opening Doors to Tomorrow



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

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Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) at Brown University is a national research and reform support organization. AISR promotes quality education for all children by building capacity for systemic education reform among policy-makers, district leaders, educators, parents, and community groups, especially those serving low-income neighborhoods and communities of color.

An important part of that work is to provide research, data analysis, capacity building, and other supports for adult and youth organizing groups working for education reform. In New York City, staff now part of AISR pioneered a collaborative model for parent- and youth-led education organizing in the South Bronx.¹ This work laid the foundation for additional neighborhood collaboratives and the formation in 2006 of the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice, a citywide collaborative of parent organizing groups. AISR staff were instrumental in the formation of the Urban Youth Collaborative, a citywide coalition of five youth-led organizations.

Building on the work in New York City, AISR staff now provide support to other local and state education organizing initiatives. We are also expanding our capacity to provide research and policy support to community organizations focused on federal policy.

In addition to supporting organizing efforts, AISR specializes in conducting research on education organizing. The 2009 series *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools* was a national study to examine the impact of urban community and youth organizing on school and district capacity to promote student learning. The study concluded that there is strong evidence for the impact of community organizing on resource allocations and equity, relationships between schools and families, teacher professional culture, and student outcomes. The study also identified key aspects of organizational capacity that are important for leading successful campaigns.²

The *Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series*, of which this executive summary is a part, further builds on this research agenda. The series includes a research report, the executive summary, and a directory of community organizations in New England doing education organizing. All three products are available at www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php.

¹ These staff joined the Annenberg Institute in 2006.

² See www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/OrganizedCommunities.php.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) is the largest charitable organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. NMEF believes that to improve collective prospects for the future, all learners must possess the skills and knowledge necessary for full participation in postsecondary education, work, and life. Toward this end, NMEF supports the promotion and integration of developmentally appropriate, rigorous, student-centered approaches to learning at the middle and high school levels. These approaches acknowledge that in today's world, students need to know not only math and English, but also how to collaborate, solve problems, and utilize technology.

Student-centered approaches draw on the science of how people learn and are characterized by: innovative uses of time; the inclusion of a wider variety of adults to complement teachers in all aspects of learning; the measurement of skills and mastery of content using a combination of performance-based assessments and traditional testing; an acknowledgement that learning takes place both in and out of the classroom; and a persistent focus on the needs and interests of learners. In this type of educational experience, learning becomes the constant, and the *where*, *when*, and *how* it happens – as well as *who* the adults are who facilitate it – become the variables.

In an effort to serve as a catalyst for a remodeled educational system, NMEF utilizes a three-part strategic approach:

- We work with practitioners to develop and enhance effective, evidence-based, student-centered approaches to learning.
- We dedicate ourselves to shaping policies that allow these approaches to flourish.
- We concentrate on increasing public understanding and demand for high-quality educational experiences for all learners.

NMEF awards grants primarily through four strategic initiatives:

- **District Level Systems Change**, which includes the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches, as well as policy and community organizing/advocacy work at the district level;
- **State Level Systems Change**, which focuses on promoting state and federal education policies that support student-centered learning at scale;
- **Research and Development**, which not only informs our work, but also that of practitioners in the fields of education and philanthropy;
- **Public Understanding**, which aims to increase both awareness of student-centered learning experiences and the public demand to implement them.

NMEF understands that community organizing and engagement is essential to attaining its goals. Rather than engaging communities at the end of efforts, NMEF works with its District Level Systems Change grantees to include community partners in the design, development, and implementation of reforms.³ For these reasons, NMEF commissioned the Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series.⁴

³ For more information, see <www.nmefdn.org/grantmaking/Initiatives/District>.

⁴ See <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php> for more information on the series.

Introduction

Community organizing for school reform offers an urgently needed alternative to traditional approaches to school reform. While many current reforms are innovative, they often fail to thrive due to lack of trust, understanding, or cultural relevance to the community being targeted by the reform (Oakes & Rogers 2006; Payne 2008). The high turnover of reformers (superintendents, principals, or outside organizations) in high-need schools and districts is another major cause of school reform failure (Mintrop & Sunderman 2009). Finally, reforms also fail because they do not address extreme inequities in resources and empowerment between poor communities and their more privileged counterparts (Oakes & Rogers 2006; Renée, Welner & Oakes 2010). Community organizing, in contrast, has the potential to situate education issues within larger economic and social systems, directly address issues of power, and build democratic capacity to sustain meaningful education reforms over the long term (Anyon 2005; Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a; Oakes & Rogers 2006; Shirley 2009).

Perhaps the largest and most recognizable example of community organizing for school reform was the national desegregation of the education system that followed the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Desegregation was ordered by the court; but building public will to challenge racist practices and accept huge changes in the structure of public schools was the result of decades of careful research, planning, and community organizing (Kluger 2004).⁵

Though not at the scale of the national civil rights movement, organizers around the nation are currently working in communities to ensure that historically marginalized parents and students can participate in local, state, and national education debates and decisions. Research has shown that the community organizing approach to school reform has led to successes such as increases in education funding, more equitable distribution of education resources, greater access to college preparatory curriculum, and more effective teacher recruitment and retention in hard-to-staff schools

(Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a; Shirley 2009). Local community organizations are also building their capacity to work at the state and federal policy levels (Oakes & Rogers 2006; Renée, Welner & Oakes 2010).

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation aim to add to the knowledge base of education organizing for school reform with the Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series. The series includes this executive summary, a directory of community organizations doing education organizing in New England, and a research report.⁶ The report examined a small but growing body of literature on community organizing for education reform, including individual case studies, regional and national scans of the field, investigations of why this reform strategy matters, and a large study documenting the impact of community organizing on education policy, school capacity, and student educational outcomes across organizations. The report begins by defining community organizing for school reform and describing how it works in practice and what makes it unique. The report then looks at existing evidence on the impact of community organizing and discusses its strengths and limitations. This executive summary presents highlights from that report.

⁵ Community organizing has a long history in the United States. See the research report in the Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series at <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php> for more details and references.

⁶ The full series is available at <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php>.

How Does Community Organizing for School Reform Work?

Community organizing for school reform leverages the collective power of parents, youth, community residents, and/or institutions to alter longstanding power relationships and policies that produce failing schools in under-served communities.⁷ The goal is to create more accountable, equitable, high-quality schools for all students by challenging the patterns of inequality that are built into the rules and laws that guide schools; the individual beliefs of many educators and administrators about who is capable of learning; and the relationships between stakeholders that dictate how a reform is adopted and implemented (Renée 2006). While some community organizing takes the form of direct protest, a large part is about building powerful collaborations and partnerships between organizers and other education stakeholders.

Current federal policies require states to create standards and assessments to measure student learning, then create a series of rewards and sanctions for schools that fail to show growth according to those assessments. This approach focuses on holding *students* accountable for learning and *teachers* for teaching, but does not hold *policy-makers* accountable for providing the resources or conditions needed for students to learn. Community organizing, in contrast, focuses on the accountability of policy-makers and school leaders to students, parents, and the community. From this standpoint, low test scores are seen not as the failure of a single student, teacher, or principal, or the unfortunate consequence of complex social factors, but as proof that the education system is failing to provide all young people with all of the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to become educated citizens.

Community organizing for education reform explicitly focuses on working *with* – not just *on behalf of* – low-income communities and communities of color to increase the power of residents to speak and act for themselves. Paid staff can work for community organizing groups, but the leadership structure and power

comes from this base of community members. Community organizing groups often work in partnership with advocacy organizations, service providers, and others, but they have a unique definition of their work and strategies (Evans 2009). Community organizers do not need to take a neutral stance on problems in the education system, nor do they need to balance competing demands arising from district and state mandates and from federal rules, regulations, and policies. Rather, community organizing starts with a clear mission to do whatever is necessary to improve the quality of education for all students in the system.

Organizing groups engage in a constant, iterative process of recruiting those most impacted by social problems and inequitable policies and striving to develop broad, shared capacity to take leadership roles in demanding change. Groups spend significant time training members in all aspects of a campaign – how to lead a meeting, how to partner with a researcher, how to write a press release. They engage in a collective dialogue to identify and research issues, brainstorm solutions with allies, consult experts, build alliances, analyze the political terrain, formulate a plan for creating change, and take collective action (AISR 2010a).

⁷ For more details and a framework on how community organizing works, see the research report.

What Makes Community Organizing a Unique Reform Strategy?

Several key strategies distinguish community organizing for school reform from conventional reform strategies.

- **Addressing power relationships.** Community organizing begins from the assumption that school reform is a complex process that includes not only the practical business of curriculum and teaching, but also many layers of power, politics, beliefs, and culture (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a; Oakes & Rogers 2006; Renée 2006; Shirley 2009). Along with addressing the technical aspects of a reform, community organizing also works toward understanding the power relationships and ideas that can advance or impede a reform.
- **Developing political will to advance equity.** Community organizing is unique in taking an “inside/outside” approach to school reform. Organizing develops a broad constituency for reform and ensures that proposed reforms reflect the needs and interests of those who will be impacted. Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009a) found that community organizations can create the political will needed to implement and sustain a particular change through negotiation, public awareness, and pressure, at the same time increasing the social capital of under-served communities so those gains can be sustained.
- **Developing relevant, innovative solutions.** By engaging the people most impacted by inequality and poverty in the creation, adoption, and implementation of reforms, community organizing inserts unique, relevant ideas and solutions into the process. The directory of organizations in this series provides many examples.
- **Looking beyond education to comprehensive reform on multiple issues.** Because many community organizations work on multiple issue areas like poverty, housing, transportation, or health care, their ideas and priorities embed school reform in a realistic and comprehensive web of social and economic issues (Anyon 2005).
- **Building democratic capacity.** Community organizing builds democratic capacity and participation of the community. Delgado Gaitan (2001) found that engaging in school reforms to benefit their children changed community residents’ perceptions about their lives “from one of deficit to empowerment, [which] led to the cultural changes in the family, the community, and in their personal lives” (p. 175).

Evidence of Impact

The body of research documenting the activities, processes, and outcomes of community organizing for school reform has grown steadily over the past decade (Shirley 2009). The research field was launched with two book-length studies documenting the emerging Alliance Schools model of school-based organizing developed by the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) (Shirley 1997) and the efforts of Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development to strengthen their city's schools (Orr 1999). As the number of community organizing groups pursuing educational change grew, more and more scholars turned their attention to documenting the methods, outcomes, and trends of education organizing campaigns.

This initial body of research has been qualitative and has focused on individual cases; thus, it has offered limited evidence of links between education organizing and outcomes for schools and students in general. However, in line with other literature on best practices for school reform, research on community organizing provides evidence of the effectiveness of organizing as a strategy for increasing equity, improving school culture, and winning policy and practice reforms in specific sites. For example, one of the most studied education organizing efforts – the Texas IAF's work to build a statewide network of Alliance Schools – has produced deep, meaningful engagement with parents and community members in schools across Texas; changed the way educators relate to each other and to students; and won hundreds of millions of dollars in additional funding to support professional development, services for students, and community resources like ESL and GED courses (Warren 2001; Shirley 1997, 2002).

As community organizing has grown in prominence as a school reform strategy, the need has grown more acute to systematically examine its contributions to district- and school-level change and improved student outcomes. But community organizing is a complex, unpredictable process tightly bound to the context in which it arises. Thus, community organizing does not lend itself to an experimental design that randomly

assigns schools or districts to “treatment” and “control” groups (Shah, Mediratta & McAlister 2009). Nor can research findings usually be replicated. It is also impossible to completely isolate the impacts of community organizing from myriad other reform efforts that are often under way, particularly in low-performing schools – or from the impacts of teacher and leader turnover, changes in neighborhood demographics, or shifts in policy.

Despite these challenges, progress has been made in elaborating methods for analyzing the outcomes of education organizing. In 2002, a team of scholars at Research for Action in Philadelphia and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform undertook a major project to develop a framework of indicators for education organizing that could begin to assess the impact of organizing activities on schools and communities (Gold, Simon & Brown 2002). In 2009, AISR completed a six-year study of the impact on their schools of seven community organizing groups engaged in education campaigns. By applying a rigorous methodology – creating a framework that triangulated qualitative data with quantitative analyses of the impacts of community-led reforms – the researchers were able to produce evidence where previous studies had not. The study documented that education organizing resulted in increased district responsiveness to the needs of low-income communities; new resources for facilities, curriculum, teacher development, and parent engagement; new policies; better teacher-parent collaboration, parent influence in school decision making, and teacher collaboration; and leadership development among community leaders (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a).

Effective Strategies in Community Organizing for School Reform

Confrontational protests are the most visible and radical of community organizing tactics, but community organizing for school reform also makes use of what Della Porta and Diani (1999) describe as *bearing witness* – publishing policy reports, providing testimony at a school board meeting, or holding a press conference. Community organizations also spend significant time creating change through building alliances with school and district leaders, elected officials, the media, teachers, and other kinds of nonprofit organizations. The literature identifies several strategies, outlined in this section, that effective organizing groups use to win meaningful education reforms.

Working at Multiple Levels

Schools are where the buck stops in terms of educational change. Personalized instruction, improved school climate, and stronger teacher-student relationships all play out at the school and classroom levels. For this reason, many organizing efforts begin around improving conditions at a local school site.

But organizing groups often find that changes at the district or state level are necessary to provide the resources or flexibility necessary to implement school-level campaigns (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a). Districts establish policies that constrain schools' choices on curriculum, staffing arrangements, and after-school programming and control the bulk of the resources flowing to schools. States have taken on ever-larger roles in setting standards and establishing accountability regimes, particularly since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. State departments of education have access to larger pots of funding than do districts, and organizing campaigns often target state legislatures for additional appropriations.

Community organizers in Chicago followed such a path after identifying high turnover of teachers, due to their lack of experience with and connection to the community, as a major problem. Drawing on a successful teacher preparation program developed by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), Chicago ACORN called for creating a statewide “grow your own” teacher pipeline strategy to train teacher paraprofessionals and community residents to become teachers in their neighborhood schools. ACORN worked with LSNA and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform to assemble a coalition of community organizing groups, district officials, leaders from university teacher preparation programs, the teachers unions, and elected officials to advocate for the statewide teacher pipeline program. This coalition secured passage of the 2004 Grow Your Own Teachers Act and, as of 2008, had won \$11 million in successive appropriations to support the program (McAlister, Mediratta & Shah 2009).

Working through Alliances and Coalitions

Community organizing groups build power and the ability to act at multiple levels by developing alliances with a range of stakeholders and participating in formal coalitions. By working jointly with advocacy organizations, teachers, education officials, researchers, businesses, and other stakeholders on issues of common concern, community organizers build collective power and gain access to decision-makers at the local, state, and national levels. These intentional cross-sector relationships not only lead to new alliances, but also demonstrate broad agreement for proposals for change. The research literature provides excellent examples of alliance and coalition building (see sidebar on page 6).

Using Data and Research

Because of the complexity of school reform, research is crucially important in education organizing. Community organizing groups use research as a tool to define policy problems, advance political proposals, litigate, and monitor the implementation of laws. Many

Building Alliances and Coalitions

In New York City, parents organized for the ouster of the unresponsive principal of a low-performing school, but were unable to influence the selection of a new principal. The parent leaders realized that they needed to build the power to influence district-level decision making and formed a collaborative with five other community-based organizations in the area called CC9 (Zachary & Olatoye 2001). The collaboration resulted in several major policy victories, including a lead teacher program to improve staff development and retention in ten schools. Later, when control of New York City schools was consolidated under the mayor and schools chancellor and local districts were abolished, CC9 leaders realized that they needed to expand their reach even further. So CC9 joined forces in 2006 with other neighborhood organizing groups to form the citywide New York City Coalition for Educational Justice. Similarly, youth organizing groups have formed the citywide Urban Youth Collaborative to advocate for the needs of under-served high school students across New York City.

In Los Angeles, conversations between youth and parent organizations, the United Way, and a Latino advocacy group led to the formation of Communities for Educational Equity (CEE). Eventually, CEE included twenty-five parent and student organizing groups, universities, civil rights and advocacy organizations, and representatives of elected education officials. The coalition put the weight of research, advocacy, and well-established civil rights organizations behind local youth organizing efforts. The powerful coalition then successfully pushed for expanded access to college prep courses in Los Angeles Unified School District. The result was passage of a school board resolution mandating college preparatory curriculum as the standard curriculum for all students in the district. CEE has continued to monitor the district's implementation of the policy to ensure that the intent of the resolution to increase equity is met (United Way of Greater Los Angeles 2007).

groups have enduring relationships with university-based researchers who provide access to data on school performance and current scholarship on education issues. In addition, there are research, reform support, and intermediary organizations (including AISR) around the nation that provide varied kinds of support to community organizations (Renée 2006).

In California, for example, the Education Justice Collaborative, a collaboration of organizing, advocacy, and legal groups, is facilitated by the Institute for Education, Democracy, and Access (IDEA) at UCLA. IDEA researchers conduct data analyses, identify relevant scholarship, and translate research into layperson-friendly formats to support the member groups of the collaborative (Oakes et al. 2008). In Philadelphia, scholars at Research for Action provided research that youth leaders needed in order to craft a successful campaign to divide two under-served Philadelphia high schools into campuses of small, themed academies of no more than 400 to 500 students. The extensive research process included surveying students to gather their ideas for a redesigned campus, researching best practices for small schools, and traveling to four cities to learn from their experiences (Suess & Lewis 2007).

Balancing Collaboration and Pressure

Most organizing groups use a mix of collaboration and pressure – resorting to public, contentious action only when negotiation and collaboration have failed (Ford Foundation & Center for Community Change 2008; Gold, Simon & Brown 2002). Because of the complexity of the education system and the need to sustain multiple facets of reform simultaneously (Coburn 2003), organizing groups need long-term access to education decision-makers and experts. Organizing groups have discovered the need to shift between adver-

sarial relationships and tactics that facilitate constructive dialogue around school reform (AISR 2010b).

At its core, community organizing is about creating safe, high-quality schools. The results of such work benefit not only students, but also teachers who engage in the day-to-day work of educating students. Much of school-based organizing is about transforming the culture of schools so that parents, teachers, principals, and the larger community work together for the benefit of children. For these reasons, organizing groups seek common ground and cultivate collaborations and alliances with teachers, school administrators, and district- and state-level officials. Many of these constituencies describe organizing groups as capable allies for advancing reforms that will benefit under-served students (e.g., Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009b).

While collaboration and alliance building are critical to organizing, so is the willingness to engage in contentious action when necessary. Yet, reliance on collaborative or pressure tactics is not either/or. Public actions like letter-writing campaigns, accountability sessions, and large turnout at school board meetings are tools that organizing groups use to demonstrate the power of their base and establish themselves as legitimate education stakeholders (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a). Organizing groups are not unwilling to use public action to pressure or even embarrass officials, but they are strategic about when, where, and how they use these strategies. Organizing groups exist to further the interests of marginalized communities; they prioritize the needs of their constituency above their relationships with allies. The ability to publicly mobilize large numbers of people with common interests and attract media attention is a core source of the power of community organizing to make demands for equity and accountability.

The Challenges of Community Organizing for Education Reform

As an “outside” strategy led by communities with comparatively few material resources and a history of disenfranchisement, community organizing faces all the daunting, well-documented barriers to sustained reform that other school reform movements face, along with additional obstacles. This section highlights the challenges of organizing across multiple dimensions; a full discussion can be found in the research report in the Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series.

The Importance of Relationships

Relationships with educators take time to develop. They depend on a mutual understanding of the very different cultures of organizing and public education and are easily damaged. Whereas organizing values distributed leadership and decision making by consensus, schools and districts are often hierarchical and decisions are continually passed up the chain of command. At the school level, teachers often feel disempowered and fight to be viewed as professionals. Teachers sometimes see the demands of organizing groups for greater decision making as a threat to their autonomy (Shirley 2002).

Winning an education campaign often depends on building agreements between multiple stakeholders (e.g., principals, school boards, superintendents, mayors, state boards of education, and legislatures) (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009a). Many districts face instability and turmoil – the average tenure of an urban superintendent is three and a half years (Council of the Great City Schools, 2008/2009), and principals, especially in struggling schools, also turn over frequently. Building sustainable agreements across so many changing stakeholders, each with his or her own agenda, presents a significant challenge to community organizers.

The Limits of Organizational Capacity

Community organizing groups are often held up as generating large returns on the investments of foundations – they win major changes in policy, attract media attention, and generate social and community capacity with a handful of staff and tiny budgets. But numerous organizational factors strain the ability of groups to be effective: the staff is small (and generally low paid); the work of the organization is carried out by volunteer leaders with families and work responsibilities; and there is a need to continually replace parent and student leaders as the students finish high school.

Partners such as universities and foundations can play a key role in the success of organizing campaigns by helping to build organizational capacity. Partners can provide community organizations with resources, research, and trainings on strategic communications and leadership development and can create opportunities for organizations to network and learn from each other. Funders can also help by increasing the social capital of organizations. By connecting organizations to economic and social capital, funders help to level the playing field for parents and residents in low-income communities by providing them with the kind of skills, knowledge, and resources that are readily available to residents of affluent communities.

There is evidence that funders working with each other and with other institutional partners can act as a particularly powerful support for community organizing. For example, numerous local and national foundations joined government agencies in supporting the development of the New York Coalition for Education Justice and the Urban Youth Collaborative. As a result, both coalitions have stable resources to meaningfully and regularly engage in school-district decision making.

⁸ See <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/NMEF.php>.

Insufficient Density of Organizations Working Together

When there is a lack of sufficient density of organizations in one geographic area, building power and capital through collaboration is particularly challenging. During the interviews for the scan of organizing in New England that is part of the Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy Series,⁸ organizers noted that foundations often view funding multiple organizations to do education work in the same city as a duplication of efforts, but that it is difficult for organizing to have an impact until it attains sufficient density for groups to work together and mobilize a large enough constituency to shift power dynamics.

Collaboration is particularly challenging in rural areas. Rural organizing, like rural school reform, is largely ignored in research literature and under-funded in practice. National organizing networks like the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and People Improving Communities through Organizing (PICO) are important sources of training, leadership development, research expertise, and knowledge about promising practices, yet none of the national networks have much presence outside of cities.

The Critical Role of Funders

Existing academic literature does not report much about the difference between community-initiated versus foundation-initiated organizing efforts, nor is there extensive research on the role of foundations in supporting and shaping community organizing for school reform. However, based on our extensive experience in this field, we know that the role of foundations has been critical to developing and supporting community organizing for school reform. For example, Communities for Public Education Reform (CPER), a coalition of funders, works to leverage investments from multiple foundations in order to strategically focus on developing community organizing potential in specific cities around the nation. This funder-led initiative has been critical to the field of community organizing – many

of the successful campaigns described in the research literature received funding and capacity-building assistance from CPER.

For collaboration between community organizations and foundations to succeed, attention to building relationships early in the process of researching and shaping reform agendas is crucial. In addition, funders need to be able to weather some of the more confrontational relationships that community organizations engage in and trust in the longer-term process an organization must go through to create a space for itself in a policy-making venue. While this process is uncomfortable at times, our experience and research indicate that these moments are part of what Tarrow (1998) describes as a *cycle of contention*: some moments are full of conflict and others are focused on collaboration.

The power of community organizers lies in placing the educational needs of young people above everything else, and they use a variety of strategies to accomplish that goal. By understanding this, funders can see community organizing as part of the portfolio of strategies they fund – knowing that the “critical friend” relationships between community organizations and other stakeholders add depth, quality, and permanence not just to the immediate organizing, but also to the long-term sustainability of school reform efforts.

Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy

With all its challenges, community organizing is hardly a magic bullet for all that ails public education. But community organizing offers a unique set of effective strategies for achieving school improvement in high-need schools and districts, especially in partnership with other reform strategies. The research suggests that community organizing for school reform has the potential to advance equity, create innovative solutions that reflect the interests and experiences of disenfranchised communities, and build the long-term social capital of under-represented communities both to support schools and districts and to hold them accountable for improving achievement.

Education organizing is as much about building coalitions with partners like school districts and policymakers as it is about protesting against them. In the end, most of the people who work in school systems – administrators, teachers, and staff, as well as the communities that are served by the school system – share a deep commitment to improving the life opportunities of young people. Some of the most effective campaigns for equitable education reform succeed by leveraging this shared commitment in order to develop the public will needed to create – then sustain – improvement in the nation’s most under-served schools.

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