



National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education

At the May NCPPIE meeting our guest speaker was Sara McAlister, a research associate at the Community Organizing and Engagement program at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Sara addresses the critical question: Does the political will generated by community organizing in low-income, urban communities ultimately enhance the capacity of schools to improve student learning?

Sara and her colleagues Seema Shah and Kavitha Mediratta have just completed a six-year, mixed-methods study of community organizing for school reform, the first of its kind, funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. They examined the work of seven community organizations in cities across the country and collected data to document its powerful impact on schools and student outcomes.

The study found strong and consistent evidence across several data sources that effective community organizing is:

- contributing to higher student educational outcomes, including improved attendance, test score performance, high school completion and college-going aspirations
- developing stronger capacity among parents, young people, and community residents both to support schools and districts, and to hold them accountable
- stimulating important changes in educational policy, practices, and resource distribution at the system level that expand school capacity and equity in historically underserved communities.

In addition to exploring these impacts, her presentation described sophisticated strategies that organizing groups have used in successful campaigns. These strategies include working closely with educators at local schools to build relational, mutually accountable school cultures; assembling broad civic coalitions to push for policy reform; and scaling up innovative reforms to the district and state level.

The Executive Summary of the study is below with a link to the complete study.

Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: A Preview of Research Findings

By

Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, Sara McAlister, Dana Lockwood, Christina Mokhtar,
Norm Fruchter

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, March 2008

Executive Summary

Background

For the past six years, the Community Involvement Program, now part of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, has been studying the impact of community organizing for school reform on student outcomes, with funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. In this research brief, *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools*, we present a preview of the findings from this study.

Because community organizing for school reform operates in a complex and fluid context of schools and communities, a multifaceted, robust research approach is necessary to assess the processes and impacts of this work. Our study draws on multiple research traditions, using a multi-site case study design, theory of change methodology, and quantitative and qualitative methods.

Constituents of Change, our initial study report issued in 2004, described the study sites; analyzed each group's school reform goals, strategies, and methods; and provided descriptive data on the urban schools and districts the study sites are organizing to improve (Mediratta 2004). The study sites are:

- **Austin Interfaith (Austin, Texas)**
- **Chicago ACORN (Chicago, Illinois)**
- **Community Coalition and its youth organizing arm, South Central Youth Empowered Thru Action (Los Angeles, California)**
- **Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project and its youth organizing affiliate, Youth United for Change (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)**
- **Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and its youth organizing arm, Sistas and Brothas United (Bronx, New York)**
- **Oakland Community Organizations (Oakland, California)**
- **People Acting for Community Together (Miami, Florida)**

Education organizers, researchers, and funders have long debated the impact of community organizing on student educational outcomes. Across multiple data sources, our six-year study found strong and consistent relationships between community organizing and policy and resource decisions, school-level improvements, and student outcomes. Interviews, surveys, and school-level administrative data analyses suggest that

organizing helps expand the capacity of urban public schools to support student success by building support for reform alternatives, increasing equity in the distribution of resources, and generating meaningful parent, youth, and community engagement focused on improved student learning.

Key Findings

Data suggest that organizing is contributing to school-level improvements, particularly in the areas of school–community relationships, parent involvement and engagement, sense of school community and trust, teacher collegiality, and teacher morale.

Successful organizing strategies contributed to increased student attendance, improved standardized-test-score performance, and higher graduation rates and college-going aspirations in several sites.

Our findings suggest that organizing efforts are influencing policy and resource distribution at the system level. Officials, school administrators, and teachers in every site reported that community organizing influenced policy and resource decisions to increase equity and build capacity, particularly in historically low-performing schools.

Data indicate that participation in organizing efforts is increasing civic engagement, as well as knowledge and investment in education issues, among adult and youth community members. Young people reported that their involvement in organizing increased their motivation to succeed in school.

Our research suggests that organizing groups achieve these schooling and community impacts through a combination of system-level advocacy, school- or community-based activity, and strategic use of research and data. Continuous and consistent parent, youth, and community engagement produced through community organizing both generates and sustains these improvements.

For more information about the study and the specific communities go to:
<http://www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>