



REVIEW OF *TURNING LIGHTNING INTO ELECTRICITY*

Reviewed By

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Summary of Review

This report presents the findings of research on parent organizing within what the report calls Education Reform Advocacy Organizations (ERAO), such as Stand for Children and Parent Revolution. The ERAO agendas focus on standards, test-based accountability, teacher tenure reform, and parent choice. The report recognizes that ERAOs are often criticized as astroturf organizations that mobilize parents behind their agendas instead of building authentic parent power; it then presents some evidence that many groups are committed to long-lasting parent engagement, and it reports on the community organizing practices they use to build parent leadership. Unfortunately, the report's presentation of research methods is so weak that the research cannot be relied upon without a better idea of the rigor or lack of rigor of its approach. The findings may be valid for the groups studied, but the selection is biased towards ERAOs that work to build sustainable forms of parent participation; it is unclear if those groups are representative of the broader field of ERAOs. While the report suggests some community organizing strategies can be used to advance the ERAO version of education reform, this approach undermines an understanding of community organizing as a democratic practice through which organizations and agendas emerge out of the concerns and through the actions of indigenous community leaders working to build a more inclusive public democracy.

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REVIEW OF *TURNING LIGHTNING INTO ELECTRICITY*

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I. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the rise of a number of advocacy groups that promote a package of education reform initiatives featuring standards and test-based accountability, the extended use of tests to evaluate teachers and reform tenure, and the promotion of “parent choice,” mostly in the form of expanding charter schools. What some have called a corporate, neoliberal or privatization movement in education has received strong financial backing from a set of private foundations, including the Gates, Walton and Broad foundations.¹ Little research has been conducted on these advocacy organizations, yet they have successfully influenced education policy at federal, state and local levels.

One controversial feature of these initiatives concerns the role of parents. Some of these groups have advocated for “parent trigger” laws that provide the opportunity for parents to transform their children’s school if a majority petition to do so.² Some charter school networks have mobilized parents to attend rallies in support of legislation that promotes or expands charter schools. Critics argue that these groups use parents to support their agenda, while supporters suggest that parents pursue better education for their children through these venues.

The American Enterprise Institute report,³ *Turning Lightning into Electricity*, written by Andrew P. Kelly, presents an inside look at these organizations—which he calls education reform advocacy organizations (ERAO)—and to examine the issue of parent participation. The report assumes the legitimacy of the goals of these advocacy groups and reports on a qualitative study of parent organizing in these groups.

The report acknowledges that parent activism in these groups did not “bubble up” from below. “Rather, it reflects a concerted effort on the part of education advocacy groups to organize and mobilize parents for action in school politics” (p. 6). Nevertheless, critics must be careful not to easily dismiss the parents involved in these groups as being manipulated by professional ERAO advocates. Many parents are legitimately concerned about the poor quality of education their children receive and the unresponsiveness often shown by traditional public school districts to change. They may well find a venue for their concerns within ERAOs, although whether they develop as leaders with power within those organizations is another question.

II. Findings and Conclusions

The report reveals that the new “parent power” groups heavily utilize community-organizing strategies that research has revealed provide effective means of building parent participation and leadership.⁴ Rather than attracting parents one by one, organizers focus on recruiting a core of parents with pre-existing social networks. They then offer those parents extensive training to develop their leadership ability and test their performance by having them organize and lead meetings. Face-to-face relationship-building is key as organizers spend considerable time with parents. Data and abstract policy ideas do not always move parents to action. Rather, “organizers have found that narratives that share the experience of other parent activists, combined with a description of the immediate steps parents can take to get involved, make for the most persuasive recruitment pitches” (p.2). Organizers teach parents to share their stories to recruit other parents.

The report includes a discussion of the difficulties of parent organizing. It draws on survey data from the 2007 National Household Education Survey, the 2012 American National Election Study, and the 2013 Education Next Survey to show that parental participation in schools and in education politics is not the norm. It then uses political science literature on the “collective action problem” to show that rational actors need additional incentives like group solidarity to motivate participation when any single individual’s investment of time is not likely to make a difference.⁵ It also draws on the social capital literature on the decline of trust to explain why parents, especially in low-income communities, may be hesitant to join an unknown entity.⁶ These are the challenges that parent organizing must overcome. According to the report, ERAOs address those challenges by recruiting parents through people they know already and trust—often other parents—and by providing parents with services like educational workshops to entice participation. The report discusses the challenges of sustaining participation, noting that “the key to sustainability may be empowering parents to run the organization entirely” (p. 2).

Quotations in the study from ERAO organizers make it clear that at least these particular organizers are committed to parent organizing, have adopted many of the skills and practices of community organizing, create extensive training programs to build parent leadership, and reflect on their practice in order to increase their effectiveness in building parent participation and leadership. They believe that building a long-term base of organized parents will help ERAOs achieve their objectives.

The most controversial part of the report’s findings concerns whether, despite these organizers’ stated commitments to parent power, parents have a meaningful say in the running of these organizations and in setting their agendas, or instead are being “used” by ERAOs to support their agendas. To be fair, the report raises this question directly, noting that critics see these groups as “astroturf” organizations “ginning up public displays of activism to make it appear as though their agenda has broader grassroots support than it actually does” (p.1). It also discusses the “numbers game,” recognizing that simply counting a large number of parents as members may say little about the level and depth of their participation and leadership.

The report claims that these groups exhibit a range of levels of parent authority. Evidence is presented that parents in some organizations have the power to set an agenda. The report considers the question of organizational control as a trade-off rather than a fundamental principle of organizing: “Empowering parents to set the agenda can promote engagement but may lead to a focus on particularistic, school-level issues. Allowing professionals to set a fixed issue agenda and then recruiting parents to support it helps to ensure coherence but is vulnerable to charges that it is little more than ‘AstroTurf’” (p. 1).

III. The Report’s Rationale for its Findings and Conclusions

The report appears to have been written for people who support the ERAO agenda, helping them to understand that “parent power is about organizing parents into a lasting political bloc, not just mobilizing them when the time is right” (p. 7). The report is intended to provide “a series of early lessons about how groups have structured their parent organizations, what strategies make for effective recruitment and mobilization, and what the challenges are for sustaining parent engagement over time” (p. 1).

The research literature does not support the report’s claim that empowering parents to set agendas leads to a narrow focus.⁷ Rather, extensive research on community organizing shows that parents as well as other participants often start with a concern for immediate needs, but subsequently, while participating in organizing efforts, build relationships with others outside their immediate circle, learn to think critically about the broader structures and factors that affect local conditions, build research skills that help them investigate current conditions as well as solutions proposed by experts, and develop an ability to analyze power relationships at an increasingly higher level. The choice for organizers, therefore, is not whether to impose an agenda on participants or let them fixate on a narrow one; rather, community organizers create a process through which parents grow and develop into leaders of their community.

Organizing is not primarily about achieving a specific policy agenda. Rather, community organizing sets out to build new kinds of relationships that empower communities for the long run. That is why “parent organizing” almost never exists in isolation. Rather, organizers help parents build relationships with other community members and actors in the public arena like teachers, pastors, neighbors and sometimes young people. Parents work with others to develop education agendas within broad-based organizations that aim to address a variety of issues impacting low-income communities and communities of color—including public safety and just policing, affordable housing, living wage jobs, and healthcare reform.⁸

ERAOs are mostly well-financed organizations that set out to organize parents from above. In contrast, in the larger world of community organizing, organizations emerge out of the concerns and through the actions of indigenous community leaders as historically constituted—for example, through the civil rights movement or traditions of religious faith. They do receive funds from private foundations, but are seldom the creation of these outside agencies. There are a few larger community organizing networks, like the

Industrial Areas Foundation and the PICO National Network, that support local affiliates and sometimes help start new groups. But when they do so, they engage in extensive processes of engagement with community residents and leaders, such as pastors of religious congregations, and do not come with pre-set agendas. When the Industrial Areas Foundation helped launch One LA, its affiliate in Los Angeles, it held more than 10,000 one-on-one conversations and gathered together a set of community leaders who brought their own power bases in congregations, neighborhoods, and unions to the organization.⁹

Community organizing is something more than a set of skills. Community organizing is a democratic practice and has deeper roots and broader purposes than immediate victories. As the report notes, community organizing grows out of the work of Saul Alinsky in organizing poor people in Chicago in the thirties, as well as the civil rights movement and other movements that express profoundly democratic values. These roots come out of the social justice traditions of religious faiths as well as the experiences of African Americans, Latinos, and other peoples struggling for liberation from unjust systems and for full inclusion in American democracy.¹⁰ By ignoring the larger community organizing world and its tradition, the report reduces organizing to a set of tactics or practices to engage parents around an issue or agenda.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

As the report notes, parent organizing within these kinds of education reform groups has not been studied, so there is no research literature to cite. However, there is an extensive literature on parent organizing as part of community organizing for education reform outside of these groups. The report cites several important studies, including by this author, but by no means extensively. The report is accurate in its citations but selective in what it chooses to cite.

The report claims that ERAOs are the new face of parent organizing. Citing this author and his colleagues, the report contrasts the new movement with “earlier incarnations,” where “parent groups tended to work in collaboration with local educators to promote school- and district-level changes, advocating for more funding for low-income schools and greater school autonomy in choosing curriculum and a pedagogical approach” (p. 6).

The reality, however, is that this “earlier incarnation” is still alive and well and pursuing equity and justice in education through a wide variety of strategies and policy agendas. Many community-organizing groups try to navigate between the competing agendas of the ERAO and its opponents, but they are increasingly coming to oppose the ERAO agenda in whole or part, seeing it as an attempt to privatize and therefore undermine the very existence of public education. In contrast to the ERAO agenda, many groups focus on efforts to increase funding to under-resourced schools, reduce harsh and racially discriminatory school discipline policies, or both. They also advocate for schools whose teachers and education practices connect closely with communities, provide caring and humane education through restorative justice programs, promote school-based wrap-

around services for young people, and look for collaborative solutions in which parents and young people have a strong voice.¹¹

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The description of the study's methods is very weak and it is unclear how rigorous the methods used were. It can be considered an exploratory study, in which case its findings can be taken as suggestive, not definitive.

The report states that it draws upon “more than 30 structured interviews, four site visits, and examination of primary source documents and data” (p. 1) to construct its findings. These are standard methods in qualitative studies, but their use is not adequately explained. The report is unclear on exactly how many groups participated in the study's interviews and site visits, or how subjects for interviews were selected. However, it appears that data in one form or another was collected from 11 city or statewide groups, including five local chapters of Stand for Children, as well as local and state chapters variously from

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Families for Excellent Schools, StudentsFirst, Parent Revolution, Democracy Builders, and the Black Alliance for Educational Options in Philadelphia. The study includes at least one participant each from Parents United for Public Schools in Minnesota and the New York City Parents Union, selected to provide a critical view of the ERAO movement.

The report recognizes that the set of groups included is not a representative sample. Instead, the report examines what it calls an opportunity sample, “limited to a set of organizations that reserved a prominent and permanent role for parents in their work, had statewide or multistate reach, and, most important, were willing to share their time and insights with researchers” (p. 8). Beyond this disclaimer, the report makes no effort to assess how representative this group might be within the broader ERAO field, but it is clearly biased towards groups that engage parents on a longer-term basis. It could be that the participant groups are quite exceptional, and that most education reform groups simply mobilize parents behind group agendas at opportune times. However, the report does claim, without presenting evidence, that ERAOs are increasingly engaging parents on a long-term basis. Indeed, it appears that a key purpose of the report is to encourage this trend and strengthen parent-organizing practice within it.

There is no discussion of how the data was analyzed, how its findings were constructed, or how threats to validity were addressed. The report offers quotations from selected interviews to support its claims. There is typically just one quotation or at most two illustrating each finding.

Since there are no other sources of data on these groups, the findings cannot be directly refuted. However, it is unclear how much support there is for each of the report's assertions and whether contrary evidence was sought or weighed in the assessment. Scholars must often trust qualitative researchers to be honest and fair in the presentation of their data, since no one else has access to it. For that reason, best practice is to describe methods in detail and discuss threats to validity.¹² One important way that qualitative researchers strengthen the validity and the credibility of their claims is through prolonged and extensive fieldwork in each site. Indeed, most research on community organizing in education reform presents extensive and detailed treatment of each case and bases its findings and conclusions on systematic and extensive presentation of qualitative data for each case. This study, instead, draws from interviews and observations across all the sites, illustrating claims with a quotation or two from participants in different sites.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The research methods employed are not adequately explained. To the extent that they are explained, the research does not appear to be extensive and systematic and the sample of ERAO groups is biased toward groups that more highly value long-lasting forms of parent engagement. The report's findings may be accurate for the groups in the study, but cannot be considered to meet rigorous standards or to be valid beyond the sample. The main purpose of the report seems to be to convince ERAO supporters of the value of building a base of parent participation to support the ERAO agenda and to offer strategies for doing so.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Given its methodological limitations, the report cannot be considered a reliable study of parent power in ERAOs. Moreover, the report's claim that ERAOs constitute the new wave of parent organizing dismisses the much wider world of community organizing for education reform that includes parents as core leaders and participants. The report suggests that some community organizing strategies can be used to advance the ERAO version of education reform. However, this approach undermines an understanding of community organizing as a profoundly democratic practice rooted in deeply held values of equity and social justice and working to build a more inclusive public democracy.

The description of parent organizing in the specific groups included in the study may well be accurate, if not necessarily generalizable to the broader field of ERAOs. If so, those who critique and dismiss participation by parents in these groups may do well to pay closer attention, since the report describes not just one-time mobilizations of parents to sign a petition or attend a rally. At least some of these groups have engaged parents in longer-term participation and leadership, and some ERAO organizers take parent participation and leadership very seriously.

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