

Rethinking the Teacher Pipeline for an Urban Public School System



CHICAGO ACORN



ORGANIZED
COMMUNITIES,
STRONGER SCHOOLS

Rethinking the Teacher Pipeline for an Urban Public School System

CHICAGO ACORN

Sara McAlister

Kavitha Mediratta

Seema Shah

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University
July 2009

Acknowledgments

We are deeply indebted to the organizers and leaders of our study sites for generously sharing their time and work with us. We are also grateful to the district officials, principals, and teachers in each site for sharing their insights with us.

Contributions to the analyses described in this series of cases studies were made by: Edwina Branch-Smith, Mary Ann Flaherty, Norm Fruchter, Barbara Gross, Janice Hirota, Dana Lockwood, Yolanda McBride, Christina Mokhtar, Deinya Phenix, Beth Rosenthal, Tom Saunders, and Meryle Weinstein. Additional research assistance was provided by Tara Bahl, Evelyn Brosi, Allison Cohen, Angelica Crane, Nadine Dechausay, Lamson Lam, Jim Laukhardt, Hannah Miller, Natalie Price, Anna Reeve, Kat Stergiopolous, Cate Swinburn, and Kelly Whitaker. Michelle Renée prepared the Overview.

In addition, Mary Arkins Decasse, Carol Ascher, Margaret Balch-Gonzalez, Susan Fisher, Anne Henderson, Haewon Kim, Jason Masten, and Fran Ostendorf each provided invaluable assistance in editing, designing, and distributing this case study series.

We extend a special thank-you to Robert Tobias, director of the National Center for Research on Teaching and Learning at New York University, for his guidance on the administrative data analyses in our study. Thanks also to Jeannie Oakes, Charles Payne, and Terry Peterson for their ongoing support of and enthusiasm for this research.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge Christine Doby of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation for her vision and leadership in this effort. Cris Doby and the Mott Foundation's unwavering commitment to community organizing and to asking prescient questions about the impact of community organizing made this research possible.

Sara McAlister is a research associate and study director for this project, Kavitha Mediratta is a principal associate in research on community organizing for school reform and principal investigator for this project, and Seema Shah is a principal associate, all at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

© 2009 Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Photo credits: Aileen Kelleher (cover, back cover, p. iv bottom);
Steve Andrews (p. iv top, p. vi bottom); Angela Mojekwu (p. vi top)

Contents

List of Figures	v
Overview: Chicago ACORN	1
Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: An Introduction to the Case Study Series	3
Community Organizing for School Reform	3
About the Study	4
The Case Study Series	5
Conceptual Framework	5
Data Sources	6
Analytic Strategy	7
Chicago ACORN	9
About Chicago	9
Chicago ACORN's Education Organizing	10
Assessing the Impact of Chicago ACORN's Education Organizing	18
Findings	19
Reflections on Findings	22
Appendix: Data Sources for the Case Study Series	23
References	25

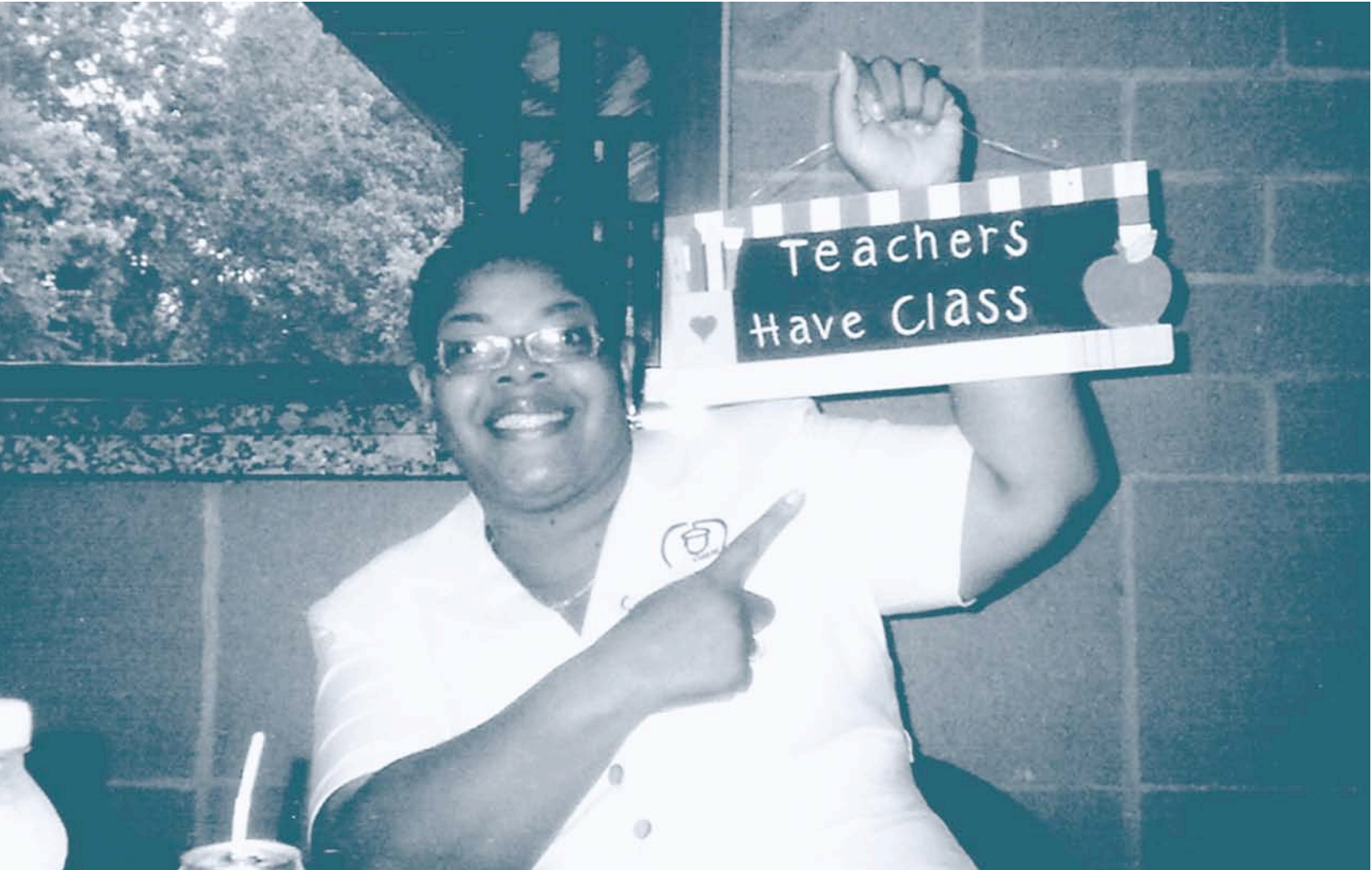


CHICAGO ACORN



List of Figures

FIGURE 1	Theory of change	5
FIGURE 2	Dimensions of district and school capacity that lead to improved student outcomes	6
FIGURE 3	Illinois Standards Achievement Test scores, North Lawndale ACORN schools vs. Chicago Public Schools	10
FIGURE 4	Teacher turnover rates: Chicago ACORN neighborhood schools (2001-2002) vs. U.S. urban public schools (2000-2001)	14
FIGURE 5	Dimensions of the Grow Your Own initiative	21



RETHINKING THE TEACHER PIPELINE FOR AN URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM



Overview: Chicago ACORN

Without ACORN, I think you would have an isolated, insulated school system that's just moving along, doing what it thinks is best, without any checks and balances. . . . We definitely need an organization like that out there to push us and make us do our jobs better.

— Chicago Public Schools official

Like many other large urban districts, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) struggles to recruit and retain experienced and successful teachers in schools serving low-income communities. In 2005, the school system entered into an unusual partnership with community groups, university leaders, and the teachers union to create a new teacher pipeline for historically hard-to-staff schools. The effort identified and trained community members to become teachers in schools with high rates of teacher turnover and persistently low levels of educational performance.

Since 1988, ACORN has organized to strengthen Chicago's neighborhood schools by training parents to participate effectively on local school councils; securing resources for school facilities improvements; and, most recently, by improving teacher retention. Beginning in 2001, ACORN conducted a series of data analyses and local campaigns that exposed teacher turnover as a severe problem in neighborhood schools. This work revealed that the cause of high teacher turnover stemmed from teachers' lack of experience with and sense of connection to the communities served by their schools.

Drawing on a successful teacher preparation program developed by the Chicago-based Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), 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 union, 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.

The statewide Grow Your Own Teachers (GYO) program is implemented by regional consortia of universities, school districts, and community organizations that work together to develop local teacher pipeline programs. These consortia recruit neighborhood residents to participate in the teacher pipeline program and provide a range of supports to help these teacher candidates complete the program successfully. The GYO program uses a cohort system to provide ongoing support to participants and offers forgivable loans, English classes, remedial coursework, daycare, and tutoring.

This study examined the impact of ACORN's organizing, drawing on interviews, field observations, archival documents, and citywide media coverage. We found that ACORN's organizing contributed to increased educational opportunities in several important ways.

Enhanced equity

- ◆ District officials credited ACORN with focusing the district's attention on the needs of underserved schools and with helping to bring new state resources to address teacher quality through the GYO program.
- ◆ School principals credited ACORN with securing funds for facilities improvements under the district's capital budget process.

Developed a new, funded teacher preparation program

- ◆ The GYO strategy of intentionally recruiting teachers with knowledge of and relationships with low-income communities of color presented a new approach to teacher preparation. As of November 2007, 545 candidates were participating in sixteen local consortia across the state; 1,000 teachers are projected to complete the program by 2016. A majority of candidates are people of color and hold full-time jobs while completing their coursework, often as classroom paraprofessionals (GYO Teachers/Grow Your Own Illinois 2008).

Established new roles for parent and community constituencies in improving teacher quality in historically hard-to-staff schools

- ◆ ACORN's research and organizing campaigns influenced how district officials and leaders in institutions of higher education worked to address challenges of teacher preparation, placement, and retention.
- ◆ The Grow Your Own Teachers Act positioned community organizing groups as key players in local consortia with responsibility for recruiting and supporting teacher candidates as they move through the pipeline program.

Though our study examines the education organizing of Chicago ACORN, the work described in this report has been led since 2008 by Action Now, an independent, non-affiliated community organizing group. Founded by the board, staff, and members formerly associated with Chicago ACORN, Action Now is continuing the education and other organizing campaigns that were begun by ACORN.

Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: An Introduction to the Case Study Series

Because good intentions are not enough, when not fortified with political will and political power.

— U.S. President Barack Obama

The opening quote, a reflection from Barack Obama on the lessons he learned during his post-college stint as a community organizer, cuts to the core of why organizing matters. Even the most well-intentioned of policies (and politicians) are often insufficient to bring about desired outcomes. Political will and political power are necessary forces to carry those good intentions forward and to hold political actors accountable when those intentions go unrealized.

In low-income neighborhoods like the ones on the South Side of Chicago where Obama organized, political power is not attained through wealth or status. Rather, power comes from numbers – from bringing together ordinary people to identify critical community concerns and to act collectively and strategically for improvements to their communities, neighborhoods, and schools.

This research follows the organizing efforts undertaken by residents of low- to moderate-income communities throughout the country, specifically in the arena of public school reform. In addition to documenting their campaigns, we aim to get underneath the organizing process to assess the tangible impacts of organizing on students and their schools. In other words, does the political will generated by organizing – in the arena of education reform – ultimately enhance the capacity of schools to improve student learning?

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR SCHOOL REFORM

Neither community organizing nor public education activism is new in the United States. But increasingly in the last fifteen years, community organizations have used organizing as a focused and deliberate strategy for school improvement, particularly within low- and moderate-income communities.

Instead of relying on more traditional forms of parent and community involvement (getting involved in school activities or serving on district-sponsored committees, for instance), organizing groups mobilize parents, youth, and community members for local school improvement and districtwide reform, often applying pressure from the outside to generate the political will necessary to adopt and implement reforms. In the process, these organizing efforts aim to equalize power dynamics between school and district administrators and low-income parents and

Community Organizing for School Reform . . .

- Brings together public school parents, youth and community residents, and/or institutions to engage in collective dialogue and action for change
- Builds grassroots leadership by training parents and youth in the skills of organizing and civic engagement
- Builds political power by mobilizing large numbers of people around a unified vision and purpose
- Focuses on demands for accountability, equity, and quality for all students, rather than on gains for individual students
- Aims to disrupt long-standing power relationships that produce failing schools in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and communities of color
- Uses the tactics of direct action and mobilization to put pressure on decision-makers when necessary

community members, who may otherwise feel marginalized or powerless to challenge educational inequities.

Nationally, it is estimated that more than 200 community groups are engaged in organizing for better schooling (Mediratta & Fruchter 2001; Gold, Simon & Brown 2002). These organizing groups have responded to a variety of parental and youth concerns, including unsafe environmental and facilities conditions, overcrowded schools, dangerous school crossings, inadequate school funding, unresponsive administrators, and inexperienced teachers.

Many researchers have noted the failure of traditional approaches to education reform to bring about deep and lasting school improvement. Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton, for example, attribute the “sorry and familiar story of school reform gone awry” to educators’ singular focus on changing the internal “technical aspects” of schooling, without adequately attending to the political, social, and cultural dimensions of schooling. Oakes and Lipton argue,

The logic and strategies employed in social and political movements – in contrast to those found in organizational change models – are more likely to expose, challenge, and if successful, disrupt the prevailing norms and politics of schooling inequality. . . . Without attention to these dynamics, such reforms are abandoned entirely or implemented in ways that actually replicate (perhaps in a different guise) the stratified status quo. (Oakes & Lipton 2002, p. 383)

Oakes and Lipton’s analysis reflects an increased interest from both practitioners and researchers in understanding the potential role of community organizing in contributing to sustainable improvements in education.

ABOUT THE STUDY

To date, research on community organizing for school reform has been mostly qualitative and includes numerous reports (Gold, Simon & Brown 2002; HoSang 2005; Zachary & olatoye 2001), as well as excellent and detailed book-length analyses of organizing efforts (Oakes, Rogers & Lipton 2006; Warren 2001; Shirley 1997). But comparatively few research studies examine the effect of these groups’ work on local schools and communities. How have organizing efforts influenced district policies and practices? In what ways does the culture of schools change because of involvement in organizing? And most important, are educational outcomes better for students when organizing is in the picture? This study, initiated in 2002 with funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, sought to address these critical questions.

The six-year, mixed-methods study – the first of its kind – followed the school reform campaigns of seven organizing groups nationally.¹ The study examined the impact of organizing on the leadership development of those involved and also assessed the impact of organizing on three critical indicators of education reform: district-level policy, school-level capacity, and student outcomes.

Organized Communities, Stronger Schools, the report of preliminary findings released in March 2008, measured and linked the impacts of community organizing to specific performance indicators (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2008). We found that sophisticated organizing at the grassroots level can indeed make major contributions to improving student achievement. Across multiple data sources, we observed strong and consistent evidence that effective community organizing:

- ◆ stimulates important changes in educational policy, practices, and resource distribution at the system level;
- ◆ strengthens school–community relationships, parent involvement and engagement, and trust in schools; and
- ◆ contributes to higher student educational outcomes, including higher attendance, test score performance, high school completion, and college-going aspirations.

¹ An eighth group, Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope, was involved at the onset of the study. Because they did not participate in the study across the whole six years, we have not produced a case study of their organization.

² The work described in this study was carried out by Chicago ACORN until January 2008, when the director, staff, and board left ACORN to start a new group called Action Now, which is continuing the education and other organizing campaigns initiated while they were affiliated with ACORN.

THE CASE STUDY SERIES

Following up on *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools*, we offer a case study series that presents an in-depth look at each of the organizing groups in our study. The study sites are:

- ◆ Austin Interfaith (Austin, Texas), affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)
- ◆ Chicago ACORN (Chicago, Illinois), affiliated with the national network Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now²
- ◆ 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); EPOP was affiliated with the PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing) national network until 2009
- ◆ Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and its youth organizing arm, Sistas and Brothas United (Bronx, New York)
- ◆ Oakland Community Organizations (Oakland, California), affiliated with PICO
- ◆ People Acting for Community Together (Miami, Florida), affiliated with the Direct Action and Research Training (DART) Center

Each case study traces the group’s education organizing campaigns and considers the impact of this work on promoting resource equity and district accountability for improved educational outcomes. In three

districts – Austin, Miami, and Oakland – where the education reform strategy was in place at least five years, we also examine trends in school capacity and student educational outcomes. Though educators predicted gains in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia resulting from the organizing conducted by groups in our study, the reforms are either too new and/or do not integrate enough intensive school-based organizing for us to assess their school capacity and student outcome impacts through administrative or survey data. In these cases, we focus on documenting the group’s organizing efforts and examining preliminary indicators of impact.

The case studies in this series will be made available for download, as they are published, at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis of impacts both across sites and within sites is guided by a conceptual framework – or logic model – for how organizing leads to change in schools. The framework, presented in the 2004 publication *Constituents of Change* (see Mediratta 2004; Figure 1), provides a guiding theory of change for how community organizing stimulates improvements in both community capacity and district and school

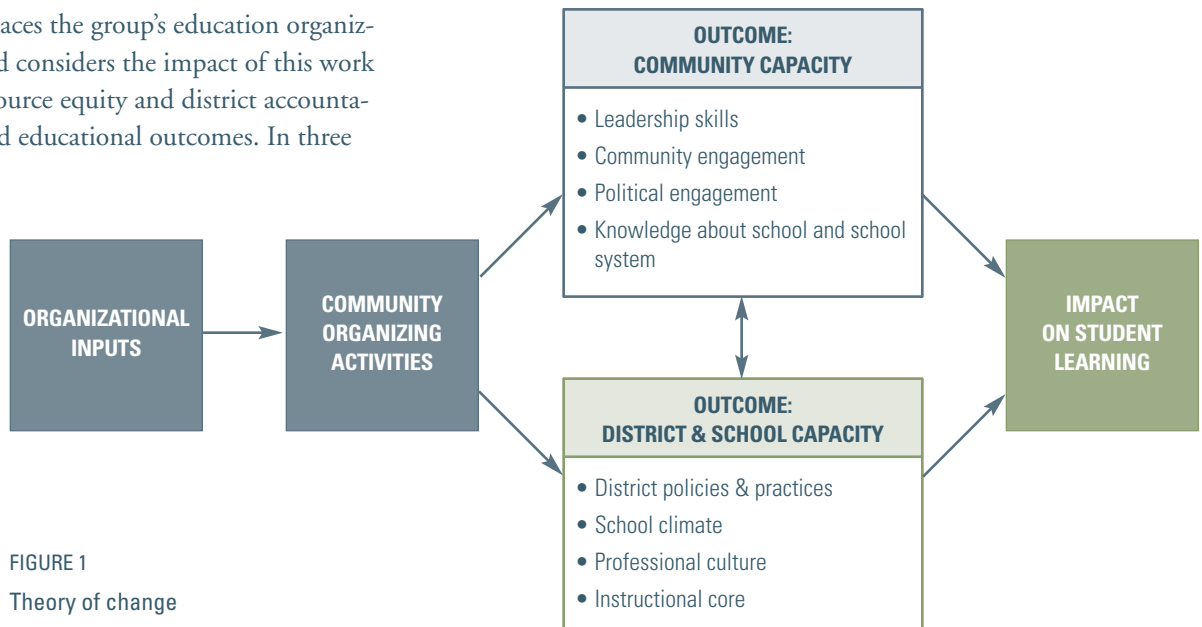


FIGURE 1
Theory of change

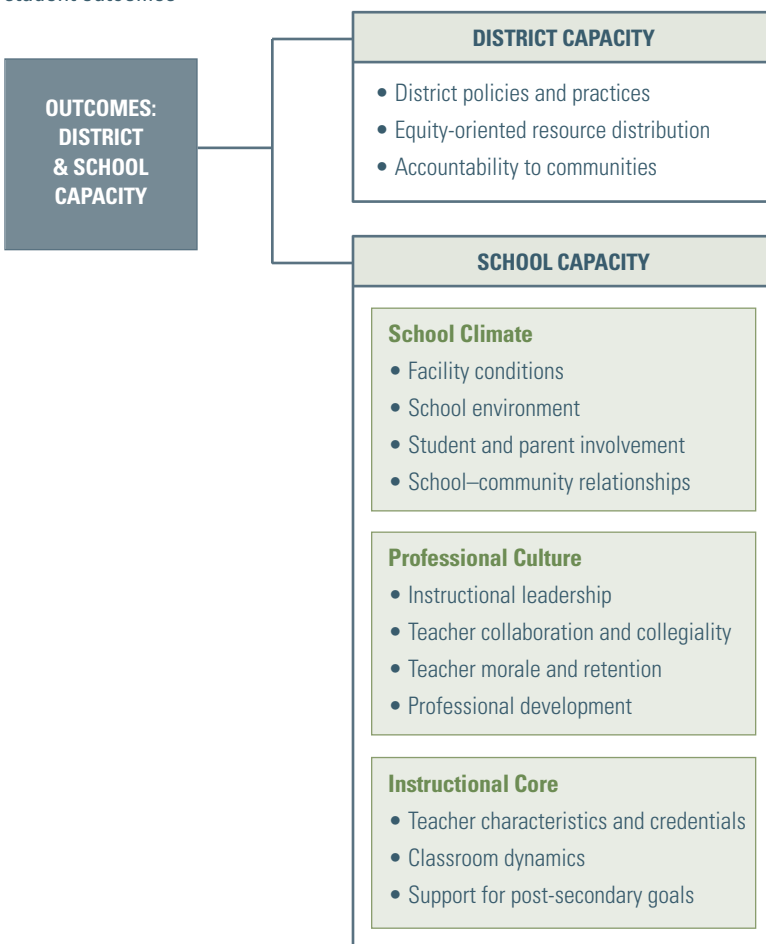
capacity. In the current series of case studies, we focus on how organizing influences district and school capacity and student learning.

We ground our assessment of district and school capacity outcomes in the existing educational change literature. We draw primarily from the seminal research on essential supports conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, which outlines five broad dimensions of school capacity (leadership, parent–community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, ambitious instruction) that are associated with better student outcomes (Sebring et al. 2006). We also pull from Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider’s work on trust in schools (2002), Richard Elmore’s writings on teaching practice (1996; 2002; 2004), the National

Center for Education Statistics’ articulation of school quality indicators (Mayer et al. 2000), and research on indicators of education organizing conducted by Eva Gold and Elaine Simon at Research for Action and Chris Brown at the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2002).

Based on the above conceptual framework, we would expect improvements on intermediate indicators of district and school capacity to produce a higher-quality learning experience. In turn, we would expect this stronger learning environment to result in improved student outcomes. Though changes in school and district capacity are important outcomes in their own right, they take on added significance because of their links to student achievement. Critical dimensions of district and school capacity are outlined in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
Dimensions of district and school capacity that lead to improved student outcomes



DATA SOURCES

Our study uses a rigorous mixed-methods design to understand the impacts of organizing on district and school capacity and student outcomes. We collected 321 stakeholder interviews; 75 observations of organizing strategy sessions, campaign activities, and actions; 509 teacher surveys; and school demographic and outcome data for each of the seven school districts.

We used interviews and observational data with community organizers and adult and youth members to clarify the theories of action and resultant educational change strategies guiding organizing groups’ work, and to assess members’ knowledge about education policy and their sense of efficacy in generating change within their schools and communities. Publicly available school-level administrative data, interviews with district and school leaders, and teacher surveys were used to analyze district-, school-, and student-level outcomes. Impacts of community organizing were thus assessed in three ways:

- ◆ District and school leaders’ attributions. We examined district and school leaders’ perceptions of the impact of organizing groups on district and

school decision making, capacities, and relationships with parent, youth, and community constituencies.

- ◆ **Teachers' attributions.** We assessed teachers' perceptions of a variety of school context indicators, and whether they believed that changes in school climate, professional culture, and instructional indicators had been influenced by the groups' actions.
- ◆ **Student outcomes.** We reviewed administrative data on student attendance, standardized test performance, graduation and dropout rates, and college aspirations in the schools targeted by groups in our study.

We also analyzed our data to understand how groups achieve their impact – that is, we identified the critical organizing processes and strategic choices that enabled organizing groups to effectively challenge the status quo and help improve schooling conditions and educational outcomes in their communities.

A detailed description of the data sources and methods of collection can be found in Appendix A.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Community organizing for school reform does not occur in isolation from the messy realities of communities, politics, and schools. Linking organizing strategies to change – either in the community at large or in complex institutions such as schools – poses critical challenges for research. Given the intricacies of schools, communities, and the dynamic contexts in which they are situated, it is neither feasible nor desirable to create an experimental research design from which causal inferences might be drawn between the activities of organizing groups and the schooling outcomes they hope to stimulate.

For example, because organizing groups make decisions based on the priorities of community members and the urgency of problems in their local schools, random assignment of schools as “treatment” and “non-treatment” is not a reasonable or appropriate strategy. Even if such a design were possible, it would be difficult to pinpoint organizing as the “cause” of

these changes, given the high turnover among superintendents, principals, teachers, and students that characterizes large urban districts, the presence of other reforms at the school, as well as the ebbs and flows of organizing itself that occur over time (Connell, Kubisch, Schorr & Weiss 1995; Berliner 2002).

To assess the schooling impacts of organizing groups, then, we employed a complex, mixed-methods design that assumes that community change efforts are multi-dimensional interventions that are evolving in response to constant changes in context. By using multiple data sources and carefully examining points of convergence and divergence within the data, we can contextualize and explain conclusions the data suggest about impact. Our ability to draw inferences in support of our research hypotheses is based on the consistency of evidence across these multiple data sources and forms of analysis.

In carrying out this research, we engaged in a collaborative research process with our sites, sharing preliminary findings at each stage of our analysis, so that their intimate knowledge of the school, district, and community contexts informed our interpretation and understanding of the data.

Denise Dixon is no stranger to asking tough questions of public officials. As former president of Chicago ACORN, the Chicago chapter of the national organizing network, she led protests, convened press conferences, testified at council hearings, and was extensively quoted in the press. On issues from living wages and unfair lending to neighborhood violence and community policing, Dixon has no qualms about demanding that politicians respond to her community's needs. Yet for years, Dixon was reluctant to ask her local school about the quality of education her daughter was receiving. "My oldest is twenty-one, went through the public schools. I never once asked her teacher what her qualifications were," Dixon recalled.

Across the country, parents like Denise Dixon increasingly are asking questions about the quality of their schools and the distribution of educational resources in their cities and towns. With the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, a stream of data exposing school-system failings has become available to the public. Many community groups are using these data to demand accountability and reform.

In Chicago, Dixon and other members of ACORN reviewed research on school reform and analyzed their schools' data. These data led ACORN to see teacher turnover as the main obstacle to improving student learning. However, the schools' parent-involvement efforts focused largely on volunteering and fundraising instead of engaging parents on this important issue. Frustrated and determined, Dixon, along with scores of parents, grandparents, and community residents involved with ACORN,

decided to take matters into their own hands, placing classified ads and recruiting certified teachers to teach in neighborhood schools.

ACORN executive director Madeline Talbott explained:

Until we started doing this, people did not see teacher quality as an issue for parents. You get that all the time. Educators relegate parents to this little area of parent involvement, not understanding that we don't want to be "involved," we want quality education. We don't need any involvement; we've got work to do. We've got homes to run and jobs to go to.

When the school district refused to release information on teacher credentials, Dixon and the ACORN members were undaunted. They worked with data analysts to conduct their own studies of teacher quality, then took their data to the school board and publicly demanded better teachers. Their vocal campaign and compelling data caught the attention of policy-makers and the press, catapulting ACORN members into a new role as experts on teacher quality in their neighborhoods. Dixon said:

We were so forward about what we wanted for our children, what we needed, the press picked up on it. And we have virtually become the group on education. It was pretty cool to be heard, to actually have a solution to the problem and not be just complaining. We're saying, "This is wrong, and this is how you fix it." It's pretty amazing.

Chicago ACORN

In many ways, public schools in Chicago have vastly improved over the years. But the district has struggled to provide a high-quality education to an overwhelmingly low-income student population, especially in traditionally underserved neighborhoods. One critical problem is that teachers often have little connection to the communities they serve, leading to high turnover and a large number of inexperienced teachers. And despite mandated parent involvement on school-based decision-making councils, many schools involve parents largely in volunteering and fundraising activities rather than participation in school reform efforts such as improving teacher quality.

ABOUT CHICAGO

In 1987, U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett called Chicago Public Schools (CPS) the nation's worst school system (Associated Press 1987). In the two decades since his pronouncement, the district has seen sweeping changes: a radical decentralization that handed power to locally elected councils of parents and teachers; the advent of mayoral control; an unprecedented investment in curricular reform; and a privately financed initiative to create 100 new small schools. CPS has earned a reputation for innovation and a commitment to reform and is often lauded as an example of an improving urban system.

Chicago still faces daunting challenges. Like many of the nation's largest school systems, its students are overwhelmingly low income (see sidebar). During the 2007-2008 school year, twenty-seven CPS students suffered violent deaths (Ihejirika 2008), and the graduation rate hovers around 55 percent. These problems are magnified in the neighborhoods where ACORN (and Action Now) members live: Englewood, West Englewood, North Lawndale, and Little Village. Clustered on the West and South sides of Chicago, these neighborhoods are home to mostly

Black and Latino working-class and low-income families and as many as 95 percent of students are low income. Compared to 62 percent of students citywide, in 2005 only 52 percent of students in North Lawndale met standards on the state achievement tests (see Figure 3 on the next page).

Chicago Public Schools at a Glance, 2006-2007	
Total student enrollment	390,243
Black	46.9%
Latino	38.9%
Students categorized as <i>low income</i> *	84.9%
Limited English proficient	14.4%
Number of schools	655
Per pupil expenditure	\$10,409
Number of teachers	22,173
Student attendance rate	91.3%

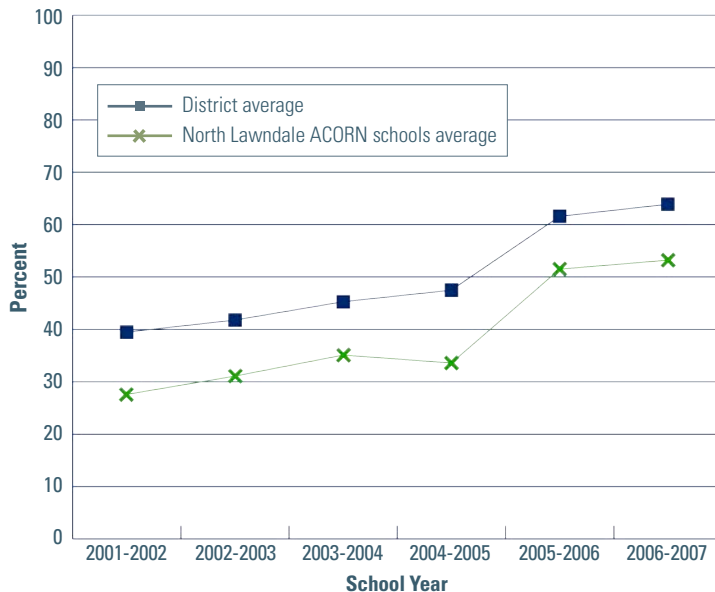
Notes: Data are for grades K-12.

*Low-income students come from families receiving public aid; live in institutions for neglected or delinquent children; are supported in foster homes with public funds; or are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Source of data: 2007 Illinois District Report Card, <http://webprod.isbe.net/ereportcard/publicsite/getReport.aspx?year=2007&code=150162990_e.pdf>

FIGURE 3

Illinois Standards Achievement Test scores, North Lawndale ACORN schools vs. Chicago Public Schools



Source of data: Illinois State Board of Education, Data Analysis and Progress Reporting <http://webprod.isbe.net/ereportcard/publicsite/getSearchCriteria.aspx>

Notes: From 2001-2005, the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) was administered to students in grades 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8. Starting in 2005-2006, the ISAT was administered to students in grades 3 through 8. The results for 2001-2002, 2002-2003, 2003-2004 reflect reading, mathematics, science, writing, and social science test scores. The results for 2004-2005 reflect only reading, mathematics, and science test scores.

Caution: Data for 2004-2005 should not be compared to data for 2005-2006 because substantial changes were made to the state tests in 2005-2006 when testing in reading and mathematics was expanded to include all grades from grade 3 through grade 8. In 2004-2005, such testing was limited only to selected grades. Although there were no changes in high school testing, data in high school report cards at the state level (and also at the district level for unit districts) are not comparable between the two years because of changes in elementary school testing mentioned above.

CHICAGO ACORN'S EDUCATION ORGANIZING

Chicago is the birthplace of community organizing. Ever since Saul Alinsky founded the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in 1939, the city has been home to a vibrant array of organizing groups with deep ties to neighborhoods and firsthand knowledge of the issues they face.³ A 2001 study counted seventeen adult, youth, and intergenerational organizing groups active on education issues (Davenport 2001). ACORN and others have played a visible role in school reform. They have mobilized and trained parents and community members to run for positions on the local school councils that the law created.

Chicago ACORN has a twenty-five-year history of organizing in Englewood, West Englewood, Little Village, and North Lawndale under the leadership of Madeline Talbott, its founder and head organizer. Beginning in 2000, Talbott lead ACORN in a new organizing effort to strengthen its neighborhood schools by improving teacher quality and slowing turnover. Working with other community organizing groups, district officials, university deans, and elected officials, ACORN assembled a statewide coalition to win legislation creating a “grow your own” teacher pipeline program to train people with ties to neighborhood schools to become teachers. This statewide campaign 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.

In early 2008, Talbott, the staff, and the board left ACORN to start Action Now, a new, unaffiliated organization that is continuing the education work and other campaigns they began while affiliated with ACORN. Though we refer to the group as ACORN, as it was called throughout the period of our study, the work we describe is now being led by Action Now.

This report shares findings from our six-year study of ACORN's education organizing. We trace the evolution of ACORN's teacher-quality campaign and its potential impact on school capacity. Though it will be several years before the Grow Your Own program bears fruit, our research found consistent and compelling evidence that ACORN's work influenced public officials' priorities and perceptions of the role of community groups in school reform and led to major changes in how teachers are recruited, trained and placed in low-income schools.

³ Saul Alinsky's organizing work has also had an impact outside of Chicago. In 1940, Alinsky founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a national organizing network that now has affiliates in twenty-one states, as well as outside the U.S. Another case study in this series, *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith* (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009), discusses the impact on education reform of organizing that grew out of IAF's work in Texas.

Local School Councils: An Opportunity for Meaningful Parent Involvement in Schools

During the late 1980s, parents, community groups, and business leaders grew increasingly frustrated with persistent labor unrest and widespread educational failure facing CPS. In the fall of 1987, the ninth teacher strike in eighteen years galvanized public anger with the low quality of schools and stifling bureaucracy of the system. A broad coalition emerged to push for reform; in 1988 the coalition won passage of the Chicago School Reform Act in the state legislature, the centerpiece of which was a radical move toward local control (O’Connell 1991).

The law created an elected Local School Council (LSC) consisting of parents, community members, teachers, and principals for each school in the district. Parents were to make up a majority of the LSC. LSCs were granted the authority to hire and fire principals, develop and approve budgets, and shape school improvement priorities.

LSCs provided parents and community members with unprecedented access to schools and opportunities for involvement in schools. For groups like ACORN, LSCs provided an opening to deepen their involvement in education issues. ACORN executive director Madeline Talbott described the process:

Once we put people on the LSCs, it created much more interest on the part of the membership about what the heck do we do about the schools. We didn’t have an answer to that question. We tried out different things over a period of time to try to figure out, how a community organization engages with classroom education.

Chicago schools were notorious for excluding parents and communities from participation beyond volunteering and fundraising. “You had to have an appointment or a reason that was cleared by the administration to even walk into most buildings,” recalled Gwen Stewart, a parent leader with ACORN (Russo 2004). After becoming the majority of each school’s council, parents and community members were taken more seriously by school leaders and

“Once we put people on the LSCs, it created much more interest on the part of the membership about what the heck do we do about the schools. . . . We tried out different things over a period of time to try to figure out how a community organization engages with classroom education.”

— Madeline Talbott, executive director, ACORN

ACORN’s Community Organizing Model

ACORN’s mission is to build power among low- and moderate-income community residents to hold government and the private sector accountable for meeting neighborhood needs. The group’s theory of action posits that power develops when large numbers of community members engage in strategic action to challenge imbalances in political power. ACORN leaders and organizers believe that the people who are directly affected by inequities have a right to be involved in decision making regarding policy and programs to address their needs and aspirations. ACORN has led successful campaigns to expand the availability of affordable housing, challenge predatory lending practices, improve access to health care, and establish a living wage in Chicago.

ACORN uses a direct-membership model of organizing, which continually recruits new members through door-knocking and other one-on-one recruitment strategies. ACORN is structured into neighborhood-based chapters, which send representatives to citywide and statewide councils that make decisions about large-scale campaigns. Local neighborhood chapters hold regular meetings, choose campaign issues, and develop and implement local actions.

Although Action Now is not affiliated with ACORN, it draws on the organizing history and traditions that shape ACORN’s work.

“It was very hard to get people . . . to come to the West Side for an interview, and many of them did not stay.”

— Madeline Talbott, executive director, ACORN

teachers. Seizing the opportunity and supported by local funders, ACORN helped many of its members campaign for spots on LSCs. In the first round of elections, eighty-seven ACORN members were elected to the councils of a number of schools.

Uncovering the Problem: A Shortage of Qualified Teachers

Through its members’ participation in LSCs, ACORN began to form relationships with local schools and principals. ACORN approached principals as allies rather than as adversaries, believing that most principals shared their goals and appreciated the political power that organizing groups brought with them. The group proved to be a formidable ally for schools that were seeking resources from the district, particularly funds for facilities repairs. ACORN testified at school board meetings on behalf of local schools and pressed the district to respond to principals’ requests.

Beyond advocating for schools’ immediate facilities needs, participating on the councils deepened members’ interest in the problems facing local schools. ACORN organizers sought ways to expand members’ access to education reform expertise and broaden interest in school issues to all ACORN members, not just those serving on LSCs. Working with local school reform groups and drawing on local foundation grants for capacity building, ACORN conducted a series of trainings for LSC members and interested parents in each of its neighborhoods. The training combined an analysis of what was happening inside

schools with training in organizing skills. Participants examined demographic and achievement data from their school and compared it to other schools, explored math and reading curricula, and made classroom visits.

Leaders came to see the poor outcomes of their schools as the product of inexperienced and under-qualified teachers, since many schools had chronic vacancies and often relied on long-term substitute teachers. A group of about twenty-five parents on the West Side launched a drive to hire highly qualified teachers by placing ads, screening candidates, and setting up interviews with principals. The response was disappointing. Talbott recalled:

It was very hard to get people who sent resumes to come to the West Side for an interview, and many of them did not stay. Because they wanted a job, they went in, and then they left.

The Need for a Systemic Response

After the inception of the LSCs, ACORN’s school-based organizing relied largely on a strategy of recruiting parents into teams focused on the needs of individual schools. As the group delved deeper into teacher recruitment, this strategy began to shift. ACORN leaders realized that the problem of recruiting quality teachers demanded a systemic response. Rather than mobilizing parents and LSC members school by school, in the fall of 2000 ACORN convened a meeting of members from all its neighborhoods to discuss education-organizing priorities. Teacher quality and recruitment emerged as a central problem for each neighborhood. The group devised a strategy of cataloging the teaching staff needs of all neighborhood schools and demanding action from the school board. Their visits to schools revealed that principals were quite concerned about teacher quality but were desperate for teachers and often relied on long-term substitutes to fill vacancies.

In February 2001, Denise Dixon, Gwen Stewart, and other leaders testified at a school board meeting about vacancies in their schools. “We will not settle for one piece of the educational pie,” Dixon told the

board, pointing out that the district had managed to open new magnet schools fully staffed with certified teachers (Rossi 2001a). During the meeting, CPS's human resources director reported that halfway through the school year, the district had well over a thousand vacancies.

The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported on the leaders' testimony to the school board and followed up with its own analysis of teacher credentials that confirmed ACORN's claims about the disproportionate shortage of qualified teachers in low-income schools (Rossi 2001b; Rossi, Beaupre & Grossman 2001a, 2001b; Rossi & Grossman 2001). Arthur Wise, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, said in one article:

The dirty little secret is that there are large numbers of unqualified individuals teaching, and they are disproportionately assigned to teach children of color and children from impoverished backgrounds. (Rossi, Beaupre & Grossman 2001b)

The series helped to raise the profile of teacher-quality issues in Chicago, and ACORN leaders were quoted in almost every article.

During the spring and summer, ACORN leaders worked intensively with CPS staff to target recruitment to North Lawndale, which the group's investigations had shown to have the most need. The district moved one of its strongest teacher recruiters to the instructional region that encompassed North Lawndale. In the fall, ACORN conducted a new round of visits to the schools. "When North Lawndale schools opened [that August], there were problems with special education, libraries, counseling. But every classroom was covered," Talbott recalled.

"The dirty little secret is that there are large numbers of unqualified individuals teaching . . . children of color and children from impoverished backgrounds."

— Arthur Wise, president, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education

The Problem: Cultural Mismatches and High Teacher Turnover

ACORN continued to work with district leaders to strengthen teacher recruitment in North Lawndale as well as its other neighborhoods. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act's requirement that each state formalize teacher certification and provide highly qualified teachers in all classrooms lent important leverage to ACORN's demands. Yet, even as recruitment improved, a consensus was emerging across Chicago that simply attracting better teachers would not solve the problem of keeping them, particularly in struggling schools. In 2002, the group released a follow-up to its earlier study, this one focusing on the absence of experienced teachers in neighborhood schools (Timmer 2002).

ACORN leaders viewed the retention problem as a cultural and ethnic mismatch between teacher recruits and the schools and communities where they took jobs. Education graduates were increasingly White and suburban. When they came to North Lawndale and similar neighborhoods, "they experienced culture shock when they walked outside the [school] building," according to ACORN leader Gwen Stewart. Drawing on a strategy developed by organizing groups in California and Texas, leaders designed a program of home visits for new teachers as part of an induction program run by a local foundation. The hope was that getting to know families and students in the neighborhood could help to allay teachers' discomfort. The visits were well-received by families and teachers alike and were publicized in local and citywide media. But many teachers who

“We’ve recruited a high number of [high] caliber teachers. But if we don’t understand the importance of the retention side, we’re kidding ourselves.”

— Arne Duncan, CEO, Chicago Public Schools

participated still left their schools quickly – some within the first week of school. The startling turn-over crystallized the issue for ACORN leaders; a different approach was required.

ACORN’s own investigations confirmed that highly educated White teachers were the first to leave high-poverty schools across Illinois, a pattern that has been described in scholarly research as well (DeAngelis & Presley 2007). Clearly, the problem lay in the pool of teachers. Talbott explained:

Teacher turnover is the cause of vacancies in otherwise easy-to-fill positions, such as elementary teachers and high school social studies teachers. It only occurs in neighborhoods where no teachers from that very community are being trained to be teachers: low-income schools, especially of color, especially African American. It is not a pipeline problem of too few teachers being trained in a state but, rather, too few teachers being trained who want to work in our schools.

The group helped to draw attention to the dimensions of teacher turnover in low-income neighborhoods (see Figure 4). In 2003, ACORN released a third report, entitled “Where Have All the Teachers Gone?” chronicling teacher churn in North Lawndale schools and the steep costs of training and hiring large numbers of new teachers each year (Timmer 2003). In November of that year, *Catalyst*, an independent school reform magazine, reported that 31 percent of new teachers were leaving the district after just two years (Williams 2003, p. 7).

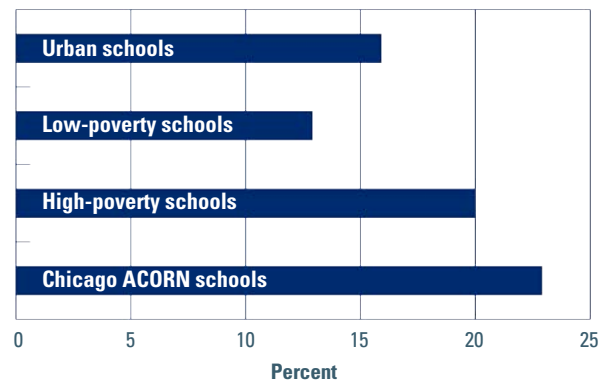
Under Arne Duncan, who took over leadership of the school district in 2001, CPS worked to strengthen professional development and mentoring for new teachers and developed a special set of supports for the “port of entry” schools that teachers left most quickly for more appealing schools and districts. Duncan commented, “We’ve recruited a high number of [high] caliber teachers. But if we don’t understand the importance of the retention side, we’re kidding ourselves” (Williams 2003).

A New Teacher- Pipeline Model

ACORN turned to a new teacher-pipeline model developed by one of its organizing allies, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), to remedy the shortage of teachers prepared for local schools. In 2000, LSNA began a partnership with a local university to provide education coursework leading to full bilingual teacher certification to local parents who had volunteered extensively in their children’s schools. The program, called Nueva Generación, offered forgivable loans, English classes, remedial coursework, daycare, and tutoring and used a cohort system in which participants moved through classes together for mutual support. Parents in Nueva Generación shared their future students’ culture, language, and experiences and approached teaching with a commitment to working in local schools (Blanc et al. 2002).

FIGURE 4

Teacher turnover rates: Chicago ACORN neighborhood schools (2001-2002) vs. U.S. urban public schools (2000-2001)



Source of data: Timmer 2003

Research supported the potential of Nueva Generación to produce a stable supply of qualified teachers committed to hard-to-staff schools. The Pathways into Teaching Project, which provided supports to a group of nontraditional candidates similar to the Nueva Generación participants, produced higher completion rates in teacher-preparation programs, and graduates received significantly higher ratings of their skills than new teachers nationally. After three years, 88 percent of graduates were still teaching, far exceeding the national three-year retention rate of 67 percent for new teachers, and the majority remained in hard-to-staff districts (DeWitt Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund 1997). A similar program in North Carolina for paraprofessionals also showed promising results. These programs, like Nueva Generación, incorporated many best practices for nontraditional adult students, such as cohort systems for mutual support, classes held in community locations, and extensive tutoring and counseling (Clewell & Villegas 2001).

Scaling Up: The Statewide Grow Your Own Teachers Campaign

ACORN saw in Nueva Generación the basis for a systemic rethinking of the teacher pipeline. As organizers and leaders dug more deeply into the issues of teacher training and teacher turnover, they discovered that schools serving low-income children of color across the state faced the same problem. It was time to develop a statewide approach. Madeline Talbott commented:

I thought we were solving a personal problem that we had in North Lawndale and Englewood, but it’s a public issue. Higher education is churning out people who are staying one or two years and no more. If it’s a problem everywhere, it means that we need to look for a solution on a much bigger scale.

From their work on LSCs, both LSNA and ACORN had developed strong relationships with two local school reform intermediaries, Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and Designs for Change.

“Higher education is churning out people who are staying one or two years and no more. If it’s a problem everywhere, it means that we need to look for a solution on a much bigger scale.”

— Madeline Talbott, executive director, ACORN

With funding from the Ford Foundation, the four groups convened a teacher-quality coalition called Chicago Learning Campaign (CLC). ACORN advocated for scaling up Nueva Generación into a statewide Grow Your Own Teacher (GYO) program that would establish partnerships between community groups and universities across the state to train residents of high-turnover neighborhoods as teachers. To ensure legitimacy and reliable funding for the effort, the CLC sought legislation establishing program rules and a yearly appropriation.

As seasoned players in the Chicago and Illinois political landscapes, ACORN and its allies in the CLC understood the importance of building coalitions. Passing state legislation would be much easier if all the organizations that would have a hand in carrying out GYO programs were on board from the start.

The CLC reached out to the school district – in particular to an official who had served as principal in an LSNA school – and to local universities, community colleges, unions, and foundations. ACORN and LSNA met with the state legislators who represented their respective neighborhoods, with whom they had long-established relationships, and recruited more organizing groups into the collaboration. With Talbott as the main facilitator, the CLC assembled a broadly representative Grow Your Own task force to draft legislation.

“ACORN was able to recruit all the key stakeholders and to hold very amicable planning sessions. We were able to move rather quickly and get consensus,” recalled senior CPS official Amanda Rivera, who

represented the district on the task force. University deans, union leaders, legislators, and Nueva Generación participants rallied support and affirmed the need for GYO at a public summit in the state capital in the winter of 2004.

The Grow Your Own Teachers Act passed during the 2004 legislative session, and the governor signed it, authorizing the creation of local consortia of universities, school districts, and community organizations. These consortia would recruit neighborhood residents who had demonstrated a commitment to hard-to-staff schools and support them through teacher preparation programs. Talbott credited the CLC’s success to its membership of universities, unions,

school districts, and community organizations – the breadth of which demonstrated widespread support for the GYO model. Educators and politicians concurred that the enthusiasm of so many constituencies for GYO was a compelling factor in the legislation’s passage and the governor’s decision to sign the law. Linda Jamali, an education official in the governor’s office, recalled:

[ACORN was] very organized in bringing in groups to speak who could offer a variety of perspectives on the legislation that they were proposing ... and they’ve reached out to higher education groups and some other groups that share the same interests they have.

The Grow Your Own Teacher Education Initiative	
GOAL	
Vision	To prepare highly skilled, committed teachers who will teach in hard-to-staff schools and hard-to-staff teaching positions and who will remain in these schools for substantial periods of time.
Long-Term Expectancy	By 2016, it is expected that 1,000 teachers, with an average retention period of 7 years, will be added to the workforce, as opposed to the current rate of 2.5 years for new teachers in such areas.
METHOD	
Participants	Participants include parents, community leaders, or paraprofessionals with a high school diploma or equivalent. Members of each cohort will move through the program together with guaranteed support and flexible schedule.
Process	Students will receive their education through attending classes from a consortium of schools that includes school employee programs and community colleges and must include at least one four-year higher-education institution with an accredited teacher preparation program, at least one school district or group of schools, and one or more community organizations.
What Is a “Community Organization”?	According to the legislation, “community organization” means a nonprofit organization that has a demonstrated capacity to train, develop, and organize parents and community leaders into a constituency that will hold the school and the school district accountable for achieving high academic standards. In addition to organizations with a geographic focus, “community organization” includes general parent organizations, organizations of special education or bilingual education parents, and school employee unions.
SUPPORT	
Financial Aid	Tuition will be covered by state or other sources. Student loans are forgiven after five years of teaching in a target school.
Social Support	The cohort design allows the students to rely on one another for additional emotional, academic, and social support.
Additional Support	Consortia participants were selected based on their ability to provide childcare, tutoring, and counseling services.

Source: <www.growyourownteachers.org/Resources/ILStateBill.htm>

Despite the enthusiasm for GYO, a state budget crisis meant that the task force had to wait until the following year to press for an appropriation. In the meantime, ACORN and its allies, particularly Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform director Anne Hallett, continued to cultivate support among universities, community groups, and unions in high-turnover districts across the state to ensure support for a sufficient appropriation and encourage broad participation in the program once funded.

During this period, task force members also worked with the state department of education to draft the rules governing the program (see sidebar). ACORN, LSNA, Cross City Campaign, and the other organizing groups pushed to require the participation in each consortium of a community organizing group, which would take most responsibility for recruiting candidates. Without this involvement, they worried, teacher training institutions risked using the GYO funds to recreate what they already had. ACORN, LSNA, Cross City Campaign, and two other Chicago organizing groups won the state contract to administer the program under the name GYO Illinois.

In 2005, the legislature approved an initial appropriation of \$1.5 million for planning grants to ten consortia and, since then, has provided additional appropriations of at least \$3 million each year, totaling \$11 million through 2008. As of 2008, eight of the twelve public universities in the state of Illinois participated in GYO, and sixteen consortia across the state were supporting cohorts of future teachers.

Renaissance 2010: The Challenge of Maintaining a Shared Vision

In 2004, as ACORN and its allies were collaborating with CPS to pass the GYO legislation, the district rolled out a controversial plan dubbed Renaissance 2010. Renaissance 2010 aimed to expand school choice and add seats to schools in rapidly growing neighborhoods. It would close nearly 60 failing and under-enrolled schools and replace them with 100 new neighborhood schools, many of them charter schools or “contract schools” run by outside partners freed from contractual regulations (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.; Rossi 2004).

“[ACORN was] very organized in bringing in groups to speak who could offer a variety of perspectives on the legislation that they were proposing.”

— Linda Jumali, education official in the governor’s office

ACORN’s extensive work on affordable housing in the city positioned the group to identify a relationship between the Renaissance 2010 strategy and neighborhood gentrification. ACORN leaders feared that the new schools were conceived mostly to attract and serve wealthier families moving into rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods and that, despite the district’s promises, low-income students would be largely shut out from the improved schools. Talbott explained:

[The city is] trying to improve the schools fast enough that they can attract some people to \$300,000 townhomes that are starting to go up and higher. Nobody wants a lousy school. . . . The people in the community now realize that this is not for them and are up in arms.

Many other organizing groups shared ACORN’s concerns and worked together to turn members out to school board meetings and other public events to protest school closings. In addition to concerns about which students would have access to new and revamped schools, community groups argued that the new schools would have appointed advisory boards instead of elected LSCs, thus weakening parent and community participation in neighborhood schools. Some critics saw the plan as an attempt to privatize schools and sideline the teachers union (Kelheller 2004).

ACORN and other organizing groups worked with state legislators and Chicago aldermen to move legislation and city council resolutions opposing parts of the initiative and calling for more community input into school-closing decisions. Though none of these efforts passed, the growing attention to the issue convinced the district to adopt the more transparent

*Without ACORN, I think you would have
an isolated, insulated school system
that's just moving along, doing what it thinks is
best without any checks and balances.*

— A CPS official

decision-making criteria for school closings that ACORN had demanded. These criteria included a provision to prevent the closure of any school that had received students from a shuttered school in the previous year.

Despite ACORN's confrontational stance on Renaissance 2010, the organization maintained an effective collaboration with CPS on GYO. This success stemmed in large part from strong relationships that ACORN staff and leaders had developed with key CPS officials responsible for human resources in the district. The continued collaboration was also facilitated by the coalition structure of the anti-Renaissance 2010 organizing, in which ACORN was only one of many players. This coalition provided important cover for ACORN and CPS to continue working together on teacher quality where they had developed a shared vision and agenda.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF ACORN'S ORGANIZING

Our research followed ACORN's campaign for a statewide GYO program, as well as the group's other education organizing campaigns. Our study centered on two questions.

- ◆ What role do educators attribute to ACORN in promoting equity-oriented resource distribution, changing district policies and practices, and increasing community accountability?
- ◆ What are the implications of the GYO campaign for school capacity and student learning in the future?

Data Collected

Our analysis drew primarily upon qualitative data, including interviews, field observations, archival documents, and citywide media coverage on education.

Interviews

The research team conducted nineteen interviews with ACORN organizers and leaders to learn more about the organization's methodology and to follow the progress of their education campaigns. Other interviews included five with district and state education officials, two with principals, and one with an ally of ACORN to assess perceptions of ACORN's work and its effectiveness.

Document review

To augment these interview data, the study team attended meetings and events and observed a national training session for leaders. We also reviewed documents produced by the group and monitored local newspapers to keep abreast of the education context in Chicago.

Analytic Approach

We looked for consistent evidence of impact across data collected from multiple sources. Because it will be several years before the teaching candidates participating in the GYO Teachers program move into the classroom, it is too early to measure the impact of the reform on school capacity.

Our framework defined district and community influences as important levers for improving school capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Our analysis focused on ACORN's impacts in this domain. We also explored the potential impact of the group's work on school climate, professional culture, and instructional core, based on interviews with educators and the outcomes of similar programs in other states.

FINDINGS

Influence on District Capacity

The educators interviewed at the school and district levels universally credited ACORN with focusing the district's attention on the needs of underserved schools. A CPS official with a key role in shaping the Renaissance 2010 initiative summed up ACORN's role:

Without ACORN, I think you would have an isolated, insulated school system that's just moving along, doing what it thinks is best without any checks and balances. . . . We definitely need an organization like that out there to push us and make us do our jobs better.

Policies and resources

ACORN was viewed as an effective advocate for equity in resource distribution within CPS. In its early organizing, ACORN advocated for the needs of schools in its neighborhoods and was credited with helping individual schools to secure funds for facilities improvements under the district's capital budget process. One principal noted that ACORN had helped her secure more than \$6 million in capital improvements and commented:

We went and met with the board and the board president. And, of course, a representative from ACORN was right there speaking with us. That kind of support really makes a difference because ACORN is an organization that's highly respected by the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education.

Through the Grow Your Own Teachers Act, which ACORN played a crucial role in helping to pass, the state of Illinois committed new resources to historically underserved school districts. To qualify for funds, local consortia must document high teacher turnover, a high proportion of poor students, or a divergence in the racial makeup of students and teachers. As of 2008, the legislature has appropriated \$11 million in grants to consortia to train teachers in the state's most underserved districts and schools.

Educators believed that ACORN's organizing helped to focus district- and state-level attention on the need

Grow Your Own was a different kind of solution, especially in our hard-to-staff schools and neighborhoods where people really wanted to stay and work because that's where they lived or committed to working.

— Al Bertani, former chief officer for professional development,
Chicago Public Schools

for a policy intervention to address a core challenge in urban school reform: teacher quality in low-performing schools. The GYO act marks a significant shift in state policy and practice on recruiting and developing new teachers. In adopting the GYO model, state leaders recognized that the usual recruitment efforts were insufficient for schools struggling to keep teachers.

The law also specified a goal of increasing the racial diversity of the teaching force and acknowledged the importance of recruiting teachers who share a culture and background with their students. In doing so, GYO elevated the concept of deep community ties and dedication to particular students as attributes of quality teaching. Al Bertani, former chief officer for professional development at CPS, explained:

We always viewed that Grow Your Own was a different kind of solution, especially in our hard-to-staff schools and neighborhoods where people really wanted to stay and work because that's where they lived or committed to working.

The legislature and state department of education, as well as the school districts that participate in consortia, not only endorsed the value of such cultural and community expertise, but backed it up by funding the childcare, tutoring, financial aid, developmental classes, and other supports necessary to ensure that individuals with those skills can become teachers.

“There was a very clear message from the beginning, both to ACORN and internally: we were going to figure out a way to be able to work together.”

— Al Bertani, former chief officer for professional development,
Chicago Public Schools

Accountability to the community

State and district officials reported that ACORN skillfully focused attention on the needs of low-income schools in general and the group’s neighborhoods in particular. ACORN’s firsthand knowledge of the reality on the ground was important in influencing the district’s responses to the problem of teacher quality. ACORN’s analysis of local schools’ staffing needs revealed the concentration of teacher vacancies in North Lawndale before the district had begun to target teacher recruitment to specific neighborhoods. The district responded by moving one of its strong recruiters to the region encompassing North Lawndale.

Educators inside the district explained that ACORN’s willingness to work collaboratively and their political acumen in balancing “inside” and “outside” roles made them a very useful partner. Bertani described the group as:

politically smart enough to position their work to say . . . “We know you’re working on this problem. We’re trying to bring more of a spotlight on it in relation to the neighborhoods that we serve.”

ACORN’s skill in balancing public pressure for its demands with a willingness to collaborate not only convinced the district to trust the group as a “critical friend,” but also created important space within the district administration for inside allies to pursue their reform goals. Bertani said:

There was a very clear message from the beginning, both to ACORN and internally: we were going to figure out a way to be able to work together on GYO. So I think part of it has to do

with the skills of navigating and strategizing that ACORN managed.

ACORN also understood the importance of maintaining public pressure for accountability. By testifying at school board meetings, publishing reports exposing the deplorable state of teacher retention, and speaking frequently to the press, leaders increased the pressure on officials to respond to their demands. ACORN was credited with pressing the district to increase transparency and develop a clear process for school closings under the Renaissance 2010 initiative. One district official who played a key role in crafting the policy recalled, “There’s no question that we added a lot of process and transparency into this as a result of the issue being brought to our attention from different community groups like ACORN.”

Finally, the GYO campaign institutionalized a role for communities and community organizations, akin to ACORN’s role vis-à-vis CPS, in the arena of teacher preparation at both the state and local levels. ACORN, LSNA, and several other organizing groups were awarded the contract to administer the GYO program on behalf of the state, creating a mechanism for organizing groups to ensure deep and ongoing community participation in the initiative. Local consortia must include the school district, a university, and a community organizing group, as well as a community college or union in some instances. The law also specified that the community organizations in each consortium have a demonstrated capacity to train, develop, and organize parents and community leaders into a constituency that will hold the school and the school district accountable for achieving high academic standards. These community organizations must also assist in recruiting and selecting teacher candidates and provide support to cohorts of teacher candidates as they move through their coursework.

Implications for School Capacity and Student Learning

Within a period of four years, Chicago ACORN identified and developed a series of strategies to rectify the problem of high teacher turnover in their schools. But it will take several more years for the GYO initiative to produce new teachers and place them in schools. Nonetheless, the growth of the initiative so far has generated new optimism among educators about the potential of GYO to improve teacher retention and increase the capacity of schools to meet the needs of students.

As of November 2007, 545 candidates were participating in sixteen consortia across the state; 1,000 teachers are projected to complete the program by 2016. The majority of candidates are people of color and hold full-time jobs while completing their coursework, often as classroom paraprofessionals (GYO Teachers/Grow Your Own Illinois 2008). See Figure 5 for a summary of the dimensions of the GYO initiative.

The study team’s framework of school capacity posits that a school’s climate and professional culture are central to its effectiveness in educating students. By *school climate*, we mean ways parents, educators, and students relate to each other and the opportunities

FIGURE 5
Dimensions of the Grow Your Own initiative

Total appropriations through 2008	\$11.0 million
2005	\$1.5 million
2006	\$3.0 million
2007	\$3.0 million
2008	\$3.5 million
Total number of candidates as of November 2007	545
Percent of color	87%
Percent with full-time jobs in addition to attending classes	67%

Source: GYO Teachers/Grow Your Own Illinois 2008

“I could see the kind of relationship that they developed with students, the comfort level and the knowledge of the community, of that school community, that new teachers often lack.”

— Amanda Rivera, district representative on the GYO task force

for involvement of parents, students, and community members in schools; *professional climate* refers to the culture of collaboration and collegiality among educators that supports effective instructional practice in schools. In both areas, there is reason to expect positive outcomes over time as the GYO initiative rolls out.

The role of community organizations in selecting teacher candidates suggests the possibility of deeper ties between community constituencies and local schools. The Nueva Generación example suggests that a teaching force with cultural and personal ties to students and parents can facilitate positive relationships and expand parent engagement in schools. Indeed, Amanda Rivera, who represented the district on the GYO task force and had worked with LSNA as a principal, noted:

One of the things that we were able to see through [GYO] was that these parents had a connection to that community and a commitment and willingness and a desire to stay in that community. As someone who supervised parent involvement, I could see the kind of relationship that they developed with students, the comfort level and the knowledge of the community, of that school community, that new teachers often lack.

Studies suggest that high teacher turnover is a substantial barrier to developing a culture of collabora-

tion and learning among teachers (Ingersoll & Smith 2004). The GYO initiative aims for an average retention of 7 years, much higher than the current average of 2.5 years in high-turnover schools. To the extent that GYO increases teacher retention, the program will enable schools to establish strong professional cultures.

GYO also represents a reconceptualization of what teacher quality means. In addition to content knowledge and pedagogic skill, GYO places cultural competency and community commitment at the center of what it means to teach effectively. In doing so, the initiative raises implications for how teachers are recruited, prepared, and supported: GYO requires universities and community colleges to commit to serve populations normally excluded from higher education and to recognize their responsibility to train a diverse corps of teachers prepared to build careers in underserved schools and communities. Eight of the twelve public universities in Illinois are currently members of GYO consortia, providing an opportunity to reshape teacher preparation on a broad scale. GYO simultaneously creates a meaningful role for community constituencies in selecting, supporting, and preparing teachers for their own schools.

REFLECTIONS ON FINDINGS

Chicago ACORN's work traces an arc from neighborhood organizing and strategic coalition building to penetrating and prescient data analyses of teacher quality in low-income Chicago neighborhoods. But the story is not finished. As the country struggles to deal with recession, a key challenge will be to ensure continued state funding for GYO teacher candidates as they continue their coursework. Nonetheless, the initiative offers a compelling view of how communities can contribute to pressing problems in urban public schools.

A key factor in the success of the GYO campaign was the importance that ACORN and its allies placed on building coalitions across traditional boundaries. By including all the constituencies required to carry out the model – universities and community colleges,

school district officials, unions, and legislators – in the process of writing legislation and working for its passage, ACORN and its allies within the CLC were able to ensure support from all corners. The coalition of diverse interests lined up behind the initiative encouraged legislators to view GYO as a viable strategy for improving teacher quality.

While recognizing the strategic importance of broad coalitions, ACORN and its allies also staked out a central role for communities and community organizations in school reform. In its early work on teacher quality, the group established its expertise in schooling issues by drawing on community members' own experiences and collecting firsthand data from neighborhood schools to confirm their analysis. This diligence put teacher quality on the table as an important public issue while the district's attention was focused elsewhere. With Nueva Generación, LSNA positioned the Logan Square community as an entity capable not only of developing its own solution to a shortage of qualified teachers, but as the source of its own dedicated teaching force.

The GYO victory takes this recognition of the centrality of communities to scale. State legislation provided stable funding and legitimacy. It also opened an opportunity to foster broad involvement in education of organizing groups in cities outside Chicago and to build a new statewide constituency of organized parents, community leaders, and para-professionals who can organize to ensure that GYO continues to meet communities' needs.

Finally, the GYO victory also illuminated the benefits of multi-issue organizing in moving a school reform strategy. ACORN's evolution from school-by-school organizing to a neighborhood-wide approach facilitated systematic analysis of the teacher-quality problems leaders were observing in each school and, thus, a systemic strategy. At the same time, ACORN's internal structure of neighborhood chapters and its history of organizing on multiple issues built a host of relationships with political leaders across the city and state that added crucial leverage to its efforts to win support for the GYO initiative.

APPENDIX

Data Sources for the Case Study Series

Over the six-year study, the study group collected and analyzed a total of 321 stakeholder interviews; 75 observations of organizing strategy sessions, campaign activities, and actions; 509 teacher surveys; and school demographic and standardized test score data.⁴

INTERVIEWS

Our research team conducted 321 open-ended, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders across the seven sites. Between January 2003 and September 2006, we conducted 160 interviews with organizing staff, 77 interviews with parent and youth leaders, 56 interviews with educators, and 28 interviews with allies. We also conducted 15 interviews with national network staff.

In the initial phase of the study, we interviewed organizing staff and leaders and focused on organizational characteristics – including each group’s mission, theory of change, strategy, capacity, and leadership development activities. Early interviews also aimed to understand the impetus for and strategies underlying groups’ campaigns for school improvement. To follow campaign developments, we interviewed organizing staff multiple times over the course of the study.

Interviews with allies, principals, teachers, district administrators, superintendents, and other key stakeholders elicited perceptions of the groups’ power and reach and the ways in which the groups’ organizing efforts may have impacted school, district, and community capacity.

OBSERVATIONS

During multiple site visits to each of the groups, we observed committee meetings, trainings, negotiation sessions, and public actions. More than seventy-five field notes written by research team members document these observations.

DOCUMENT REVIEW

We reviewed documentation and archival materials produced by the groups, including newsletters, organizational charts, and training materials, across five years of the study.

CONTEXT REVIEW

In addition to conducting extensive background research on the local and state context for each group (e.g., defining the critical policy reforms, state-level issues, governance structure for each school system, political landscape), we followed the local media coverage of education issues in all of our sites. Our database includes more than 1,700 articles. These articles, combined with the interview data, provide a picture of the shifting context for reform in each site.

TEACHER SURVEYS

We administered online teacher surveys in three sites – Austin, Miami-Dade, and Oakland – where organizing groups had used an intensive, school-based strategy of organizing and had mounted signature campaigns for several years. The survey explored four critical areas of school capacity: district support, school climate, professional culture, and instructional core. Survey questions were drawn from a variety of established measures, but primarily from scales developed by the Consortium on Chicago School Research. Appendices in the Austin, Miami, and Oakland case studies include a description of survey measures and their psychometric properties.

⁴We also collected 241 adult member surveys and 124 youth member surveys to understand how involvement in community organizing influenced members’ leadership skills and their community and political engagement. However, the case studies focused on school and district outcomes and do not include analysis of these parent and youth survey data. Results of these surveys will be presented in future publications.

Surveys were administered to teachers at schools where the group was highly engaged in organizing efforts, as well as in a set of comparison schools. A total of 509 teacher surveys were collected from the three sites.

ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

We also examined publicly available teacher and student data from all districts. Data vary from district to district but include measures of teacher and student race/ethnicity, years of teaching experience, dropout rates, graduation rates, student performance on standardized tests, and a range of other variables. To assess indicators that did not have corresponding data for publicly available download, data requests to the district were made. In Austin and Oakland, these publicly available data included district-administered parent and teacher surveys.

References

- Associated Press. 1987. "Schools in Chicago Are Called the Worst by Education Chief," *New York Times* (September 8), sec. 1.
- Berliner, David C. 2002. "Educational Research: The Hardest Science of Them All," *Educational Researcher* 31, no. 8:18–20.
- Blanc, Suzanne, Joanna Brown, Aida Nevarez-La Torre, and Chris Brown. 2002. *Case Study: LSNA, Logan Square Neighborhood Association. Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools*. The Indicators Project on Education Organizing. Chicago, IL: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.
- Bryk, Anthony, and Barbara Schneider. 2002. *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Clewell, Beatriz Chu, and Ana Maria Villegas. 2001. *Absence Unexcused: Ending Teacher Shortages in High-Need Areas*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Connell, James P., Anne C. Kubisch, Lisbeth B. Schorr, and Carol H. Weiss, eds. 1995. *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods, and Contexts*. Aspen Institute. Washington.
- Davenport, Suzanne. 2001. *Site Report on Community Organizing in Chicago*. New York: New York University, Institute for Education and Social Policy.
- DeAngelis, Karen J., and Jennifer B. Presley. 2007. *Leaving Schools or Leaving the Profession: Setting Illinois' Record Straight on New Teacher Attrition*. Policy Research Report IERC 2007-1. Edwardsville, IL: Illinois Education Research Council. Available for download at <<http://ierc.siue.edu/iercpublication.asp>>
- DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund. 1997. *Recruiting, Preparing, and Retaining Teachers for America's Schools*. New York: DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund. Available for download at <www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/AreasOfContinuingInterest/TeacherRecruitment/Pages/default.aspx>
- Elmore, Richard. 1996. "Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice," *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 1:1–25.
- Elmore, Richard. 2002. *Bridging the Gap between Standards and Achievement: Report on the Imperative for Professional Development in Education*. Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute.
- Elmore, Richard. 2004. *Knowing the Right Thing to Do: School Improvement and Performance-Based Accountability*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.
- Gold, Eva, Elaine Simon, and Chris Brown. 2002. *Successful Community Organizing for School Reform: Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools*. Chicago; Philadelphia: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform; Research for Action, Inc.
- GYO Teachers/Grow Your Own Illinois. 2008. *Grow Your Own Teachers: An Illinois Initiative*. An Overview of the Grow Your Own Program (February 14). Chicago, IL: Grow Your Own Illinois. Available for download at <www.growyourownteachers.org/BeAnAdvocate/Resources.htm>
- HoSang, Daniel. 2005. *Traditions and Innovations: Youth Organizing in the Southwest*. Occasional Paper no. 8 (September). New York: Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
- Ihejirika, Maudlyne. 2008. "That Boy Died over a Bike; He Is First CPS Student Killed over Summer Break," *Chicago Sun-Times* (June 18), sec. News.
- Ingersoll, Richard, and Thomas Smith. 2004. "Do Teacher Induction and Mentoring Matter?" *NAASP Bulletin* 88, no. 638 (March):28–40.

- Kelheller, Maureen. 2004. "Rocky Start for Renaissance," *Catalyst Chicago* (March). Available online at < www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/index.php?item=1323&cat=23>
- Mayer, Daniel P., John E. Mullens, Mary T. Moore, and John Ralph. 2000. *Monitoring School Quality: An Indicators Report*. NCES 2000-030. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Mediratta, Kavitha. 2004. *Constituents of Change: Community Organizations and Public Education Reform*. New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University.
- Mediratta, Kavitha, and Norm Fruchter. 2001. *Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement*. New York: Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University.
- Mediratta, Kavitha, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister. 2008. *Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: A Preview of Research Findings*. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Available for download at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>
- Mediratta, Kavitha, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister. 2009. *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith*. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Available for download at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/Mott.php>
- Oakes, Jeannie, and Martin Lipton. 2002. "Struggling for Educational Equity in Diverse Communities: School Reform as Social Movement," *Journal of Educational Change* 3:383–406.
- Oakes, Jeannie, John Rogers, and Martin Lipton. 2006. *Learning Power*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- O'Connell, Mary. 1991. *School Reform Chicago Style: How Citizens Organized to Change Public Policy*. Chicago, IL: Center for Neighborhood Technology.
- Rossi, Rosalind. 2001a. "End Teacher Shortage Now, Parents Urge," *Chicago Sun-Times* (February 22), sec. News.
- Rossi, Rosalind. 2001b. "Teacher Woes Worst in Poor Schools," *Chicago Sun-Times* (October 10), sec. News Special Edition.
- Rossi, Rosalind. 2004. "The Duncan Way," *Chicago Sun-Times* (July 8). News Special Section: Exploring the Issues of the Day.
- Rossi, Rosalind, Becky Beaupre, and Kate N. Grossman. 2001a. "Other States Do It Better," *Chicago Sun-Times* (September 9), sec. News Special Edition.
- Rossi, Rosalind, Becky Beaupre, and Kate N. Grossman. 2001b. "Poor Kids Often Wind Up with the Weakest Teachers," *Chicago Sun-Times* (September 7), sec. News.
- Rossi, Rosalind, and Kate N. Grossman. 2001. "Substandard Teachers under the Microscope," *Chicago Sun-Times* (September 24), sec. News Special Edition.
- Russo, Alexander. 2004. "Introduction: 'Third Wave' – or Lull – in Chicago School Reform." In *School Reform in Chicago: Lessons in Policy and Practice*, edited by Alexander Russo. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Sebring, Penny Bender, Elaine Allensworth, Anthony S. Bryk, John Q. Easton, and Stuart Luppescu. 2006. *The Essential Supports for School Improvement*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research. Available for download at <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=86>
- Shirley, Dennis. 1997. *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

- Timmer, Doug. 2002. *Instructional Inequality in Seventy-one Chicago Public Schools, Teaching Experience and Turnover: How Do They Impact on Student Learning?* (March) Chicago, IL: Chicago ACORN.
- Timmer, Doug. 2003. *Where Have All the Teachers Gone? The Costs of Teacher Turnover in ACORN Neighborhood Schools in Chicago.* Chicago, IL: Chicago ACORN.
- Warren, Mark R. 2001. *Dry Bones Rattling.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, Debra. 2003. "More New Teachers Leaving CPS," *Catalyst Chicago* (November). Available online at <www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/index.php?item=1187&cat=23>
- Zachary, Eric, and oyeshola olatoye. 2001. *A Case Study: Community Organizing for School Improvement in the South Bronx.* New York: New York University, Institute for Education and Social Policy.

About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization, affiliated with Brown University, that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools, especially those serving disadvantaged children.

In pursuing its mission, the Institute collaborates with a variety of partners committed to educational improvement – school districts, community organizations, researchers, national and local reform support organizations, and funders. Rather than providing a specific reform design or model to be implemented, the Institute's approach is to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

For more information and to obtain additional copies of this brief, please visit our Website at <www.annenberginstitute.org>.



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

Providence

Brown University
Box 1985
Providence, RI 02912
T 401.863.7990
F 401.863.1290

New York

233 Broadway, Suite 720
New York, NY 10279
T 212.328.9290
F 212.964.1057

www.annenberginstitute.org