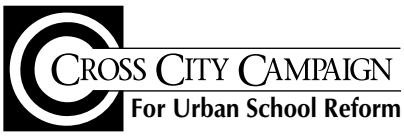
Communities Working for Better Schools

Written by Anne C. Lewis



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Foreword

Communities Working for Better Schools

I was executive director of the Wieboldt Foundation for seven years before several colleagues and I founded the Cross City Campaign in 1993. Two experiences at the Foundation were especially important to me. First, the Wieboldt Foundation funds community organizing in Chicago so I had the opportunity to know first hand many of the groups who were developing local leaders in low-income neighborhoods and implementing a local agenda for change. This gave me a real appreciation for both the importance and the difficulty of the work. Secondly, I was at the Wieboldt Foundation during the first seven years of the Chicago school reform movement. My passion for public education and my experience as a parent and as head of several citizen organizations, provided a strong basis for the Foundation to get involved in school reform. Organizations funded by the Foundation played leading roles in the reform movement, and we were able to provide start-up funds for new groups.

Chicago's school reform created parent-majority local school councils that have significant authority at the school level. Chicago's network of community organizations assumed key responsibilities to recruit and support local leaders to serve on local councils. The combination of community organizing and school reform, I observed, was powerful and extremely effective.

This focus on organizing as an essential element of school reform carried over directly into a founding focus for the Cross City Campaign. Strong school and community connections have been central to the work of the Cross City Campaign since our inception; a Schools and Community working group was the first such group we formed. Our first publication was on Schools and Community Partnerships (written by Michele Cahill, a founder of the Beacons Program in New York); one of our earliest products was the leadership development curriculum Community Organizing for School Reformers. With this history, it was truly exciting for us to have the privilege of convening so many community organizers and parent leaders who are working to make schools better in their communities.

Who Was There

Our plan was to bring together grassroots neighborhood leaders in a meeting small enough to allow for real conversation. The 120 parents, community organizers and educators from a dozen cities represented 38 parent groups and community organizations; 20 national and local school reform organizations; and educators, school board members, and administrators from 16 schools or districts. Ten colleagues from eight foundations joined us. This impressive group resulted both from our own work and relationships, and from the wide set of contacts and relationships of a small group of community experts who helped us plan the meeting.

Planning Committee

We are enormously grateful to the group of 10 community leaders who accepted our invitation to help us plan this meeting—who should attend, what is the key message, what are the most important issues we should discuss, what format will work best? Their invaluable experience was directly reflected in the substance of the meeting. Please see the list of Planning Committee members at the end of this report. They attended a full-day planning meeting and participated in many phone calls as preparations continued. The committee members:

- were clear that the meeting needed to relate community organizing to student achievement;
- knew we needed to open up a serious discussion of race and class issues;
- wanted to be sure that groups were introduced to some of the best examples of capacity building work in the country;
- designed small groups that would remain together throughout the conference, providing another way to encourage groups to learn directly from each other;
- helped to identify and contact key speakers; and
- played facilitating roles at the conference itself.

Funding

We were very fortunate to have support from the Open Society Institute and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to host this meeting. Their funds enabled us to provide scholarships to many parents who would not have been able to attend otherwise. Although Gara LaMarche, director of U.S. Programs for the Open Society Institute, cautioned us against calling foundations "partners," since the power relationships are so unequal, these two foundations both approach the school reform work of grassroots groups with great respect, understanding, and appreciation. The Mott Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation also provided support for a "sister" meeting, Building Bridges: Funders and Community-based School Reformers, held in September 1997. This conference enabled serious discussion about the importance of organizing to school reform and the need for sustained funding.

Measuring the Work

Building Bridges also sparked frank debate about the need for clear ways to measure organizing for school reform. What is of value in the work? What is needed to do the work well? How do local people judge their own work and what do they consider success? What elements might provide a framework that would assist funders in understanding the importance of the work? In 1998, Cross City twice convened a group of 12 to 15 organizers and funders who had volunteered to discuss these issues and to develop a program to tackle them. A series of funding proposals are currently under review, and we hope to launch this critically important work by mid-year.

Acknowledgments

We were extremely fortunate that Jean Thomases was available to help staff prepare for the meeting and to facilitate the meeting itself. Jean worked for many years at Good Shepherd Services in New York and helped to establish one of the first Beacons programs in Red Hook. She had just completed a year as a community leader fellow with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Anne Lewis is an excellent writer and is extremely knowledgeable about community-based school reform work. We were *very* glad that she was available to record the conference and to write this report. At the Cross City Campaign, Lupe Prieto provided key leadership to the meeting from original conception to implementation, ably assisted in the final two months before the meeting by Chris Brown, who had been selected as Cross City's Schools and Community director in July. David Hays and Janet Lyons provided excellent administrative support.

Our final acknowledgment goes to the many parent and community leaders who carry out the critical work of improving public schools every day. Schools are arguably the most important public institution in our country. We were privileged to spend three days learning first-hand from these leaders, who are working in many city neighborhoods to make schools meet their promise of educating all students well.

Anne C. Hallett, Executive Director
June 1999

Communities Working for Better Schools

> *"We are building a community of learners."*
>
> Dr. M. Susana Navarro, Executive Director
> El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence

The families of America's urban neighborhoods want what ought to be a birthright for all—a high-quality education for their children. They share with suburban and rural families a fervor about the importance of education. Unfortunately, too many of their schools do not provide their children with an excellent education. Urban districts enroll more than one-fourth of the nation's K-12 students and are growing faster than any other type of district. They provide ample evidence that the schools attended by children who are traditionally the least well-served by public education—low-income children and/or children of color—still fail to educate them well.

Much of the debate about school reform focuses on how to turn low-performing urban schools and districts around. Consider the many initiatives directed primarily at urban districts and schools:

- At least 23 states have passed "academic bankruptcy" legislation, allowing states to assume control of consistently low-performing districts or schools.
- Policy-makers have turned to changes in governance as a solution, in some instances putting mayors in charge of the schools, and in others, taking authority away from mayors.

- Stricter accountability measures mean that thousands more students are being retained or sent to summer school, and that hundreds of schools face sanctions or reconstitution because of their continual low performance.
- Higher standards and new assessment systems are meant to allow "all boats to rise." They set the same standards for performance in all schools, but fail to provide the necessary support and resources to ensure that all students will succeed.
- Teacher quality increasingly is seen as a critical issue. Policy-makers are developing comprehensive policies that include better recruitment, higher quality preparation programs, support for new teachers, and rewards/sanctions for teacher performance.

No one can argue that some of these measures are desperately needed in urban schools—particularly higher standards if well-implemented, better methods of assessment, and better teaching. But policy-makers also cannot ignore the reality that most of the interventions they have put into place have done very little to improve student learning. Still, polls and reports, such as those conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation and the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polls, show that the public remains supportive of public schools and strong efforts to improve them. A large percentage of parents whose children attend failing urban schools, however, are understandably dissatisfied with current efforts. They seek an organized and powerful way to participate in school reform efforts to ensure that they result in improvements for their children.

This crucial element of improvement lies outside of traditional professional approaches; yet, it is central to making reform possible for all children. It rarely has official policy behind it. Despite its successes, it often is marginalized in all of the rhetoric about school reform. It is the power and energy of families and community members advocating for the children; it is communities working for better schools.

For too long, the inherent resistance of large urban school districts to substantial change has thwarted parents and others seeking reforms. It has been more than 100 years since another reform, the professionalization of school administration, reduced to a minimum public and parent involvement in the work of schools. As the century ends, the limits of relying solely on professionals for the education of children are all too evident. Consequently, interest is growing in the roles that community organizations and parent groups can play as educators and advocates for school reform, restoring a needed balance in students' lives.

This strategy is democratic, not despotic. It is positive, not punitive. It can energize people inside and outside of schools, developing leadership in all the areas that are crucial to student growth and well-being. In fact, "school reform cannot, will not and should not happen without strong community connections," said Anne C. Hallett, executive director of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, at the opening of a national conference to celebrate and advance family and community leadership to improve schools.

Communities Working for Better Schools

The conference, *Communities Working for Better Schools,* brought together more than 120 parents, community organizers, and educators from a dozen cities. They represented 38 parent groups and community organizations, 20 national and local school reform organizations, plus educators, school board members, and school district administrators representing 16 schools and districts. The groups ranged in size from larger groups, including affiliates of national organizations such as ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) and the IEF (Interfaith Education Fund, an offshoot of the Industrial Areas Foundation) to small neighborhood and parent groups as well as community-development corporations. Educators in attendance helped to ensure that the conversations were consistently focused on community work *and* education. They were joined by 10 colleagues from eight foundations that support this work. They shared compelling stories about efforts to get better schools for their children and, as a consequence, better neighborhoods for their families.

The conference had three goals: to enable organizations engaged in community-based school reform to share their strategies and strengthen their work; to directly connect community-based school reform and improved educational and developmental outcomes for children and youth; and to honor the work of community-based education reform efforts.

> *"The transformation of schools is not going to happen without involving communities.... To transform what happens inside, in the classrooms, teachers need to feel support from the community and know how the community works. They should use our ideas, and integrate our lives into the environment of the classroom. It is hard for teachers to imagine what equity has to do with them and their classroom unless they have had the necessary conversations with parents and the community."*
>
> Gabriel Medel, Executive Director,
> Parents for Unity, Los Angeles

The conference represented a continuum. In 1997, the Cross City Campaign brought together community organizers, educators, and funders to share ideas and consider next steps in "building bridges" across schools and communities and across streams of funding. At the 1998 conference, educators, community organizers, and funders again shared and planned. Some leaders are new to a network focused on efforts to link advocacy and school reform. Others are veterans of such efforts with vital experience to share.

Community work for better schools is not a new idea, nor an untried one. But it is time-intensive and difficult. The three days of conversations, workshops, and planning at the conference made obvious just how tough and time-consuming the work is. However, the stories reaffirmed that urban schools cannot do what is best for children without firm collaboration and pressure from the outside.

What Does Community Involvement in School Reform Look Like?

Groups from 12 cities[1] at the conference envisioned partnerships that could create better futures for all children. But how does such an effort begin? What should its expectations be? What should it encompass?

El Paso: A School-Community Partnership Significantly Improves Education for Children

Conference planners wanted to communicate the kind of "across the board" improvement in the education of Black and Latino children that is possible when communities and schools join forces. They turned to a detailed and inspiring example out of El Paso, Texas, where a school-community collaboration is making a significant difference in the education and lives of children. The story of the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence, told by its executive director, Dr. Susana Navarro, is one of a remarkable reform effort shaped and maintained by schools and communities working together.

El Paso is an out-of-the-way city, farther from the other side of Texas than it is from San Diego, CA. Yet, it is a hub for border communities, with a population of 700,000 in the city and almost 2 million in the El Paso-Juarez area. It is the fifth poorest congressional district in the country. The three largest school districts in the vicinity, which are primarily Latino, face difficult challenges: two-thirds of their students are from low-income families. Still, the El Paso area has become a model of parent/community involvement in school reform.

[1] Baltimore, Md.; Chicago, Ill.; Denver, Colo.; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Philadelphia, Pa.; Houston, Texas; Kansas City, Kan.; Los Angeles, Calif.; Milwaukee, Wis.; New York, N.Y.; Toledo, Ohio; and Seattle, Wash.

Before the Collaborative began seven years ago, the schools were overrun with a number of programs aimed at helping its disadvantaged children, but "our academic achievement was unbelievably low," and the schools were isolated from the community, according to Navarro. Policy-makers talk about the benefits of "comprehensive school reform." What happened in El Paso was "comprehensive community involvement," which grew out of the community's involvement in a K-16 Compact, a foundation-funded project of the Education Trust.[2] This brought all stakeholders to the table, discussing how to improve results from kindergarten through undergraduate programs. Navarro described nine elements of the Collaborative:

▶ ***Standards*** The reform work is standards-based. Teachers, parents, higher education and business leaders, and consultants drew from state and national resources to develop high standards for El Paso children. The standards are clear and brief. There are benchmarks at the fourth and eighth grades, leading to rigorous expectations for high school graduation. "The standards became meaningful in the community because of intensive discussions among teachers and parents," Navarro said. "They examined each standard, discussed what it really meant and if it would apply to all students. Even if parents just came in from the cotton fields or just came across the border, they were part of the process."

▶ ***Assessments*** Assessments are aligned with standards. The state test—the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)—is only one measure, because, Navarro explained, "it is standards-based only to a certain degree." The districts supplement with other assessments closer to the standards.

▶ ***All students, no exceptions*** The reform work applies to all. "This is not for a few students or a few schools," Navarro said. "It is focused on the relationships between students and teachers in all schools, looking at how knowledge is constructed in each classroom and the ways in which students, teachers, and parents hold expectations for each other."

▶ ***Systemwide*** The strategy includes developing policies that keep the momentum going. The Collaborative supported new graduation requirements that are aligned with new university admission requirements in the three participating districts. Every student takes three to four years of college-preparatory English, math, science, history, and foreign language.

▶ ***Higher Education*** Higher education institutions, especially their teacher preparation programs, are part of the reform effort. The Collaborative seeks to align the skills imparted to future teachers with the school districts' reforms, such as student-centered teaching rather than "teacher frontal teaching."

▶ ***Disaggregated Data*** The Collaborative uses essential data regularly to assess progress and inform the community. It sponsors sessions in almost all of its 170 schools to help parents and administrators understand achievement data, study disaggregated information and identify areas where students are consistently doing well or doing poorly, and decide what strategies are needed to address concerns. "Parents must understand what student achievement data mean or they won't be able to be meaningfully involved," Navarro pointed out.

▶ ***Accountability*** Accountability strategies make the work serious. In this part of the reform, state policies that require all subgroups of students within a school to make academic progress have been helpful. Schools cannot hide behind the scores of their best students.

▶ ***Professional Development*** The Collaborative offers schools "a full and robust set of assistance mechanisms," especially professional development. Its purpose is to build communities of leaders within schools, including parents.

▶ ***Partnership with Parents*** Navarro extended the idea of parent involvement beyond the familiar. "Schools must be places where parents are comfortable, feel welcome, and can learn and extend their knowledge about what schools can do to improve student achievement," she said. "But even more, parents need to be

[2] The Education Trust is a Washington, D.C.-based organization that provides assistance to communities developing comprehensive strategies to improve the education of all children, especially low-income children and/or children of color.

part of a school that truly believes in parent involvement. It draws parents in through a variety of roles so that they are very much a part of improving learning at school, not just at home. They are engaged in the process of identifying what good teaching looks like, especially around literacy." The Collaborative is now training parent liaisons in 30 schools who will focus on literacy development.

Navarro acknowledged bumps along the road. Although some stakeholders do not believe as strongly as others that all students can achieve at high levels, "they are all still at the table." One district has not been as enthusiastic as the others about the professional development offered by the Collaborative, "but it's getting better." One district allowed parents to ask for waivers excusing their children from meeting the course standards, "but we made it clear to parents that they shouldn't sign such a waiver." The most useful tool to get over the bumps, she said, was the use of data about students and schools: "Data were a real way of getting conversations going about all of this."

The Collaborative in El Paso has data to prove its partnership is working well. Before the Collaborative, the passing rate of Black and Latino students on TAAS was 35 percent, compared with 83 percent for white students. The gap has closed significantly as scores have risen dramatically. In the latest testing, for example, 84 percent of the minorities had passing scores, as did 93 percent of white students. Similar gains were registered in reading. Before the Collaborative, 45 percent of students took algebra, now two-thirds of the students take this course. Enrollment in physics has jumped from 7 percent of the students five years ago to 20 percent today.

> *"What we see in El Paso that we don't see in many other communities are parents and teachers sitting down to examine, discuss, and develop local standards that are comprehensive and understood by all."*
>
> Jonathan Considine, Research Assistant
> Annenberg Institute for School Reform

El Paso's Lessons for Others

The powerful story of the Collaborative—the organization, the commitment, and the results for students—set the tone of discussions for the rest of the conference. Participants wanted to know more.

Some asked about the effect on special populations, such as language minorities and students with disabilities. For either group, Navarro said, the goal is to set the same expectations, to do away with "systems that keep children away from the best knowledge." Bilingual education is part of the picture, but schools are expected to be accountable for all students, limited English-proficient or not, achieving the standards. Some curricular changes have resulted in far higher performance among children with disabilities.

Participants confirmed that pieces of the El Paso reforms work in other places. One major element is the importance of organizing parents to focus on school reform. "When my parents go with me to work at the school, I feel we have more power," said Maria Flores, a parent involved with the ACORN/Little Village Charter School in Chicago. Using data, providing a lot of staff development, and visiting other sites where urban students are succeeding are strategies that several community-based reform efforts have found successful.

Navarro credited commitment—from parents to the superintendent to the university president—as critical to the El Paso efforts. Everyone was trained together, and the efforts have been sustained over time. "Relations are difficult to build," pointed out Christine Woods, organizational specialist for the National Education Association. "When you rush a process, it falls apart. It takes years to do this work."

Issues of Race and Class Out in the Open

Conference planners understood that issues of race and class permeate the quality of working relationships and education in urban communities—and are rarely discussed openly. All the data and statistics, the parent-teacher meetings, and the work to improve schools must consistently take issues of race and class into account. The groups participating in the conference confront these issues every day. As a lens through which to view the work, four leaders discussed how race and class intrude on efforts to provide a quality education for all children.

The issue is more than one of making resources equal. Racist attitudes and behaviors in school settings are sometimes subtle and unrecognized, but are pervasive and result in many forms of inequality. They exist inside the school and outside as well; they are barriers that interfere with what should be happening for children. These feelings can be painful to talk about. The conference, however, put them on the table early. Issues of race and class as they impact community-based education reform efforts must be better understood and addressed constantly. Without this attention, efforts to bring schools and communities together to undertake fundamental change are at risk of dissolving into blame and superficial excuses.

It is hard to capture in writing the spirit and feelings that accompanied this discussion. A panel of people who have confronted the issues of race and class in school reform presented strongly felt personal stories and experiences to frame the issue.

> *"Each of us has a responsibility in the issue of class and race. We have a duty to study our own experiences and understand them, because none of us has the answer. We have the dual responsibility of being a student of other people's experiences as well as understanding our own."*
>
> Richard Gray, Jr., Senior Project Director, Community Involvement Program, Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University

In Philadelphia...

All Elaine Pinkney wanted was better food for her child at school and assurance that the school in East Philadelphia was safe. However, when parents organized, "we were told that poor Puerto Rican and black kids didn't deserve good lunches. We were told that because of our education and color, we wouldn't be able to win on a new, safer school yard," she recalled at the conference. But the parents did win on these issues because they organized with the Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project. She and other parents also studied test scores and realized students needed help learning to read. Parents became educated about the best strategies, focused on making the school library more accessible, and supported the principal in a reading challenge. Pinkney would like to believe that the barriers parents faced were not racial, but "I found that children in other sections of the city were getting a better

education than our children." Parents in her neighborhood had to organize to overcome biases against their children.

Growing up in Boston before and after desegregation, Fran Smith became an anti-racist activist as a young teenager, even though her commitment made her stand out among her white working-class family and neighborhood. She supported desegregation when others took to the streets to oppose it. She went to jail at one point because she opposed discrimination.

Coordinator of the Mobilization for Equity Project of the Massachusetts Advocacy Center, Smith firmly believes that until there can be conversations about how race and class affect teaching and learning, no policies for change can have an impact. She sees systematic discrimination against poor and minority families in Boston, in banks and employment as well as in schools. In the last 20 years, Smith said, "every major institution has had to have some federal agency or a court come in and tell them they were not doing the right thing."

She fears that the education-standards movement, including punitive assessment policies, could usurp years of work on equity and multiculturalism. "It is a real struggle," she said, "to help policy-makers understand that racism and classism manifest themselves in every aspect of the teaching and learning experience." Strategies by community organizers and parents, she said, must ensure that no one avoids the necessity to address such issues.

In Los Angeles...

Putting the race and class issue into a wider perspective, Genethia Hudley Hayes warned that the civil rights gains of people of color are being whittled away, and that some groups get stepped on when they try to climb the mythical economic ladder. Education reforms could turn into another way of merely shuffling the deck in order to keep the status quo—"and to keep people of color and poor people at the bottom of the deck."

Executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Los Angeles, Hayes spoke bluntly about the issue of race and class and how different groups react to it. She pointed out that "we don't have a vocabulary to talk about race and class in America because we haven't wanted to talk about it." The lack of a vocabulary leads to stereotypes about minorities and women, Hayes pointed out. The important word is not "race." It is all the words used to separate people from each other, such as color, places of origin or socio-economic status. She criticized blacks who, when they become upper-middle class, "talk down poor black kids and create roadblocks that prevent other black, brown and Asian children from getting ahead."

These are complex issues that require a great deal of listening and discussion. One phenomenon that needs better understanding is why blacks tend to distance themselves from the experiences of other minorities in the country. Frankly, she said, "We must get away from trying to be the poster group for oppression."

In New York City...

The message Frances Lucerna heard when she was growing up in the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn was "to get your education, get skills and move out." Different waves of ethnic groups cycled through the community, but the power structure remained in place. When she became active in education issues—she is now principal and a founder of the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice—Lucerna was aware of the long-standing racial and ethnic issues in the community. They were evident in housing patterns.

In education, one only had to attend school board meetings to realize that the board and the community were out of sync. The school enrollment was 93 percent children of color, but six of the nine school board members were white. For 20 years, no one on the school board had children in local schools. Crowded into a high school of 4,000 students, most young people dropped out; of an entering freshman class of 1,500, less than 100 would graduate.

Lucerna and others, with the leadership of Luis Garden Acosta, opened their own school "as an act of revolution." Schools should not be fortresses that create a counterculture among their students, she said. Rather, they should create and foster a culture that reflects the families in the community. El Puente Academy, opened six years ago, is owned by the community organization and declares, Lucerna said, that "learning is a political act." The families in the community want their children to be involved in making their neighborhoods better; they want their school to use standards as a way of educating young people to lead quality lives; and they want the school to build leadership by helping young people understand issues of access and power. Ultimately, she said, "we are all teachers and learners. We do not have the luxury of being casual about education."

> *"Racism is the elephant in the living room."*
>
> Chicago participant

These stories and opinions led the participants to further discuss race and class issues preventing schools and communities from coming together. This discussion at a national meeting affirmed the critical nature of the issues and was helpful, although it led to more questions than answers. Some of the points made in a general discussion:

- Power and politics prevent people and institutions from moving away from the issue of race and class discrimination. One participant described a high school where the multicultural programs, that were started at the community's request, were suspended by school district authorities who charged that the school "was not spending the money right." Gray and Hayes said communities need to become more skilled at understanding power politics. What happened at the school, Gray commented, "is a different form of racism."
- Power is more important than money in overturning racist policies. People may not "want to come to the table honestly," because they haven't understood the power issue or talked about it. They don't know "who is kicking whose butt and why."
- Race and class issues affect all aspects of communities, creating difficulties for families in urban areas. These problems invariably spill over into the schools. The rate of incarceration of young black and brown men, for example, has doubled in the past decade. However, public education is one institution where the public can come together and be involved in seeking solutions. Communities need to separate out the issues that specifically affect schools.
- Teachers as well as families must find ways to discuss racism and classism "without shutting down." Anger and reluctance are to be expected, but the issues need to be worked through every day, even in the evaluations of teachers. Said one participant: "We need always to pull the conversations back to our kids. Mrs. Jones may be a nice person, but, we can say, as a teacher she is destroying our children every day. We need righteous anger."
- Parents and community activists need to make sure more people of color are part of the power structure, from classrooms to school boards. South Bronx activists, for example, recruited people in the community to become community school board members.

Small-group discussions of how race and class issues impact the work of communities in education reform produced common themes. Most participants related to the stories told by panelists. They saw the same issues reflected in the marked mistrust between schools and their communities. They also felt the issues personally. "You need to know what baggage you carry before you attempt to change," said one.

> *"It is really hard for educators to see this issue as we do, because they don't know us.... They need to take parents seriously. Parents are always ready to work with the schools. They want to be involved, but the system is really closed."*
>
> Rosa Fenton, a bilingual coordinator in the New York City schools and vice president of the national ACORN board of directors

Even though some of the problems related to race and class are embedded in school politics, work on changing the political environment needs to go hand-in-hand with changing people's personal beliefs about poor and minority children and their communities. Both the personal and political pieces are important, said Regina McGraw, executive director of the Wieboldt Foundation, "but we can't wait for the people in power to get their personal act together." Building strong, trusting relationships in schools and communities may be slow, she said, but it also is faster than political solutions.

The small groups produced a number of recommendations from the conversation about race and class issues. They focused on:

- Getting more specific about the effect of race and class on student learning. This means using disaggregated data to show how different groups of students at a school are progressing, as well as how one school compares to another. Listening to students was considered essential.
- Providing development opportunities. For educators, this would focus on how race and class issues influence their work. For parents, training would help them develop leadership skills for team-building within their communities and with their schools.
- Challenging racist school policies; for example, the under-representation of Black and Latino students in honors classes compared with the number who score well on standardized tests; or the assignment of new or inexperienced teachers to low-performing schools.
- Challenging other sectors/institutions to analyze how their policies result in negative racial effects, such as the role of corporations in undermining equal opportunities within communities (e.g., hiring policies or the failure to consider community health when closing or moving operations).

The participants wanted schools to open up more to families and communities, or, as some suggested, transfer ownership to communities to run them. They also argued that families and communities can be instrumental in a "healing process" that will enable teaching and learning to reflect their values. They were equally forceful in admonishing themselves to be willing to put the issue on the table.

The purpose for having this discussion, they agreed, was to get on with an agenda about children. "Instead of being against something," Fran Smith noted, "it's always good to be for something."

> *"How can we put this issue into action? How do we confront the daily experience of children? If a parent is told by the teacher that his child is doing well, and the next day test scores show he is doing very poorly—that is real racism. We need to teach our community how racism is reflected in the day-to-day life of our children in schools."*
>
> — Small-group report

Stories From the Front: Community Work that Has Improved Education

Without community support, Zavala Elementary School in Austin probably would still have one of the highest absenteeism rates and lowest academic scores in the district. The Toledo, Ohio, schools would still have a near closed-door policy toward parents. And the Flower Career Academy in Chicago might have been shut down before it could show that it is an asset to students and the community.

These three sites represent hundreds of other successful stories where communities have made progress on school reform possible. Each one is unique. Yet each one contains several common features—people willing to work very hard; the management of "creative tension" between communities and schools; an ability to focus schools and parents on students and their academic needs; and, mutual empowerment.

In Texas...

Cut off from more affluent communities by the ubiquitous freeways of Austin and straddling two housing projects, Zavala Elementary School was a place where students and teachers stayed as short a time as possible. A first-stop for new immigrants, it had a 40 percent turnover rate among students, high absenteeism, and very low academic scores. It was just the kind of school that the IEF, which supports organizers, training, and a statewide advocacy network in Texas, was looking for, "a school that felt it in their gut that it needed to change," according to Joe Higgs. Now lead organizer for The Metropolitan Organization in Houston, an IAF affiliate, Higgs said that Zavala needed what IEF could help it do: reconnect the school to the community. The goals were to: create a civil society where the school, the parents, and the

community could trust each other, "set standards for themselves and live up to them"; create a "powerful constituency that could act together and have an appetite for it"; and create a culture of learning within the school that would push people into reflecting on teaching and learning every day."

One entry point for the organization was a young teacher at the school, Claudia Santamaria. She wasn't sure "what all those church people were doing in the school," but as the organization's strategies of starting with people's concerns came into play, she realized what was happening. "This was not about fixing a program," she said. "It was about developing people, creating a constituency around change." A small group of parents and teachers began to meet, then teachers walked the neighborhood on a Saturday to visit parents. "There was a hum in the neighborhood-'The teachers are coming!'" Though the teachers were very nervous initially, "parents were waiting with coffee and pastries," Higgs recalled.

Despite numerous intervention programs, the school was not improving, Santamaria said. Then, parents stood up at a meeting with the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) scores in hand and asked, "Where are the good teachers?" "They accused us of giving kids A's and Bs for good behavior," she said. Parent and teacher leaders went to work. They first lobbied for a health clinic at the school. They then decided on strategies for improving achievement, brought the sixth grade back into the grade structure, and started after-school academic programs. Teachers stayed longer and took leadership roles. Three teachers are now principals at other schools, and Santamaria has taken her leadership skills to help another elementary school.

In Toledo...

Persistence has paid off for Toledo's most veteran parent organizer. Mother of nine children and often rebuffed because she was poor and sometimes living in the projects, Lola Glover personally knows the impact of race and class issues on children. When she began organizing parents 20 years ago, "the Toledo schools did not have good relationships with poor children and their families," she remembers. "Tracking and ability-grouping hurt our children. They were misclassified into special education; they were suspended at high rates. If we complained, we were insulted." The school system also "was very good at getting parents to serve on committees when they needed some people who looked like me," she said, "but after the need was over, the committees were disbanded, and we couldn't get a meeting, no matter how hard we tried." When the committee work on a new junior high school was over, Glover didn't quit. She and a core group of parents pressed school officials to improve the academics and the way students were treated, they held a citywide conference and decided they were going to become advocates for their children.

Now, after two decades of work by the Coalition for Quality Education, Glover can't say relationships are perfect. There were times "when they hated us." But there are parent liaisons in 18 elementary schools, and parents are welcome in the schools. The current superintendent, Merrill Grant, represents a change of attitude on the school system's part. Anyone hired by the system, he told the conference, must accept the goal of creating good working relationships with parents. Teams appointed to select administrators now include parents, and parents were instrumental in crafting a new teachers' union contract that recognizes parent involvement as important (the old contract didn't mention parents). Parents also must sign off on all school improvement plans. Grant has negotiated with higher education institutions to waive tuition for parent para-professionals, who want to become teachers and who agree to teach in the district for three years. "I'm beginning to see changes," Glover declared.

In Chicago...

The West Garfield Park community was about to lose its vocational high school, considered too small and ineffective to be continued by the school board. But that isn't what the community wanted to happen, particularly because parents had been working on plans to implement reforms at the school (the federal Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act requires parents to be involved in school improvement plans). The school board changed its mind when confronted with three bus loads of persuasive parents, students and community members, organized by the Community Organizing for Re-Neighboring Project of Bethel New Life. The challenge for communities, according to Mildred Wiley, director of Community Organizing, "is to always be ready to change with the system. Always be looking for new partners. Always be ready to tell your stories." Because of the work done by parents and others, the Flower Career Academy "is not an island in the community but very much a part of it," declared its principal, Dorothy Williams.

As a focus of its reincarnation, the school has become a center of businesses that enhance a neighborhood where services and businesses have largely disappeared. Every student must study entrepreneurship in one of the school's five career clusters. As a consequence, one cluster runs a copy/printing business; another sells school supplies. There is a credit union run by students that serves the community members, a building construction laboratory, a horticulture service, a boutique, and the Flower Pot Cafe that can cater parties for up to 2,500 people. The involvement of students in community services "has changed their attitudes and outlooks," Williams reported, because they feel the community cares about them. And the school is totally part of the community, Wiley said, providing good education for neighborhood youth as well as much needed services.

Did the stories from Texas, Ohio, and Chicago resonate with other participants at the conference? Several school board members noted that they felt tension as they moved from being advocates for their children's schools to district-wide concerns. But, Higgs reassured them, tension "helps us think harder about things. It does not have to be bomb-throwing, but a calculated strategy to get others to see things differently." One board member said it was strategic to have many parents and community organizations aware of how policies and budgets are made "so they can push the leadership."

The participants also picked up on the mutual empowerment created by the efforts described on the panel. "Teachers and parents empower each other by working together," Glover said. Where does the time come from to do the reform work? Community advocates need to be focused and organized when they go into schools, Wiley said, aware that their "window of opportunity for discussions may be only a few minutes." Within schools, giving extra time becomes a matter of relationships, Santamaria said. "If teachers begin trusting each other, they will begin to make time, to prioritize, to decide what they can let go of. This takes a lot of relationship-building, because teachers themselves don't trust their colleagues to change."

> *"What I like about our partnership is that there are no limits."*
>
> Mildred Wiley, Bethel New Life

Sharing Expertise to Answer Questions

Before the conference, those planning to attend raised a number of questions about community work for school reform that they wanted to discuss during the meeting. Panelists and reform leaders addressed many of the questions during the three-day conference.

How did you get started?

In El Paso, the impetus was a foundation-sponsored effort to bring the community together and excellent leadership from the higher education community. Conversations with community leaders led to a meeting with all stakeholders present—the superintendents of the three largest school districts, the presidents of the local community college and the University of Texas/El Paso, the executive director of the regional state service center, grassroots organizations affiliated with the Interfaith Education Fund, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, the mayor, and county supervisors. They were reluctant to start another organization, Dr. Susana Navarro recalled, "but we said we would act quickly on specific plans." The El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence was launched in May 1992. It held its first meetings with teachers and principals in June of that year.

For advocates in the Northwest Neighborhood Federation in Chicago, the establishment of a charter school in the area spurred an interest in school reform. Worried that the school was not recruiting in the neighborhood even though there were parents who wanted to enroll their children, the Federation lobbied to get a seat on the board for the neighborhood. When the Federation found out that principals of local schools favored the charter school because it would relieve overcrowding in their schools, the Federation realized it had to take action, according to Gabe Gonzales, executive director of the Federation. "We had been attempting to create stability for a long time by working on what we should keep out of the neighborhood," he said. "When we

realized how bad the overcrowding was at eight schools, we knew we needed to work on that problem—to bring services in—to keep young families in the neighborhood."

At Zavala Elementary School in Austin, the school and the community first came together around a proposal for health care at the school. That was a successful fight, Higgs and Santamaria reported, giving the teachers and parents confidence in working together on other issues. The next one was student achievement.

What evidence is there that this works?

In addition to the impressive impact on student academic progress described above in El Paso, Zavala Elementary School recorded extraordinary gains on TAAS. It is now among the highest-ranking schools on academic achievement in the district, and it has the highest attendance rate. Zavala also earned designation as a Blue Ribbon School through a federal recognition program.

In Toledo, formal school-parent links exist in many schools because of persistent organizing by the communities around them. Philadelphia's Alliance Organizing Project is only three years old, but an outside evaluation of the first two years concluded that "it shows great promise."[3] In different school settings, "AOP teams have been able to establish themselves, identify concerns parents have about their children's school experience, and bring issues emanating from these concerns to the school community-at-large with proposals for how to work in partnership on these issues," it reported. Moreover, when there is initial distrust between AOP and school administrators, persistent work on the partnerships helps dissipate such feelings. Once everyone sees progress on such issues as safety, discipline and early literacy, there is more willingness to work together. In several instances, families and the neighborhood have become resources for the schools.

What indicators can be used to document that community work for school reform is succeeding?

Assessments, state or district, are one indicator, although there are some reservations about what standardized assessments actually reveal about student learning. Glover expressed frustration that just as student scores among minority groups were beginning to improve in Toledo, the state changed its assessment policies. Conferees considered it important for communities to have a variety of data, but equally important is training in how to interpret and use data. Some went to sources other than the school system, such as higher education research faculty, to obtain data they wanted. In addition to test scores, useful indicators include:

- Student and teacher attendance
- Parent participation and number of volunteers
- Development of parent leadership
- Assessments of student work by teachers through portfolios and exhibitions
- Course offerings and student enrollment in college-preparatory courses
- College attendance rates
- Teacher relationships with parents
- Teacher certification in the subjects they are teaching
- Community investments such as bond referendums, school-business partnerships, and increases in resources from higher education and community groups
- School climate
- Administrator/teacher turnover
- Dropout/graduation rates
- Participation of students in community service

Sources for data on such indicators include: community organizations, assessment data, evaluations, school report cards, state departments of education, surveys and focus groups, media reports, school board/budget meetings, benchmarks established by districts, think tanks, citizen watchdog groups, and realtors.

[3] "A Report to the Alliance Organizing Project on Its Work With Parents," Research for Action, September 1998

How can the work be sustained?

In El Paso, the Collaborative keeps a constant focus on organizing and nurturing all the stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on involving the business community. Large foundation grants, including grants from the National Science Foundation, have provided the Collaborative with five-year financing for professional development and other initiatives.

For Gary Rodwell, executive director of the Alliance Organizing Project in Philadelphia, the work proceeds school by school. "We really can't affect enough factors at the district level, so our focus has to be on creating an impetus for change from individual schools," he said.

Both Zavala Elementary in Austin and schools in El Paso benefit from the backing of the Interfaith Education Fund, which provides organizers; training; and statewide networks and conferences for teachers, parents, and principals on a consistent basis. IEF lobbied successfully for state funding to support parent and community partnerships with schools centered on improving student achievement.

Another factor that is important in sustaining efforts is that community advocates and parents entered into the work with the understanding that school reform takes a long time, so quick fixes are not part of their agendas. Trying to reform schools, said Gabe Gonzales of Chicago's Northwest Neighborhood Federation, "makes neighborhood organizing look like a cakewalk."

As Funders See the Efforts...

The cross-district discussions were important for two reasons, noted Zoe Gillett, associate program officer of the **Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.** They revealed the high level of expertise in the room, and they underscored the importance of each of us in our own roles working together rather than in isolation. New structures between schools and communities, she said at a luncheon panel of funders, face three major challenges: harnessing community energy ("parents first may be angry, but action grows from that"); using community knowledge and experience as a powerful lever for school reform; and accepting community responsibility and recognizing that everyone has a role, including parents, elected officials, and community organizers.

Gara LaMarche, director of U.S. Programs for the **Open Society Institute** (OSI) and co-chair of the PTA at the Brooklyn public school his children attend, described how the foundation is deciding on its priorities for domestic education investments, a relatively new area for them. The Institute believes that a central problem is the fundamental inequality that stems from issues of race and class. Therefore, it chooses to focus on those children most marginalized and least well-served by public schools, with a strong commitment to organizing, advocacy, and support for social change.

Many funders are working in education, he noted, and their investments are far less than what districts get from other sources. OSI asks: How can we use our resources to make an impact? One answer is to look at the issues around public support for public education. "We are very concerned about a dominant political climate that is making a strong assault on public education." The public needs to hear good stories, LaMarche said, not glossed-over ones, but those that speak of successes, especially from students.

OSI is interested in helping youth to organize and to develop their own voice. They are also interested in supporting the kind of organizing approaches represented by the groups at the conference-work that says we are here for the long haul, strengthening the capacity for the change to endure. Noting that superintendents come and go, he acknowledged that groups "can't hitch your wagon to even the most enlightened leadership." Referring to the Institute's investment in Eastern Europe, he noted that "even in repressive regimes, people are remarkably courageous in stepping out. I feel the same way in this kind of work, listening to people like you who are working very hard in the trenches."

Improving Community Capacity

Conference participants did more than draw inspiration from stories of successful communities working for better schools. They had the chance to sample a variety of work aimed at strengthening community capacity. They were introduced to skill-building strategies and approaches they might find useful in their work during an afternoon of workshops conducted by leaders of training programs and community-building initiatives. These were diverse and explicit about lessons learned. Dan Rothstein, executive director, and Luz Santana, director of training at the Right Question Project, Inc., conducted a workshop that helped organizers learn how to define accountability and how to formulate questions that will get at information parents and community people need. At the end of the session, a participant from Kansas City praised the experience, noting that she now realized "you can't take anything for granted, and you certainly can't ever believe that parents don't know how to ask the right questions."

Sharon Dupree, project director of Beacons Adaptation, Youth Development Institute, and Millie Henriquez-McArdle, division director for Red Hook programs at the Good Shepherd Services, talked with workshop participants about how to adopt and expand the New York City Beacons' after-school support and services programs to wider community development and school collaboration. Rochelle Nichols Solomon, director of

school/community partnerships at the Philadelphia Education Fund and director of the North Philadelphia Community Compact for College Access and Success, took parents and community leaders through the steps in using data as a tool for parent engagement and organizing. Ellen Schumer, executive director, and Tammie Love, trainer/administrator with Community Organizing and Family Issues, ran a session from their parent leadership-development program. Genethia Hayes, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Los Angeles, discussed with colleagues how community asset-mapping, often conducted by young people themselves, can be used to develop a central bank of information on community strengths and resources.

Reaching Conference Goals

These hands-on, skill-building experiences, as well as good stories and focused discussions, helped the conference accomplish its goals in several ways. The workshops, aimed at building capacity:

- Introduced participants to successful methods of training and other community strategies for building an effective community base.
- Provided concrete learning experiences to support local work.

Other conference sessions were similarly structured for positive impact. Taken together, they:

- Provided an opportunity to share successful strategies as well as concerns. "We've only been organizing around schools for 18 months, and I felt for a long time that we were really screwing up because we didn't understand enough," said Gabe Gonzales of Chicago's Northwest Neighborhood Federation. "It was good to talk to people with more experience and find out that they go through the same frustrations we do. I realized that we're not stupid, that this really is a hard thing to organize around."

NEW YORK MEETING: What Will It Take to Build a Community Movement for School Reform?

The national Cross City Campaign's *Communities Working for Better Schools* conference, held in Chicago, was followed by a similar one-day forum in New York on Oct. 17 titled *What Will It Take to Build a Community Movement for School Reform?* It was sponsored by New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy and co-sponsored by the Cross City Campaign and the Open Society Institute. This meeting, which drew approximately 175 people, had similar goals to the national Cross City conference. Both were planned to provide a place where community organizations, parents, educators, and others could come together to share their strategies, lessons learned, challenges, and successes as they work to improve their local schools. One difference between the two sessions was that Cross City's national *Communities Working for Better Schools* session drew participants from a dozen cities and the Oct. 17 session was designed for groups working in New York City. Many of the New York groups who attended the Oct. 17 meeting also attended the meeting in Chicago.

According to Kavitha Mediratta, Co-Director of the Institute's Community Involvement Program and one of the principal organizers of the day's event, one of the primary goals of the forum was "to provide an opportunity for people to learn from each other's school improvement work and to create a setting where these discussions could be held in a grounded, focused way." During the day, participants identified a variety of strategies they use in their work, but what surfaced resoundingly was that traditional organizing approaches are often most effective; for example, building relationships, working one-on-one to establish trust and common ground, focused action, and continuous development of leaders.

According to Mediratta, the New York forum participants who had attended the national Cross City conference in Chicago "felt like they were part of something larger—that their struggles, while extremely challenging, were also shared by others across the country." This, she noted, helped emphasize the importance of networking and helped people realize that they aren't alone in this work.

The Institute plans to invite a group of Chicagoans whom they met at the *Communities Working for Better Schools* conference to present at a spring forum for New Yorkers who are about to embark on a school-based management initiative similar to Chicago's successful 10-year-old Local School Council model.

One critical lesson learned from these two meetings is that networking, sharing, and cross-pollination of ideas has merit and value for those doing this difficult work.

- Put the issue of the impact of race and class on student learning on the table. "This is something we have not addressed systematically in our discussions of education reform," said Gary Rodwell of the Alliance Organizing Project of Philadelphia. "It is relevant to a meaningful analysis of reforms. Now the discussions need to get closer to the context of how race and class play out in schools and how to address the problems that creates."
- Created stronger bonds between and among the community groups working with the Cross City Campaign, giving them ideas and contacts. At lunch on the second day of the conference, five tables were put together to accommodate some 40 community organizers from New York and Chicago. New Yorkers are just about to launch school site councils, and they were anxious to pick the brains of Chicago local school council members and community organizers about their eight years of experience with school governance. Plans are being made to follow this lunch discussion with a meeting in New York in the spring at which a group of Chicagoans can talk with a larger group of New York activists.

What Actions Are Needed Now, on What Issues?

The conference on Communities Working for Better Schools reflected the dynamic quality of this work. Some participants began organizing to improve schools two decades ago; others are only beginning their work. Some are associated with nationally linked groups; some are home-grown efforts, truly grassroots in nature. They all learned from the conference, veterans as well as beginners, because the work very much depends on the creativity of local leadership rather than any cookie-cutter notion of how to organize for better schools. Although the work in each community is different, groups identified a number of overriding issues that they share.

Issue: ***Funding Community Organizing and Leadership Development***

Community organizing is essential to initiate, develop, and sustain school improvement efforts. Whether the initiative comes from outside the system or is educator-led, a strong base of parental and community support is required if the initiative is to succeed. Community leaders who work with schools to improve the educational experience of young people can tap the enormous resources available in the community, resources that are not duplicated even in the best schools. Parents and community activists who have found their voice and have been

able to mobilize others to support school changes for urban children reveal that a vast amount of inspired leadership remains untapped in homes and neighborhoods. Community-based organizations need the wherewithal to identify potential leaders and community educators, bring them in, support their growth and development, and then sustain their participation. Similarly, schools need to take this work very seriously and use their resources to build family and community constituencies for school reform and to help teachers connect with parents. This involvement may start small, making corners near schools safe for children. It can grow to reach the core of learning, as in El Paso, where parents and teachers work together to develop and monitor standards-based teaching.

Needed:

- Funding for community organizing
- Links to funders, especially for community efforts that do not have major groups behind them such as the IAF
- Rigorous leadership development opportunities for parents, teachers, principals, and community members that include action, reflection, and formal organizing training
- Funds from the school budget made available to support parent and community work

Issue: *Sustaining Organizing Work to Support School Reform*

Funding for the work of organizing around school reform is essential to its success. In addition to basic funding, however, it is critical to recognize that building the necessary relationships and local leadership, on which success depends, is slow, intensive, and time-consuming work. Multiyear funding that is renewable and sustaining, therefore, is equally important. Measurable success in the form of improved learning is often the product of many years of organizing work. Parents face the inevitable tension that comes from the slow and measured investment and careful relationship-building that good organizing requires, and the fact that their child attends a poorly performing school now and may be slipping behind year after year. Trained leaders may burn out or begin to feel the problem is intractable and move on to other issues. Organizers need to develop new leaders constantly, an important element of any organizing campaign, but particularly critical in education organizing.

Needed:

- Long-term financial support for community organizing
- Clear measures of success that are realistic, yet rigorous, and benchmarked to different points in an organizing campaign and to the maturity of the organization
- Evidence that community organizing does result in improved schools and that improved schools improve neighborhoods
- More people and groups involved in the work

Issue: *Linking Schools With Community Work*

People in schools have received neither the preparation for, nor a mandate to, connect to families and communities, and most do so only tentatively, if at all. Working with parents and the community in a meaningful way has not been part of their mission, even though research supports the fact that students are more successful in school if their parents and the community are involved. Issues of race and class exacerbate this disconnection, creating a serious barrier to community organizing for school reform. Parents and community leaders, especially ones who are well-organized and who want to work on substantive educational issues, may pose a threat to those who work for the school district. School principals may have had a bad experience with an

> *"This is real tough work. Some of the things we talked about are real simple ideas, but it is hard to make them work. I noticed with myself that after each person spoke on race and class, there were so many things I wanted to say. I think that trying to learn from each other is a good way to get into the subject."*
>
> Greg Tuke, executive director, Powerful Schools, Seattle

overzealous single-issue parent. Parents who may have less formal education than teachers or principals may feel marginalized or disregarded. School principals and teachers often have little direct experience in community work, particularly if they do not live in the neighborhood in which the school is located. Moreover, parents and community leaders often are unaware of their own resources and strengths to support school change. Too many frustrated parents remain silent, unable to voice their concerns, because they feel unwelcome at schools and isolated from others who may have similar concerns. All of this makes creating partnerships more difficult than it would be if principals and teachers readily recognized that serious parent and community groups, the more organized the better, are essential to supporting their work for a school reform agenda.

Needed:

- Training in community involvement and action for teachers and principals
- Collaborative training for parents, teachers, and administrators on school issues, including how to work together and how to deal with controversies
- Policies, incentives, and funds at the district level that support school-family-community partnerships
- Policy frameworks that can help institutionalize community involvement in school reform
- Use of the media to communicate community-based school reform successes

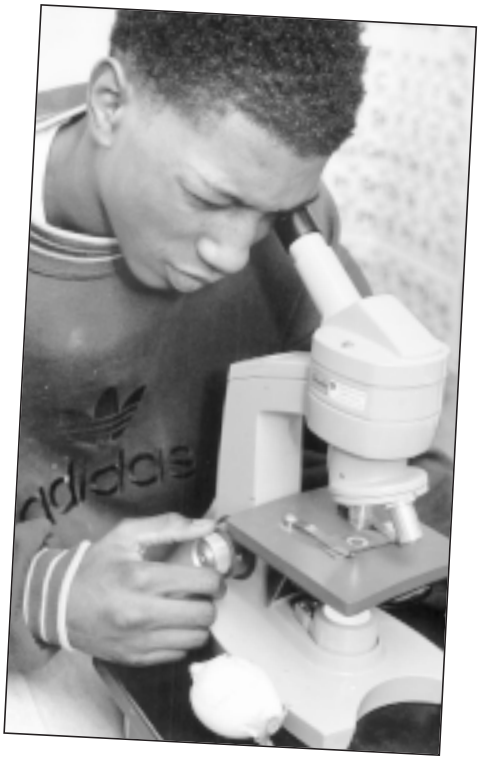
Issue: *Getting and Using Good Data*

Having, understanding, and using data both about the school and the community are key factors in making community work effective. Data are often not readily available on topics of interest or are not prepared in a way that is user-friendly. Good data allow informed decision-making. Using data for strategic decision-making requires knowing the right questions to ask, knowing where to get the information, knowing how to interpret the data, and then using it to shape a strategy for improvement. Community groups also need help gathering the information they need, both from public sources and from surveys and data-collection they initiate themselves. Parents and community groups also need to learn how to find, analyze, monitor, and use data about students and schools.

Needed:

- Community-friendly sources of data, prepared for easy understanding and use
- Links between community groups who need data and the public sector, research groups, and other not-for-profit groups who have access to a great deal of data
- Technical assistance in data interpretation and use

> *"I learned that I can do a lot just by asking good questions.... Information about what is not working on the bottom often doesn't get to the top. I have so many things coming at me at the same time that it was truly a benefit to be with people who helped me sort it out."*
>
> Adele Burke, parent, Philadelphia



Issue: ***Learning From Colleagues in the Field***

Other than learning-by-doing, perhaps the best way to get good ideas and strategies in this tough work is to have a regular opportunity to learn from others, both from their failures and their successes. Community-based school reformers would benefit from more opportunities to share experiences, discuss strategies, and learn about effective practices within and across cities. Enormous support can be drawn from talking to and working with others who are involved in similar undertakings, support that helps in the struggle to carry out work that is slow and difficult. People in school change work need access to information on different reform models, different funding strategies, a variety of effective media approaches, and positive examples of building constituencies that have the power to win on issues.

Needed:

- Site visits to see the work of others "on the ground"
- A clearinghouse that links people, data, case studies, supportive funders, policy alternatives, and other useful information
- A network that convenes local community-based school reformers from time to time, connecting them with each other and with other resources and information

> *"We touched on all the issues in our communities—racism, language, inequalities, standards, raising the bar. There are so many issues that we want to work on; sometimes for some of us, it seems too much to handle. I learned here that there is a broad community of parent involvement and that it demands high standards for our children."*
>
> Rosa Fenton, vice president, ACORN, New York City

Issue: ***Addressing Issues of Race and Class***

Issues of race and class permeate our society and the educational system at all levels. Almost all educational systems do an inadequate job of educating low-income children and children of color. Some of this is intentional, though never named as such. Some of this is unintentional, but harmful nonetheless, as when teachers' sympathy for the problems that low-income students face reduces their expectations for those students' academic achievement. Regardless, conference participants felt strongly that issues of race and class must be openly addressed for real school change and improved student achievement to occur. Many believe that people do not discuss these issues because they are afraid or uncomfortable. In addition, there are powerful forces that are well-served by the status quo.

Needed:

- Data and information that supports work on these issues (such as the disaggregated data regularly used by schools that work with The Education Trust or ACORN's look at tracking in New York schools in its report *Secret Apartheid*)
- An open dialogue on issues of race and class in education in cities around the country, followed by action
- Systematic action to change school district policies that are barriers to equity

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[Asterisk * Denotes Executive Committee]