

ACORN EDUCATION REFORM ORGANIZING Evolution of a Model

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES
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We are a stand-alone institute jointly sponsored by the Graduate Schools of Education and Social Service at the Fordham University Lincoln Center Campus in New York City. Our core mission is to provide data and policy analysis, research, leadership development, and other technical support to strengthen community-led school reform campaigns. We work with grassroots community organizations to address inequality among schools in terms of their educational resources and leadership as well as the broader conditions that perpetuate such inequality. We also evaluate programs and policies aimed at improving educational outcomes for low-income children. We hope to help build the knowledge base, skill level, and political sophistication of grassroots school reform leaders.

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Sharmeen Irani, Director of Research and Evaluation for the Center, participated in every phase of this project: design, fieldwork, data analysis, and production of this final report. Rebecca McMaster assisted with document preparation. Gill Eddins and Elizabeth Buonomo assisted in identifying research that suggests the theoretical soundness of various dimensions of ACORN’s evolving approach to education reform organizing.

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Although ACORN staff members had an opportunity to comment on various drafts of the study and made valuable contributions to its accuracy and our understanding ACORN’s perspective on education organizing, the analysis and interpretation of the information we gathered for this study from them and other sources remain the sole responsibility of the NCSC study team.

John M. Beam
April 8, 2003

HIGHLIGHTS

This report, *ACORN Education Reform Organizing: Evolution of a Model*, was requested and underwritten by the Hewlett Foundation and is an attempt to “get inside” ACORN’s extensive and varied experience around issues of school improvement and educational reform. At the request of ACORN, senior analysts from the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University structured and, in some cases, facilitated a review of and reflection on the organization’s extensive and diverse experiences in organizing around issues related to public schools in low-income neighborhoods across the United States.

We made site visits in Boston, Chicago, New York City, and Oakland. We conducted structured interviews and facilitated group discussions of both head organizers who manage the staffs of city and state affiliates as well as organizers with years of field experience who now fill senior staff positions at the Association level. We observed leadership training and campaign planning and listened to ACORN leaders and staff describe their fight for quality public education to a range of interested parties. We took notes. We collected handouts and reviewed reports. We made follow-up calls and sent emails requesting clarification. We then attempted to distill lessons learned about how to think about schools and education reform, the internal issues being confronted, the tensions and contradictions inherent in the work of multi-issue organizations that hold stakeholder positions in multiple arenas in their local political environment, and the inevitable resource issues associated with grassroots organizing for change. We begin this report with some of the findings from that process:

There are three key findings:

- ACORN’s approach to school-related organizing has evolved to include an increasing emphasis on questions of quality of instruction and its educational outcomes for low-income children; in other words, on education reform.
- As a multi-state association, the organization has accumulated a critical mass of experience, including best practice, and, more importantly, critical understanding of that experience to provide the raw material for a first generation model linking community organizing and education reform.
- The need of ACORN’s local affiliates for internal support for school reform organizing combined with ACORN’s demonstrated capacity to create mechanisms to coordinate and strengthen work in complex issue and program areas as they become part of the organization’s national agenda suggest the potential for an in-house, permanently staffed support network.

Other findings of particular interest include:

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- Various local ACORN affiliates have achieved the status of recognized players in resource and policy fights in their local schools and, in some cases, school systems.
- The scope of ACORN school-related organizing encompasses targeting decision makers at the school, district and city, and state levels. Organizing tends to focus on three spheres of issues: quality of school life problems; governance; and, more recently, quality of instruction available to low-income children.
- In distinct contrast to the assumption that organizing around public education is about organizing parents, the base for ACORN schools campaigns is the regular ACORN membership and the constituency (buildings, blocks, neighborhoods, family networks) from which it is drawn. Obviously, that constituency includes public school parents, but they are more likely to be recruited and mobilized along with their neighbors through community- rather than school-based outreach.
- Tracking implementation and evaluating impact school-related victories are difficult or beyond the capacity of many offices, but promising steps are being taken in Chicago and other locations that, if replicated, would give ACORN the ability to monitor progress on critical teacher quality issues.
- ACORN community groups organizing around school and education issues benefit from carefully cultivated political relationships at both the local and national level.
- ACORN affiliates have access to specialized policy support and political intelligence that strengthens their local organizing around education and other issues.
- Organizing around school and education issues is more time- and, therefore, resource-intensive than other issues in terms of the effort required to generate similar levels and quality of participation.
- Specific “ACORN schools” where the organization has a high level of formal or negotiated control or influence place intense pressure on the organizational, financial, and political capital of local ACORN operations.
- A corollary finding is that winning, maintaining, and protecting a specific neighborhood school where parents have a structured influence on the school’s culture and agenda through charter, program design, or input on hiring can limit an ACORN affiliate’s ability to participate aggressively in local policy fights for district-wide systems change.

Capacity and opportunity to raise foundation support for education organizing are not distributed evenly across local ACORN affiliates.

Drawing on these and other findings, we make two major recommendations:

- ACORN should incorporate the lessons learned and best practice developed to date into a draft model of school reform organizing to be tested, then implemented across the Association.
- To support the implementation and refinement of the model, ACORN should establish an internal public education organizing network coordinated and staffed by an Education Reform Organizing Center structured along the lines of either ACORN's Living Wage Resource Center or the ACORN Housing Corporation. An Education Reform Organizing Center would assist with issue development and quality control and could advance ACORN's school reform work to the next level of profile and effectiveness.

The report concludes with a discussion of a draft ACORN model for organizing for school reform.

INTRODUCTION

I think that if we do not address educational issues in the community then we are not getting to the heart of the problem. The future looks bleak, and it is of tremendous benefit for an organization like ACORN to take on the issues of education. (*Interview with ACORN state director.*)

ACORN is made up of low- and moderate-income families who, lacking the wealth that so often equates with power, come together and use their numbers and energy to build power they need to take control of the economic and political policies that affect them. The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now began in Little Rock in 1970 when the “A” stood for Arkansas. Now, according to the organization’s website (www.ACORN.org), “**ACORN®** is the nation's largest community organization of low- and moderate-income families, with over 150,000 member families organized into 700 neighborhood chapters in 51 cities across the country.” ACORN also organizes citywide issue groups around issues such as living wages, affordable housing, community reinvestment, and predatory lending. The organization has helped its members organize two major locals of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), as well as establish a national mortgage counseling service, various housing development corporations, and two radio stations.

The local public school is frequently the largest, perhaps only, piece of tangible public capital in a low-income community. Moreover, ACORN members understand that a decent education is the only option for escaping poverty for kids from many neighborhoods in our largest cities and forgotten rural areas. However, adequate public schools and the resources necessary to create and maintain them – or their absence -- are matters of public policy frequently couched in inaccessible numbers and jargon and molded by pressures of race and class.

Schools are of interest to grassroots organizations because they operate on the premise that the community should have a say in both the public institutions and the political and economic policies that have an impact on the well being of the community and its families. Furthermore, research suggests that the active involvement of parents and other local residents in their schools has a positive impact on both the facilities and educational outcomes of those schools.

A review of 66 studies found that in all of the programs studied student achievement increased directly with the duration and intensity of parent involvement (Covington, 2000). When the studies distinguished between *levels* of parent involvement, they consistently found that the greater the parent involvement, the better the students performed in school. The studies also showed that the extensive school involvement of low-income parents can raise their children’s educational achievement to the levels expected of middle-class children. For example:

- Teachers have higher expectations of students whose parents collaborate with them (Laureau, 1987; Snow, et al. 1991; Stevenson and Baker, 1987).

- High levels of parent involvement in African-American communities correlate with improved reading achievement (Armor, 1976).
- The degree of parent and community interest in quality education is the critical factor in explaining the impact of the high school environment on the achievement and educational aspirations of students (McDill, 1969; Wagenaar, 1977).
- High school students whose parents were “highly involved” in their education were much more likely to complete a four-year college education (Eagle, 1989).

These findings apply to a broad range of parent involvement. Recent work by Henderson and Mapp (2002) concentrates on “parent and community organizing efforts” as a specific type of parent involvement and finds that, “Unlike traditional parent involvement, parent and community organizing intends to hold schools accountable for results.” Their synthesis of more than 50 studies published since 1995 found that community organizing contributed to positive changes in schools. These include:

- upgraded school facilities,
- improved school leadership and staffing,
- higher quality educational programs for students,
- new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum, and
- new funding for after-school programs and family supports (Henderson, 2003).

That schools and public education would regularly find a place among the priorities of both the individual neighborhood groups and citywide agenda of many ACORN affiliates is, therefore, hardly surprising. What might be surprising is the range of school-related and, increasingly, school reform-related issues ACORN members have taken on over the years. Occasionally in the first 20 years and steadily for the past dozen or so, local ACORN groups have, in fact, won improvements in each of the areas on Henderson’s checklist.¹

In 1973, ACORN supported the organizing efforts of a Little Rock high school student to force his/her school to stop serving sour milk. ACORN members went on to fight and win what we will call “quality of school life” issues ranging from securing textbooks to the construction of sidewalks needed around the neighborhood high school in Southwest Little Rock to opposing the misuse of corporal punishment in rural communities. Eventually, ACORN led a successful community effort to convert the Little Rock school board from at-large membership to district-based membership that rapidly transformed the board into a body that actually reflected the make-up of Little

¹ 2001-2002 was a particularly fruitful period for research on the relationship of community organizing and public school reform. The Cross City Campaign for School Reform and Research for Action, the New York University Institute for Education and Social Policy, and the National Center for Schools and Communities all published studies examining various dimensions of the organizing-school reform nexus. These are included in the reference list in the Appendix.

Rock neighborhoods. As ACORN grew nationally, so did the involvement in public schools, and the late eighties and much of the nineties saw its members around the country taking on school and education issues large and small.

When Albuquerque ACORN organized a dozen elementary schools and head start programs in 1994 to stand up against proposed Federal cuts to the school lunch program, over 100 parents and children rallied to win the support of both the Mayor of Albuquerque and their U.S. Senator. On the other end of the food chain, members in Denver forced Purina Dog Chow to install hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of filters on its rendering plant adjacent to a neighborhood school.

Boston ACORN began by campaigning for stop signs, cross walks, and Slow For Children signs in 1994. Boston parents won additional police protection both near the school and for the nearby subway stops (as did students from the ACORN Club at Bread and Roses High School in Upper Manhattan a few years later). The organization eventually accumulated the necessary credibility to help break an impasse in stalled contract negotiations between the Boston schools superintendent and the teachers' union and established useful relationships with both in the process. Last May, an aggressive ACORN-labor coalition forced restoration of all \$15 million of school budget cuts that, among other programs, eliminated special services for students in danger of failing. Bucking national trends, the campaign won state approval of \$1.2 billion in new taxes and restoration of \$30 million in local aid to Boston.

Beginning in the early nineties, ACORN groups from throughout Chicago turned out hundreds of community residents in a series of actions that scored millions from both the city and the U.S. Attorney for Drug Enforcement to board up vacant buildings near neighborhood schools. In Hillview, in San Jose, California, parents rolled off winning actions for stop signs near their school into successfully pressuring school officials to complete construction at the local school, which had been without indoor plumbing or running water for six weeks.

New Orleans ACORN members began in 1980 to carve out a role as the major force in their city concerned with the safety of school children and have fought for enforcement of asbestos removal laws, reinstatement of laid off crossing guards, and "children crossing" signs. ACORN parents moved on to win after-school tutorials in a low-income neighborhood of the city as well as in two rural parishes.

Across the country, ACORN organizing has used creative policy analysis and action research to focus media and official attention on what happens to children in urban public schools. *Making St. Paul's Schools Work for Everyone: An Introductory Paper* (1994) established Minnesota ACORN as a serious stakeholder in education policy and laid the groundwork for the nation's first dual language Hmong-English charter school. New York ACORN's three *Secret Apartheid* studies (1996, 1997, 1998) documented system wide, race-based tracking and fueled campaigns that resulted in a consent decree between the Board of Education and the Civil Rights Office of the U.S. Department of Education mandating improved, non-discriminatory systems for informing parents about available programming. These equity campaigns also secured a dramatic

expansion of the Math Science Institute, which prepares students for the admissions test to the city's elite, invitation-only public “science” high schools.

In New York, a dozen members ran and won seven seats on five community school boards in 1988. Eighty-seven members won seats on 28 school leadership teams Chicago in first round of elections for school leadership teams in 1989. In a 1996 Denver school board election, ACORN members helped elect the pro-public schools candidate who defeated a pro-voucher candidate.

ACORN groups have over the years won, planned, and implemented nine community-controlled public schools in Chicago, Jersey City, New York City, Oakland, and St. Paul.

By the end of the decade the framework for discussing organizing in public schools had deteriorated from demands to increase parent input to ones to defend public ownership of the public schools. In early 2001, when the Chancellor and the Mayor proposed turning over five elementary school in Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn to Edison Schools Inc., New York ACORN members and staff hit the doors and the phones to generate a relatively huge participation in the parent referendum (47 percent) that spelled a four to one defeat for Edison.

Edison bounced back in Philadelphia the next fall, coming close to winning a contract to operate the entire school system. But, once again the shareholder-owned firm hit the ACORN wall when the organization joined forces with the teachers union and SEIU for a series of actions, including a 1,500 strong Christmas caroling at the mayor’s home. The campaign forced the city and the governor to eliminate Edison’s master role, drastically limit the number of schools Edison would run, and open up the process to parent consultation and management contracts to various non-profit consortia.

Last spring (2002), ACORN members derailed a New Mexico Department of Education plan to include Edison Schools in its plan for restructuring under performing schools. Their campaign won a community approval process for any restructuring strategy and elimination of Edison from the list of approved contractors.

Although the perspective of the more experienced organizers and leadership has moved beyond budget *process* to scrutinizing both inputs and the distribution of the inputs embodied in the budgets, the collapse of public revenues muffled by the mantra of “no new taxes” has inevitably forced low-income families to defend their schools on yet another front. During the past year, ACORN members in Boston, New York City, Oakland, and Pittsburgh have fought against school budget cuts and, in some cases, on behalf of new taxes to support public schools.

In New York, for example, ACORN is a key mover in the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE), a coalition of scores of grassroots, labor, and advocacy organizations. AQE originally came together to monitor the implementation of the historic Campaign for Fiscal Equity suit, which won an initial court ruling, affirming that state support for New York City public schools fails to meet the requirements of the state constitution.

Meanwhile, the economic downturn has thrust the coalition and, therefore, ACORN into efforts to resist school budget cuts that last spring forced local schools activists into a two front fight against the governor and state legislature on the one hand and the mayor on the other. At its peak last May, parents and their allies were mounting daily actions at City Hall culminating in a joint community-labor demonstration that featured major hip hop celebrities and drew a huge crowd of students, parents, and teachers; turnout was estimated variously from 20,000 (New York Times) to 100,000 (Washington Post), which, according to the Post story, “crammed eight blocks.” (While the budget fight drags on as one set of disastrous budget cuts is overtaken by the next, high school students organized by Brooklyn ACORN beat back a Department of Education decision to eliminate a drug counseling program that, on a practical level, provides the only counseling services of any kind for many of the borough’s schools.)

Privatization and budget cuts notwithstanding, some ACORN affiliates have begun to organize proactive campaigns around central issues of quality of education. These efforts have addressed issues like class size, tutoring, and professional development for teachers, but have gradually begun to pinpoint teacher qualifications as their core issue. While research varies on the significance of specific indicators, there appears to be general agreement about the set of indicators being debated: teaching experience, subject matter mastery, degrees and majors, quality of undergraduate university, and verbal and cognitive abilities (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Sanders, Rivers, 1996; Walsh, 2001). Most of these are subject to comparative measurement. This last factor has allowed Chicago ACORN to translate an intimidating topic (teacher preparation and qualifications) into an easily understood equity issue that parents and their organization can monitor for improvement as the campaign progresses and negotiations occur.

Almost a year before the No Child Left Behind Act, signed on January 8, 2002, injected teacher quality into the national debate, a 300 person meeting of Chicago ACORN members had already selected that issue as their education organizing priority. Beginning by documenting the inequitable distribution of vacancies in ACORN neighborhoods, starting in North Lawndale, the campaign forced Chicago Public School Human Resources, as well as targeted principals, into a more aggressive recruitment mode that has virtually eliminated the vacancy problem in North Lawndale. Working against a baseline for the 68 schools in ACORN neighborhoods, the campaign moved on to demands that encompassed increasingly stricter standards (Timmer, March 2001). To date, Chicago ACORN members have won decreases in inappropriately certified teachers (i.e., those teaching “out of license”), in the percentage of special education teachers lacking the appropriate certificate, and in the number of teachers working with an emergency or provisional certificates (typically bilingual and permanent substitute teachers who have received no teaching preparation). The baseline, assembled by Chicago ACORN research staff, lets the membership track any commitments made by principals and CPS officials.

In the past year, building largely on the experience of Chicago ACORN and taking advantage of organizing handles in the Bush Administration’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), ACORN groups in several cities have begun to focus on quality of

instruction as a core issue for their local schools. Their efforts accelerated following an internal reflection by a dozen or so senior organizing staff members on ACORN’s cumulative experience with schools and a briefing at a larger meeting for dozens of head organizers on No Child Left Behind last May in Estes Park. Albuquerque, Boston, Bronx, Chicago, Philadelphia, Phoenix, and Pittsburgh members confronted school officials with the evidence that schools serving low-income children of color tended to have less experienced, less qualified teachers than schools in whiter, better-off sections of their cities. As a statewide organization, California ACORN filed a lawsuit challenging the state’s definition – required by NCLB – for “highly qualified” teachers. These are long haul campaigns and mark a departure from much of the organization’s earlier schools organizing that often focused on physical and process questions rather than policies that directly address instruction.

ACORN’s experience with education issues is delimited for better and worse by its shear variety, its geographic spread, and its susceptibility to the controlled chaos that marks un- and under-funded grassroots organizing in the United States. At present, the usable total of that experience is, therefore, actually *less* than the sum of its parts. ACORN’s participation in this project is a major down payment in the organization’s accelerating attempt to leverage that experience by consolidating the lessons learned in years of acting on the concerns low-income families have about the conditions in their children’s schools and in their cities’ school systems.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

After multiple conversations with Hewlett Foundation staff, ACORN undertook an internal examination of its work over the past decade with school improvement and education reform issues. The results of this process, which we summarize in this report, will assist ACORN in developing a strategy for even more effective education reform work in the future. *ACORN Education Reform Organizing: Evolution of a Model* embodies an extended analysis of community organizing as a strategy for creating building-level, system-wide, and statewide improvements in public schools attended by low-income children, especially children of color. We look at the approaches ACORN uses and the organizing and political dimensions of those approaches. We offer a number of strategic and tactical recommendations to strengthen ACORN's education organizing. Finally, we provide a foundation for the next stage of this consolidation process in the form of a preliminary model for education reform organizing that ACORN can field test and replicate.

We parse the information we assembled, observations we made, and conclusions we draw in an effort to cover the conceptual territory mapped out in the project proposal underwritten by Hewlett. The landmarks of this terrain include:

- constituency
- issues
- strategies
- changing a school versus policy change
- operating at scale
- legitimacy and becoming a “player”
- allies
- resource issues
- education organizing in the broader context of community organizing.

The National Center for Schools and Communities (NCSC) undertook the facilitation, fieldwork, analysis, and editorial services for this project and is responsible for this report. The Center is a joint project of the Fordham University Graduate Schools of Education and Social Service in New York City. NCSC provides policy and data analysis support to community- and parent-led school reform efforts and program evaluation for school-based efforts to improve services for low-income public school students. In addition to this Hewlett-supported collaboration, NCSC and ACORN work together on the multi-year Organizing for Excellence Project funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Our work for local ACORN affiliates for that effort has provided us with a grounding in ACORN's institutional culture and a network of working relationships within the Association that contributed to the progress of the present project.

METHODOLOGY

The research and analysis informing this report was essentially qualitative. The investigators collected input for our analysis through a variety of activities, most of which involved interacting with or observing ACORN staff and membership. These activities include:

- Materials review.

We examined ACORN press coverage and leadership statements and reviewed policy studies on organizing and schools that included ACORN.

- Planning and facilitating a structured exploration by very senior ACORN staff with experience in school issues and newer head organizers with an interest in them. (5/31/02)

This “master class” with a dozen mostly senior ACORN organizers working on school issues was held during the annual management staff retreat at the YMCA national conference center in Estes Park, Colorado. The group began summarizing lessons learned, considered differences in organizing for school reform versus for other issues, explored the tension between substantive school reform and the political demands of both neighborhood-based organizing and playing multiple roles in the city and state political environment.

- Observation of the issue-planning meeting for 50 head organizers and national staff. (5/31/02)

Research staff distributed materials on new increases in Title I funding while an experienced head organizer walked participants through the strategic significance of the political opportunity and the tactical approach to “branding” the information and the issue for local ACORN affiliates.

- Fifteen structured phone interviews with head organizers; follow up and planning calls and correspondence with senior staff. (5-9/02)

A copy of the interview protocol is in the Appendix. In addition, we also incorporated into our content analysis material from separate, highly structured, phone interviews conducted for a recent NCSC project that included three ACORN affiliates (Miami, St. Paul, and Philadelphia) in an investigation of the school reform priorities and needs of 51 grassroots organizations (Beam, et al. 2002).

- Tour of ACORN neighborhoods and observation of roundtable led by ACORN leaders at Robeson High School in the Englewood section of the South Side. (10/24/02)

These activities were part of Chicago ACORN’s participation in a two-day meeting of the National Alliance on the American High School held at National-Louis University.

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The event, staffed by the Institute for Educational Leadership in D.C. and locally hosted by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, brought together representatives from national academic and professional associations and foundations with an investment in high school reform. Chicago ACORN's head organizer provided an overview of the organization's approach to school reform in Chicago and a running commentary on the local school-related campaigns in ACORN neighborhoods through which we passed on the way to and from Robeson. At the high school, ACORN leaders and the principal discussed the working relationship between the school and the neighborhood organization.

- Observation of a meeting of the parent organizer and an ACORN member with Boston public schools district staff person. (11/5/02)

This conversation was a follow-up to monitor progress on an earlier commitment by the district to improve training for substitute teachers.

- Observation of Boston ACORN planning session around Title I issues; loosely structured group conversation with members before meeting. (11/5/02)

This event focused on the planning process for upcoming school-related issues, particularly the increase in Title I funding flowing from No Child Left Behind.

- Tour of Woodland Elementary, an "ACORN school" in the Flatlands section of Oakland, California. (11/22/02)

The ACORN member who helped lead the multi-year effort to win the school and who now volunteers nearly full-time as liaison between the organization and the school introduced us to the history, faculty, and facilities of Woodland. We interviewed the principal, who is also an ACORN member.

- Observation and facilitation of parent leadership training session for ACORN leaders from Oakland, San Francisco, San Jose, and Sacramento. (11/23/02)

We observed a half-day leadership development event that brought together 60 members and faculty from Woodland with a wide range of experience with school issues; i.e., from several years to none. We facilitated a bilingual exploration of parents' notions of what constitutes a good school.

- Session with Oakland organizing staff on school issues (11/22/02); debriefing with senior staff after leadership training event (11/23/02).
- Observation of training for parents from ACORN Community High School in Brooklyn. (11/26/02)

A former ACORN organizer now working with the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy facilitated this event, one in a series intended to strengthen the connection between newer parents from the high school to the organization that founded it. A mix of veteran ACORN leaders who helped win the school, visiting leaders from Bronx ACORN, and parents with no connection to the organization whose children attend ACHS participated.

- Round robin discussion with New York ACORN schools organizing staff.
(1/16/02)

This meeting with a typically harried staff included the rotating participation of the director of the NY ACORN Schools Office, the Brooklyn head organizer, a youth organizer who graduated from ACORN’s Social Justice High School, and the teacher-liaison working to design and implement the social justice and organizing curricula for the ACORN high schools.

- Content analysis of 43 documents summarizing notes, interviews, and observations from information collection activities.

Using Atlas.ti content analysis software, we coded material from these documents according to categories suggested by the original proposal questions as well as themes suggested by our early conversations with ACORN senior staff. The resulting content analysis is approximately 100 pages long and groups the material according to the following dimensions of ACORN’s school and education related work, which ultimately served as headings for the “Findings” section, which follows:

- base/constituency
- issues and issue selection
- focus (primary target/area of organizational concern)
- scope (primary arena or venue for policy advocacy)
- strategies
- legitimacy as a stakeholder
- allies
- resources
- organizational context
- accountability
- ACORN schools.²

We interrogated the output of the content analysis to identify real world examples that illuminate the descriptive headings suggested by the proposal and the two we added, that illustrate common themes in ACORN’s school-related experience, that demonstrate tensions within and among the themes, and that identify possible examples of best practice in education reform organizing.³

A comment about quotations: We use quotations and paraphrases throughout this report to ground the discussion in the day-to-day reality of community organizing and to attempt to provide the reader with a feel for the insight, creativity, and sometimes

² Accountability and ACORN Schools were added by the investigators as potentially useful categories of analysis.

³ Throughout this report, we have included references to research on various topics and themes that ACORN members have begun addressing in their organizing and negotiations.

honest perplexity of the people who organize for better public schools. We attempt to be as close to both the language and spirit of what we heard but acknowledge that we are working from notes of what were frequently fast paced, wide ranging, and, on occasion, even multilingual exchanges.

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

The overarching finding we offer is that ACORN’s approach to school-related organizing has evolved in some locations to include an emphasis on questions regarding quality of instruction and its educational outcomes for low-income children; in other words on issues of education reform.

The evolution of that approach is at different stages throughout the 24 states of the Association. While staff capacity on this issue is very uneven, there are deep pockets of accumulated experience, history, reflection, and analysis. There is poor maintenance of institutional memory and frequently a lack of effective dissemination – and adoption – of lessons learned in various ACORN affiliates.

These observations notwithstanding, ACORN as a multi-state Association has accumulated a critical mass of experience, including best practice, and, more important, a critical understanding of that experience. Together these provide the raw material for a first generation model linking community organizing and education reform. We present a draft of this model after the following discussion of our findings.

Constituency

1) In distinct contrast to the assumption that organizing around public education is about organizing parents, the base for ACORN schools campaigns is the regular ACORN membership and the constituency (buildings, blocks, neighborhoods, family networks) from which it is drawn.

Campaigns may attract new members but the existing base propels the campaigns forward. For example, in the Bronx, “The people who are members who join for some other issue end up being just as involved in the campaign as the people we met at the schools.” In San Jose, an organizer estimates that a majority of members involved in school issues do not currently have children in school. Having an external community base helps the organization avoid both the continuous aging out that cripples the continuity of typical parent involvement as adults’ focus moves from school to school with their kids and the cooptation inherent in officially sanctioned parent associations.

2) With occasional exceptions, schools are not prime places for recruiting members. A long time Minnesota organizer claims that he was still able to recruit more members doorknocking homes two blocks down the street from the charter school that St. Paul members had won than with an equal amount of time standing in front of the school. The major exception is Oakland, which compared to the other surviving “ACORN schools,” maintains an exceptionally strong organizational presence in a school the construction of which was a major victory for the local ACORN group. Absent such clear ownership of a corner of the neighborhood infrastructure and culture, schools appear to embody important issues but not necessarily a new pool of potential recruits.

In general, local ACORN affiliates work on school-specific issues as part of the neighborhood group's agenda; i.e., when leaders or members identify problems.

3) Moreover, the consensus of the most experienced organizers as expressed at the Estes Park colloquium is that organizing around individual school issues does not build the wider base and more sophisticated leadership that is necessary for system change. In fact, one New York organizer related carefully planning which schools to target for mobilization for a district-wide campaign to avoid being drawn into school-specific issues that would not advance the broader agenda. Staff members in Chicago ACORN, where the organization aggressively represents the interests of 68 public schools in ACORN neighborhoods, are explicit about not being able to support school-level issues beyond the occasional emergency situation or political necessity. (Even in the nation's third largest urban school district, 68 schools provide a strong platform from which to raise district-wide issues.) Increasingly, issues and ACORN campaigns that address them concern entire districts or, at minimum, groups of schools serving ACORN neighborhoods.

4) For a variety of what may be very locale-specific reasons that range from local economics to culturally shaped perspectives on education, immigrant families are frequently at the forefront of ACORN members who organize around school-related issues.

Our interviews and field visits suggested that in the Midwest and West Coast ACORN cities, Mexicans and Mexican American families are ready recruits for school campaigns. In San Diego, an organizer suggested that a higher level of Hispanic homeownership frees up energy for schools; that is, members can focus on issues other than housing. Family networks are also important for Mexican and Mexican American families in that city and, therefore, offer a format to reach more potential parent activists. In Miami, an organizer reports that the Dominican American Foundation and the Haitian Women of Miami (FANM) have over the past four years been the most faithful participants in the pro-schools coalition ACORN has organized there. In New York, Afro Caribbean members have frequently taken leadership roles in, for example, the creation of ACORN Community High School in Central Brooklyn. Yet another person suggested that children of immigrant parents generally have some rights as students, regardless of their parents' legal status; those rights provide organizing handles that might be missing for other issues.

5) Given the premise that local ACORN affiliates can build district- and perhaps even school-level campaigns with existing membership, mobilization for a campaign resembles the approach used for other ACORN efforts. This approach is rooted in thirty years of experience and based on careful planning, quantifiable goals, and measurable expectations. As one California organizer with a particularly nuts and bolts approach put it:

We have lots of parents at particular schools. To [expand] the infrastructure at the local level we work district wide on curriculum and teacher quality and/or resources. The [newly hired schools] organizer is

building a list. We did a map on how we can build an at-large parent group. We want 10 members per week. 100 members in 10 weeks. We have to do 300 home visits. One hundred is enough to have it [the district wide education committee] be a fairly powerful organization. Trying to build something that is much stronger than a 20-person committee. It is manageable and gives you enough of a scale that you can have impact on [district] decision-making... By way of comparison] there is the teacher union that could mobilize a 100 teachers... In ten weeks, we could be a major player.

What makes ACORN's headlines and high profile actions possible is the low profile, day-to-day grind of community organizing, of building the base one family at a time. ACORN staff is constantly reaching out to people in the community, doorknocking, flyering at schools, assisting leaders in holding house meetings that draw on new networks, identifying potential leaders and volunteers, and forming new local groups (neighborhood associations, block clubs, tenants unions).

6) The ability to mobilize a constituency that is concerned with the educational outcomes and related equity issues but that is not necessarily tied to specific public schools permits ACORN organizing to move beyond the notion that there is some starter-set of issues (e.g., crossing guards) that build interest and capacity for taking on more systemic problems in public education. The crossing guards, broken toilets, and pusher-plagued playgrounds that will remain a staple of *neighborhood* organizing often have little connection in terms of content or targets to issues related to accountability for the quality of instruction in those schools.

7) Education campaigns both require and nurture sophisticated leadership.

At their most incisive, ACORN education campaigns can translate issues with extensive policy and research backup (e.g., teacher qualifications) into an accountability or equity framework that organizers can easily communicate "on the doors" (e.g., percentage of appropriately certified teachers in neighborhood schools versus in the rest of the district). But, to speak before the school board, negotiate with the superintendent, or testify in court, community leaders need a solid understanding of the factors that contribute most strongly to successful academic outcomes.

For formal leadership training on topics ranging from how to understand test scores to analyzing how demographics affect the resources available to local public schools, ACORN groups often turn to regional and national policy advocacy centers. These have included the Institute for Education and Social Policy (NYU), Small Schools Workshop (UI Circle Campus); Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (UCLA); and Cross City Campaign for School Reform in Chicago. Formal presentations and workshops on education topics have become a regular part of ACORN's annual national leadership school and legislative conference.

ACORN has also traditionally depended heavily on well-staffed on-the-job training to build issue leaders. Learning experiences for leaders in Chicago ACORN have included actions on statewide or district targets to push a simple educational issue that provides a window into the quality of instruction at the school. For instance, actions on the Illinois State Board of Education, which oversees licensing and Title I, demanded information on whether teachers are highly qualified as required by the much-touted No Child Left Behind Act. In Brooklyn, staff also stressed a serendipitous aspect of learning by doing: previously untried members who “step up to the plate” to give the statement when the planned spokesperson is delayed, to ask the pointed question when the negotiation is off-track, or to unify the group when it is losing focus.

Organizers cite a number of specific replicable activities and general experiences that build leadership capacity for school reform. These include:

- reviewing performance statistics that compare schools in their neighborhoods with other schools
- taking tours of well-appointed schools in better off sections of the city
- perhaps more importantly, touring schools that are successfully educating low-income children of color
- “popular education” techniques that help parents explore their own and their children’s experience in school and relate it to specific school reform proposals.

Issues

1) Local ACORN affiliates formulate issues relating to problems in the schools in much the same way they do for other local concerns: Members identify concerns during one-on-one visits with organizers, at community meetings, in special committee or task force meetings, or during an executive board session. Staff then aggregates and synthesizes member input, investigates feasibility, and researches or generates policy options for next level of discussion and planning by the membership. The following description describes some issues as being defined at the base and others in leadership forums:

The [first of] two major approaches: the bubble up from the bottom approach. We are organizing at a school and we achieve a critical mass [of parent members]. Often we help them tackle what seems achievable. So, we help them [organize to] get the crossing guard and then help them become clearer that something else is achievable. This is the organic model. Or, one opportunity leads to another [model].

The other type is more strategic, and the leadership decides and we research the landscape. Something is put forward. The members always

want to know what the organizers think. The question is: How do you make sure the members are empowered to make real decisions?

Defining the issue is a first step in a longer process of taking action on the issue. Another organizer describes additional steps:

Before any larger meeting we develop a core of people that are really active. We assign leaders more broadly. We have leaders meet over a period of time, set up a time line. Who are the allies? Who is the opposition? What are the tactics?

In some offices, this process, which marries consensus building and planning, centers in the executive board; other ACORN cities have established citywide education committees.

Policy making for public schools and, to an even larger degree, its implementation are overwhelmingly local and dispersed among the nation's 16,000 school districts. Nevertheless, an advantage of being affiliated with a close-knit national association is the potential – sometimes imperfectly realized – for learning about and replicating or avoiding campaigns or approaches that have been, respectively, successes or failures in other ACORN cities.

When they organize around schools – or any other concern, local ACORN members leverage substantial logistic and political resources. These include full-time organizing staff; social capital generated by ACORN's ongoing outreach in the community; access, legitimacy, and material assistance from allies cultivated in past campaigns; and technical assistance at the local or national level. For example, discussing Baltimore ACORN's first schools campaign, the head organizer pointed out that, through ACORN's national partnerships, local ACORN members obtained data analysis documenting the distribution of qualified teachers that the Baltimore City Public Schools would have been unable to generate.

2) ACORN's long history of addressing schools at the neighborhood level has contributed to safety and better working conditions for students but seldom to their academic success. Issues have traditionally grown from the membership and tended to be concrete and neighborhood- specific. Local wins range from demolition of dangerous abandoned buildings encroaching on Chicago schools to sacking a superintendent in the Bronx to saving highly valued drug counselors in Brooklyn high schools to construction of the first new school in Oakland in 30 years and the purchase of a "school on wheels" to alleviate crowding at an Albuquerque high school.

In some cases, the political benefits of organizing transcend the specific improvement won: "A lot of what victory means to us is having school board members and administrators give us things we ask for that don't require a vote by the school board."

"We became the go-to place for school issues."

3) Implementation of a commitment is a function of its content and the continuity of follow-through by the school system and by the group. Unlike their experience with many issues wherein the desired change flows directly and quickly from the victory, some organizers report having difficulty knowing when the group has won, what the real win is, and whether the win is actually having an impact on the quality of kids' education. Major urban chancellors and superintendents are purged every three years and principals come and go. In many districts, professional development that should translate a commitment into change in the classroom is under supported by both budget and institutional culture. Funding is cut and bureaucracies are reorganized. And assessment systems – that should help parents identify what does and does not help their children learn – have narrowed to an extent that curriculum is increasingly equated with teaching to the test.

The local organization “is constantly trying to monitor the implementation to see if their wins are for real,” says one organizer. “Schools are so complex that the definition of a good school is all over the map, [it is] even harder to know what the victory is,” says another. “I think on some other issues, the solutions are not cut and dried. Just pouring more money is not the solution,” asserts a third.

Even when the victory appears concrete, some organizers lack confidence in its effect: “There is a real chance that we will win some programmatic changes in teacher quality. Whether they will have an impact on education is less clear.” Another form of frustration for organizers is the unclaimable win. Three and half years ago, Bronx ACORN members pushed for incentives and mentoring for experienced and new principals attempting to turn around poorly performing school. Covering the Mayor Bloomberg/Chancellor Klein reforms in the New York City public schools, Education Week recently mentioned “bonus pay to outstanding principals who agree to work in low-performing schools” and a program in which “aspiring principals would shadow those veteran principals,” – proposals that correspond directly to points raised by ACORN leaders in much earlier negotiations. Says an organizer who used to work in the Bronx:

It is very hard...even if you get the reforms that you fight for implemented, you really have to be able to track the schools for some time to make sure that they're implemented and that they are having the effect that they are supposed to.

That said, in the past two years, Chicago ACORN has, in fact, built monitoring into the structure of its campaigns. A school-by-school baseline helps kick off a campaign by highlighting the equity issue (e.g., teacher certification) then becomes the benchmark for measuring semester or annual progress with data collected through action research (e.g., phone surveys and parent observations) or more formal analysis of official statistics. Although this approach relies heavily on a local office's ability to support or borrow technical resources and secure access to the appropriate data, the Chicago approach offers other ACORN affiliates an approach that is at least potentially replicable.

4) ACORN staff often identifies school-related issues in terms of process questions that resonate with the organization’s mission of building power in low-income communities. One of ACORN’s most senior organizers observed that organizers feel like they have won when they work on an issue that moves people. In other words, success could be *mobilizing* the membership or constituency to take aggressive action on the issue rather than achieving the changes suggested by the issue itself.

Group discussion with organizers did, in fact, generate a list of factors that participants felt were indications, if not actually indicators, of successful schools organizing. These include results, policies, or commitments that:

- change public policy
- create schools
- relate to the group’s vision of good schools (e.g., building power, increasing student achievement, equitable distribution of educational inputs like high quality teachers and effective curricula, cultivating effective educational leadership at the school level)
- increase the role for parents in schools
- establish the group as the “go-to” organization for education issues
- make the school a player in the neighborhood
- open up access to arenas of educational policy making
- are acknowledged by the membership.

With the exception of some elements of the “vision thing,” however, all these points are indications of increased political influence but might or might not represent an improvement in or even control of educational quality.

5) A more strategic, streamlined perspective on education issues has begun to emerge within the organization.

The evolving analysis of staff with the most experience with education issues and the timely availability of a number of useful organizing handles⁴ in the federal No Child Left Behind Act have spurred a growing emphasis in internal best organizing practice that centers on improving quality of instruction and, therefore, student achievement. ACORN members are beginning to zero in on quality of instruction by holding officials accountable for a short list of educational inputs.

⁴ Handle is a term of organizing art that refers to the law, ordinance, regulation, existing policy, or precedent that provides a group with political or, preferably, legal standing to inject itself into an area of policy. For example, No Child Left Behind regulations require schools to provide parents with a description of the qualifications of their children’s individual teachers. This handle opens the way for community groups to raise the issue of the distribution of teaching resources among schools in different communities.

This approach is still a work in progress and has not been summarized in a consistent or coherent way. For example, one senior staff member asserted that, “It’s clear that ACORN needs to have a position on achievement and scores that it doesn’t currently have.” Meanwhile, as is often the case, reality speeds past theory and consensus building: ACORN members in both Massachusetts and California are beginning to organize against high stakes exit exams that “penalize students for failures of the public school system.”

With or without such a position, education issues are claiming a place in the organization’s national knowledge base in a way that reflects upgraded support for the school reform efforts of local ACORN affiliates. For example, for last summer’s meeting of 60 head organizers and senior Association staff, the ACORN research director had extracted for each ACORN affiliate the local Title I budgets from the recently enacted No Child Left Behind legislation. At a session devoted to current and prospective issues, she distributed the customized handouts while the head organizer from Chicago succinctly laid out the opportunity, the handle, and the strategy for seizing local initiative on the distribution of new expanded Title I funding. Within a few weeks of the meeting, the researcher circulated descriptions of additional NCLB handles related to compensatory educational services, transfer and transportation rights, and teacher qualifications. And, in the fall, the president of the ACORN national board released *Parents Left Behind*, which summarized state by state implementation – or lack thereof – of those program components.

Focus and Scope

Focus refers to the *sphere* of policy interest. Scope refers to the *level* of decision making targeted by campaigns.

1) Over the years, ACORN groups have focused on three distinct spheres of policy interest with regard to education. First, groups have organized around the physical issues in and around schools (traffic, heating, abandoned buildings); safety, health, and comfort concerns (drug dealers near the school, asbestos); dignity and human rights (broken or poor maintained restrooms, treatment of parents by school staff) – in short, quality of school life questions. Second, they have sought to increase general parent influence on the operation of specific schools (reviving parent associations, serving on school leadership teams, participating on interview committees for new principals, scrutinizing budgets or fighting budget cuts) – in short, governance questions. Finally, more recently, some of the most established ACORN affiliates have begun to emphasize issues related to the quality of instruction and educational outcomes.

While we remain convinced that local groups can focus on just one or the other of these spheres of school policy indefinitely, various ACORN operations have through instinct or insight worked through them in ways that have moved the local organization’s educational politics closer to some core of education reform. ACORN members, for instance, began by addressing the number of dropouts at two Albuquerque high schools

– 600 students in just two years – and won an innovative new program in the form of the School on Wheels. The legitimacy acquired in that campaign positioned New Mexico ACORN to take on privatization of local schools, win an important role for parents in any future privatization decisions, and, moreover, veto Edison Schools Inc. from coming into ACORN neighborhoods. ACORN members are now leveraging their accumulated clout from these two very different efforts to influence decisions on professional development policies that will have an impact on teaching quality in Albuquerque Public Schools.

2) ACORN groups pursue policy or operational changes at the school, district or city, and state levels.

The solution for very school-specific, quality of school life, or parent association level governance issues can sometimes take place at the school level, but frequently parents must put pressure on public agencies unrelated to the schools (e.g., the local police precinct or the city building inspectors) or levels of school-related decision making above the principal.

Concerns with the quality of education, especially when they relate to an inequitable distribution of key educational resources, frequently, perhaps usually, require pressuring district officials (the superintendent or board of education) or bureaucracies and elected officials that control budgets or have oversight responsibilities (mayors and city councils, state Title I offices).

According to various ACORN organizers, the downside of this reality is having to go “downtown.” In other words, the scale of a policy change needed to accomplish systemic or even broadband change in major urban districts requires decisions that happen in a much more powerful venue than the local school. Even very localized change may require serious effort directed at the district level; a case in point is multi-year fight by residents of the South Elmhurst neighborhood in Oakland to force construction of a single, new elementary school in their neighborhood, a fight that pitted them against the mayor, three different superintendents, and various generations of the school board.

In larger ACORN cities, the number of schools represented by local neighborhood groups sometimes limits the organization’s ability to address even school level issues at the school level. For example, while Chicago ACORN has independently strong bases of support in a number of neighborhoods (i.e., it could operate at the school level on any given issue), those neighborhoods are home to 68 separate public schools. So, even a campaign like the organization’s successful effort to begin upping the qualifications of teachers in specific ACORN neighborhood schools inexorably gravitates toward negotiations with the central administration and may in the process win improvements for additional public schools beyond the 68.

Moreover, campaigns that generalize from issues shared by many individual schools are able to tap the leadership that has the most background in education issues, mobilize

more members more efficiently, and make strategic use of political capital (e.g., a citywide relationship with the teacher's union).

State government frequently has some degree of regulatory and budgetary input responsibility for local schools, and the No Child Left Behind Act now holds state government accountable for testing, standards, teacher quality, and service requirements. In California, where members have begun to go after state education officials and legislative targets, for example,

It is also hard to organize with education because so much is on the state level. That is something we have begun doing, [that is] to develop a statewide strategy...to get at the state funding issues.

Although most of ACORN's school-related organizing is at the district or citywide levels, state officials are increasingly included as targets in a campaigns in other cities including Albuquerque, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh.

Strategy

1) ACORN's strategic approach to organizing around school improvement and education questions is heavily informed by the mission of the organization, which is to increase the political and economic power of low and moderate income families.

ACORN groups engage in a self-reinforcing process of successfully applying organizational capacity to affect a policy or distributional decision that addresses membership needs and demands. They then incorporate the access and influence resulting from that victory into the equation for the next round of demands. Capacity is often based on people-related assets: mobilization of members, votes, stopping business as usual through mass action, identifying sympathetic plaintiffs, creative media relations employing stunts or well presented data, petitions, email and phone campaigns, etc. Capacity might also include access to resources other stakeholders do not have such as research or the ability to borrow or share the influence of an ally. This part of ACORN's methods is relatively content neutral.

Most ACORN organizers are trained and socialized in the power building approach and are, therefore, quite comfortable with its internal mechanics. In the Bronx, "the goals that we're better at setting are around expanding our base, turnout for actions, [and negotiating] which elected officials we want to get commitments from..." In San Jose, "the members are going to have to decide what they can accomplish in six months." In LA, "There are also internal goals as well as outside goals. Developing parents as leaders, involving parents more is a goal."

Less experienced organizers are less confident in their ability to assist ACORN members and leadership in planning campaigns that include demands for actual improvement in the quality of education, rather than the quality of school life improvements that present themselves during routine doorknocking and neighborhood

meetings. For education reform and other campaigns that address specialized content, the national Association frequently contributes or procures high quality technical assistance that we describe under Issues, Resources, and Allies. Baltimore, Chicago, New York City, and Philadelphia ACORN campaigns have successfully used policy research and data analyses to ratchet up the influence of ACORN members in education reform policy debates.

Community and economic development, civil rights, and civic engagement for a democratic society are all alternative frames for education organizing but do not receive much “air play” in discussions with ACORN staff.

2) ACORN’s most relevant – in terms of education reform – and sophisticated – in terms of power building – strategy has begun to focus on accumulating power in schools and districts by winning actual policy changes and redistribution of educational resources rather than by pouring energy into capturing governance structures or emphasizing localized problems that are marginal to the quality of education provided to the community’s children. Demanding and winning a full-time teacher for every classroom, for example, positions parents to then demand that every teacher be licensed or otherwise qualified in the subject she teaches.

A senior staff member in New York equates winning parent control of relevant decisions not with taking over local PTAs but with having “to do campaigns on the issues we need to go forward,” which he defines as campaigns of opportunity to win one or more of the elements required for student achievement.

An organizer from Chicago ACORN, an office that has made substantial contributions to the Association’s collective thinking on education reform organizing, considers it a win for that office to be “working toward better student achievement” and that putting some key elements in place in schools in ACORN neighborhoods has in itself augmented the organization’s power.

The group discussion with head organizers and national staff at Estes Park devoted some attention to defining potential policy issues that might have a strong connection to strategies emphasizing student achievement and produced a list that included:

- teacher quality
- lower class size
- curricula
- professional development
- school safety/school climate
- mentoring for principals, teachers, and students
- adequate resources to support all these elements.

This list was primarily generated by the most experienced organizers and is more integrated and informed than a similar list would have been even five years ago. This

session and other discussions at the Estes Park retreat may have encouraged many organizers to begin shifting their focus toward issues of quality of instruction. Comments during that meeting and in earlier and subsequent interviews suggested that some organizers and local leaders have difficulty breaking out of the quality of school life and governance spheres of issues, but it is equally clear that ACORN's organizing priorities are increasingly converging on questions at the core of education reform. ACORN members in at least seven cities are currently engaged in campaigns around teacher quality and the distribution of teaching resources in their communities. Still other communities have begun with related issues suggested by the No Child Left Behind legislation.

A strategic benefit of the centrally disseminated NCLB material is its contribution to focusing the organizing on an issue (teacher quality) that has strong potential for affecting student achievement but can be organized in straightforward accountability terms: demand the data, enforce the deadlines, compare schools in ACORN neighborhoods with those in other areas, document the improvement, escalate the demands.

3) Education reform, as opposed to quality of school life issues, requires longer timeframes and, therefore, modification of the typical issue campaign structure, which is generally laid out in weeks or months, not the years that will be required to turn around many urban systems. Education reform campaigns require the leadership and staff to identify intermediate objectives the winning of which will recharge the membership and maintain its enthusiasm for the campaign. As an organizer in Los Angeles explains:

On most campaigns that have a fairly large policy goal, we figure out shorter-term goals or pieces. Example...[suppose] we want to get the district to change their policy around credentialing and teachers, which is a huge problem that may take awhile: We may figure out a short-term piece that has to do with reporting [the distribution of teaching credentials by school]. It is sort of a campaign within itself. We make sure that there are benchmarks that are connected to the broader goal.

Legitimacy: Becoming a Player

1) Various local ACORN affiliates have achieved the status of recognized players in resource and policy fights in their local schools and, in some cases, school systems.

While making its mandatory nod to some X factor of local context, this status relates more to the organizing and political skills of the leadership and staff for polarizing an issue and assembling a coalition or neutralizing opposition than to the centrality of their issues to educational reform. The ability to achieve local political legitimacy and access appears to be independent of whether the local education reform debate is densely (e.g., Chicago or New York) or thinly (Albuquerque) populated with other grassroots, non-profit, and political players.

None of the other community organizations getting into the arena have done as much or know as much [about quality of education issues]. [A non-ACORN community organization] does good program stuff and ACORN is working with them... We are the third major play on teacher quality [in between the two Chicago dailies, which have aggressive, ambitious investigative reporters on the education beat] ... our status is in the last year and half.

In Albuquerque, where ACORN's school-related efforts last year revolved around beating back privatization of under performing schools, an organizer remarked: "The thing that amazed me in all of our (school) work here is that there really are no other players [that represent some form of parent organization]." According to another interview from California: "It is so rare that parents organize effectively." If you have an organized groups of parents to promote on behalf of their kids, she says, that gets attention. In Philadelphia, where ACORN has "traditionally" been able to turn out support and where ACORN and union allies confronted the mayor with 1,500 people at an annual Christmas tree lighting, "People respect numbers."

In San Jose, an organizer claims that the organization becomes a player when the "school district officials and principals start calling us about things...recognizing that ACORN has to be at the table." Another perspective, voiced by a number of people, is that the legitimacy of a local ACORN affiliate in the education arena is recognized when it becomes the "go-to" organization, primarily for the newspaper, but also for parents and others looking for an organizational champion for their school-related grievances. "Go-to" status is often based on an organization's capacity to connect reporters on short notice with articulate parent leaders who can represent a community perspective on a school-related issue.

2) Winning, maintaining, and protecting an "ACORN school" do not guarantee and frequently interfere with a local ACORN affiliate becoming a player.

One former head organizer reports: "[Our] charter school did not make the organization a player. Once we won the institution, that's where all the energy went...[Working with that school] sucked any energy out of the education campaign." The difficulty in advancing a citywide schools agenda in another ACORN city, "comes back to [our resources and capacity] being just sucked into the black hole of our three [non-charter] schools." In yet another:

The charter school thing was really bad for us...we were just paralyzed...there was no way to go that was a good direction. We couldn't do ACORN-style campaigns for three years. [We] really wasted a lot of time in terms of holding system accountable.

3) Investing organizational energy in governance may actually interfere with controlling the school reform debate and moving toward substantive change.

The hundreds of school leadership teams in Chicago or the 32 New York City community school boards were tempting targets for organizations with a base and the capacity to mobilize it, and ACORN was successful in inserting members into both structures. In one of New York ACORN's early forays into school reform (1988), a dozen members who ran won seven seats on five community school boards. According to the *Cross City Indicators Project on Education Organizing*, these victories,

...did not provide the kind of influence ACORN hoped for. For one thing, ACORN leaders were frustrated in their attempts to get community concerns on the local boards' agendas. They found the boards more engaged in assigning contracts and hiring than in changing educational policy and improving schools. (Simon, Pickron-Davis, Brown, 2002)

A senior organizer in Chicago, where in 1989, 87 members won seats on 28 school leadership teams, recounts being unable to discern any significant difference, pro or con, in the relationship between organized parents and SLTs that had ACORN members versus those that did not. Furthermore, the frequent meetings and training attached to the position invariably meant that ACORN leaders on the school leadership teams became unavailable for any other leadership responsibilities in their local neighborhood groups.

These experiences have left many organizers with a pessimistic view of any formally sanctioned school governance structure that is actually accessible to parents as being an empty promise that will provide no real power for parents but will consume inordinate quantities of their time and the organization's resources. In 1996, for example, the first major legislative moves toward re-centralizing the New York City public schools were softened with the institution of school leadership teams, which new state law required to include a majority of parents and community members. Within a year, ACORN groups and most other community organizations in the city were putting little if any energy into winning seats on the SLTs.

Allies

1) Local ACORN affiliates frequently establish useful relationships with other stakeholders in the local public education environment.

Teachers unions – Despite the structural tension between the organizations that represent teachers as public employees and the organizations that organize parents and students, ACORN staff identifies a number of pragmatic reasons for having working relationships with teachers unions whenever possible. In many cities, particularly in the Northeast and Chicago, organized teachers are formidable players in local and state politics. According to the Temporary State Commission on Lobbying, the New York State United Teachers and its New York City local, the United Federation of Teachers, spent nearly \$5 million last year to influence policy made in the state capitol or by local governments, more than any other special interest group (New York Times, 2003). This

clout can potentially combine with the more sympathetic profile of organized parents and students to intensify pressure on elected officials.

An organizer who has worked on school issues in the Northeast as well as California expresses a mild caveat:

To have any impact you need a role where you're not 100 percent on the union side or 100 percent on the superintendent side and have some sort of independence so that there's a reason [for both] to need your support.

Principle and pragmatics suggest that teachers must be involved in working out the details of implementing major systems change, creation of staff development programs, and adoption of improved classroom practice even when the pressure for those changes comes from the community. For example, a change in leadership in the Chicago AFT local provided the local ACORN affiliate with an opportunity to establish a liaison with the union that has allowed the two organizations to collaborate on professional development and mentoring (i.e., lead teacher) proposals to the CPS. According to the Illinois head organizer,

The new Chicago Teachers Union [leadership] has been very open and helpful, and very non-defensive about teacher quality issues. We find them to be a breath of fresh air. We joined forces in attacking CPS [Chicago Public Schools] for its sudden closing of three schools last year, and they have invited us to be on their community advisory board.

This spring (April 2003), ACORN is negotiating formal national partnerships with both the National Education Association, America's largest teachers union, and the AFT, the membership of which teaches in many major urban centers. These linkages leverage opportunities for local ACORN affiliates to form relationships with both AFT and NEA locals in their cities...or, at minimum, neutralize their possible opposition to education reform proposals.

New York ACORN's maintains a strong working relationship with the United Federation of Teachers, the largest AFT local in the nation. ACORN and the UFT are key members of the Alliance for Quality Education, which strongly supported raises for the teachers last spring when teachers, parents and their allies in the community, and hip hop stars joined forces to mount a major demonstration against cuts to the school budget and in support of a fair contract for the teachers.

Miami ACORN has access to school district officials because of a relationship with the teachers union.

The district hates us and we hate the district, basically... The reason they give us any time to meet with them in spite of this is because ACORN has a strong relationship with the teachers union and so does the school board, so since the teachers' union thinks we're cool, the board has to pay attention to us.

ACORN EDUCATION REFORM ORGANIZING.....

In 2000, when contract negotiations between the Boston Public Schools and the teachers union were foundering, ACORN leaders organized and moderated a public accountability session attended by 350 community residents that brought the union and superintendent together to hear input from parents. The event broke the ice between the two sides, and Boston ACORN's access to both parties improved dramatically. Moreover, solutions to a number of parent issues about school-to-home communication were actually incorporated into the teachers' new contract.

In Philadelphia, the teachers union, as well as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), joined forces with ACORN to protest privatization in a campaign that forced state officials to seriously scale down the original package of schools and power they had offered to Edison Schools.

Senior representatives of NEA and AFT locals from around the country participated in a recent (April 2003) "Partnerships for Change" working session in Chicago facilitated by the Center for Community Change. This first ever event brought union officials together with members and organizers from ACORN, as well as the IAF and PICO, to try to define the common ground shared by the unions and the consumers of public education. ACORN leaders from Albuquerque, Boston, Chicago, and New York participated.

Other unions -- Through its sister SEIU locals along the Gulf Coast and in the Midwest, ACORN also maintains liaison with the D.C. headquarters of various national unions. ACORN support for living wage campaigns around the country has resulted in or solidified access to local central labor councils.

Principals – Chicago ACORN campaigns include a conscious effort to win support or, at least, neutrality, from principals and specifically to avoid defining them as the target. This approach has significantly improved the organization's access to school-by-school information on issues such as teacher vacancies. Chicago ACORN works with the 13 principals of North Lawndale schools who run the North Lawndale Learning Community, described below.

Community coalitions, other organizations – Boston, Chicago, and New York ACORN belong to standing education coalitions of community groups. Member groups primarily work within their traditional turf or constituency but come together to broaden the political base for citywide and statewide issues.

New York ACORN is a founding member of the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE), a major coalition of community and advocacy organizations that came together to provide community support for the Campaign for Fiscal Equity suit. (That litigation, currently under appeal, won a lower court ruling that the distribution of state public education funding was structurally inequitable and violated the state constitution.) AQE pursues both New York City and statewide agenda. New York ACORN is also a founding member of the Parent Organizing Consortium, which comprises a number local community organizations that raise money together and cooperate on citywide school issues like budget cuts.

Boston ACORN is one of eight funded members of the Boston Parent Organizing Network, an alliance of 34 local organizations that collaborate around issues and fundraising.

Chicago ACORN is the founder of the Chicago Learning Campaign, a Ford-funded collaborative on working for teacher quality from a community organizing perspective that includes the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, and Designs for Change.

School reform establishment – As observations recorded in other sections (e.g., Context) suggest, many ACORN cities lack a thriving school reform establishment or, at least, one with serious grassroots. In some offices, however, the education organizing may not yet have intersected with what would qualify as the local school reform establishment.

Around 1995, the Annenberg Challenge Grant program made grants to be matched locally of about \$50 million in Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and the Bay Area and \$10-33 million in Boston, Detroit, Houston, NYC, and South Florida (including Miami-Dade and Broward)...all ACORN locations. We found evidence of attempts to cooperate with this major national initiative in three cities.

New York ACORN was one of four partners in the Annenberg-funded New York Networks for School Renewal, which underwrote the planning and establishment of the ACORN community high schools. Chicago ACORN was a partner in a leadership development initiative organized by Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform that channeled Annenberg funding for parent organizing into the organization for four years. Boston ACORN staff attempted to connect with the local Annenberg intermediary, the Boston Plan for Excellence, but concluded that “they had no interest in involving us or any other independent parent groups in this.”

Another regular category of participant in the local school reform establishment of many large and midsize cities is the local education fund (LEF) affiliated with the Public Education Network (PEN). According to PEN outreach materials, its mission “is to build public demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for all children through a national constituency of organizations.” There are 78 LEF in 30 states. LEF tend to work through inside-outside or even allied relationships with local school districts. For example, the board of New Visions for Public Schools, the New York City local education fund, includes the Chancellor of the New York City Public Schools and the presidents of the teachers and principals unions.

There are 29 local education funds in at least 24 ACORN cities. Although a staff member from New York ACORN’s Schools Office facilitated a workshop at the most recent national PEN conference in D.C., only the ACORN affiliates in Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and, perhaps, Portland appear to have any relationship with PEN affiliates. One national staff member shared an impression that local education funds “don’t necessarily see organizing as that helpful, yet.” At the national level, however,

ACORN has a seat on PEN’s advisory board and runs workshops on community organizing for school reform at PEN conferences.

Academic and policy connections – The research and advocacy groups detailed in the discussion of resources do provide valuable services and occasionally financial and logistic assistance. In addition, many of the groups mentioned – the Consortium on Chicago School Research; Designs for Change in Chicago; Cross City Campaign for School Reform; Education Trust; Fordham’s National Center for Schools and Communities; Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access at UCLA; NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy; and the Small Schools Workshop – have ongoing or project specific partnerships with ACORN. Such partnerships may be built around ACORN campaigns, leadership development activities, or policy projects.

Service providers -- When members negotiate specific service improvements in Chicago public schools, ACORN establishes working partnerships with service providers who bring in desired program components; e.g., after school programming or family services. For example, the Steans Family Foundation, a hands-on foundation that is focused on the North Lawndale, an ACORN neighborhood on Chicago's west side, and the North Lawndale Learning Community provide supplemental educational services in North Lawndale. Oakland ACORN’s Woodland Elementary School has a Care Committee that coordinates service providers from areas like public health and dropout and suspension prevention.

Resources

1) In addition to their access to staffing, outreach, and leadership development, ACORN community groups organizing around school and education issues benefit from carefully cultivated political relationships and specialized policy support.

One of the functions of the national staff is to provide technical support for national campaigns (e.g., predatory lending) or similar initiatives in more than one office (e.g., living wage campaigns). ACORN has assembled a particularly robust set of partnerships to support education organizing. These include the Consortium on Chicago School Research, Cross City Campaign for School Reform, Designs for Change, and Small Schools Workshop at University of Illinois Circle Campus; Education Trust in Washington D.C.; Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access at UCLA; the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University and the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham University in New York.

2) There is a wide range of staff capacity for organizing around schools. The staff of one ACORN affiliate in a major city is run by a veteran organizer with 27 years experience with ACORN and two kids in public schools, permanent in-house research capacity with access to high-end statistics backup, and relatively stable staff and funding streams, including money for education issues. Despite an extensive history of organizing around public schools, another office has an experienced head organizer but

all new field staff; no current funding streams for schools work; and because of staff turnover, little or no in-house expertise on education issues.

According to one senior organizer who attempted to provide backup for local school organizing while heading up a major city office and coordinating a national campaign on a completely different issue,

Some offices have capacity to do it right from the get go. [Among other things] they are able to tap into more outsiders...[They are, for example] using outside help to do leadership development around what makes good schools.

3) If time is money and organizing takes time – and effort and creativity – then school and education organizing is particularly expensive. Several head organizers commented on the intense level of staff time required to organize around school issues well. According to one head organizer in the Southwest,

It takes a lot more staff time doing this than other campaigns. The quality of leadership work, the prepping of members, developing leaders and spokespeople... We haven't gotten any grant money out of our education work...or [any] terrific membership growth.

A colleague in New York seconds his view: “To do the campaign well, it’s very labor intensive. It can be frustrating and can take a lot of resources.” Another person with bi-coastal experience offers a cost-benefit analysis comparing the intensive work to produce 50 people at an education action when, “with a little work and phone calls, in pouring rain we pulled 150 folks to a minimum-wage action.”

Leadership is a key resource in grassroots organizing and education organizing, particularly at the district level, can exact certain trade-offs, as this comment from one interview that was echoed in other settings suggests:

If you build [the base] at-large and there is a major issue at the local school, you don't [necessarily] have local leadership. Either you cannot do anything about it and let the issue go, or you put resources into the local schools site.

4) Capacity and opportunity to raise foundation support for education organizing are not distributed evenly across local ACORN affiliates. There is a wide range in fund raising success that does not always bear relationship to local level of activity. In addition to the inevitable variations of capacity in any organization with 51 offices, another problem is the degree to which geographic location and, to some extent, priorities of progressive funders tend to be bicoastal. For example, according to a senior organizer who works with a number of local offices, “There has never been much grant money in the Southwest, hence [a particular office’s] problems... So much of income depends on [personnel-related factors], as well as location, location, location.”

5) Whether set up with a formal charter or just a hard won political deal, “ACORN schools” that have been established or taken over with an explicit understanding that the community will play a special role in defining the school culture and educational philosophy place intense pressure on the organizational, financial, and political capital of local ACORN operations.

[The ACORN school] is a big drain on our organizational resources. The first year, the head organizer was there every day. He didn’t do any recruitment or fundraising [for the local office]. We cannot keep a full time organizer at the school. We need to subsidize [through separate funding stream?] a non-dues collecting organizer who is perhaps more social servicey. It’s a tightrope that we walk...[but] we need a full time organizer there.

Having formal responsibility for a school’s charter appears to impose an additional level of opportunity and political costs on the sponsoring organization. ACORN affiliates have found that the programmatic freedom that is supposed to define a charter school comes at the cost of an absolute absence of district back up; in other words, there is no safety net. In one city, when the principal lost her job in a leadership struggle with the school’s teachers, the head organizer had to fill in as the principal for several days until a hiring plan could be adopted.

The charter school experiment in another city cost the organization its relationship with a foundation that was no longer willing to discuss support for other education organizing.

Organizational Context

1) The organizational culture of ACORN has not yet produced a consistently shared approach, content, or value system that unifies the work around school improvement and education reform. ACORN’s participation in the exchanges and information gathering for this report has contributed to the increasing cohesion of the organizational perspective on education reform organizing.

There is widespread acknowledgement that education speaks to central issues in members’ lives, but, in the words of one experienced organizer: “There needs to be some discussion about why we need to be doing this work...overall discussion of why we want to do it.” One of her colleagues frames a context that unites the institutional and political – or inside and outside – interests of the organization:

I think that if we do not address educational issues in the community then we are not getting to the heart of the problem. The future looks bleak, and it is of tremendous benefit for an organization like ACORN to take on the issues of education.

That said and the potential of shared handles in No Child Left Behind regulations notwithstanding, group and individual conversations suggest that individual offices frequently undertake education issues independently of one another and, until recently, have not always looked at what other cities are doing. In fact, the discussion at Estes Park concluded with a challenging question from a very senior staff member: “When it comes to organizing around education, is ACORN talking about strategies or tactics? Is there a larger plan or is it all about tasks?”

ACORN’s leadership has sometimes been out in front of the staff on the high priority public education should within the organization, although in the past they have frequently led with quality of school life issues. However, national staff report increasing local enthusiasm for the teacher quality issue: “Members have jumped on this...because it resonates with their experience; and it helps folks blame the system, not the kids, for the fact that the kids aren’t learning.” The head organizer of one of ACORN’s more robust state operations summarizes the leadership’s position:

California ACORN has been engaged in housing campaigns for several years. While education has always been way at the top of any priority lists produced by our members, organizers were somewhat hesitant to dive into this complicated area of work, with clear victories sometimes a long time in coming and so many reforms requiring state, as opposed to local, policy. However, a mandate has come clearly from our leadership around the state that we need to tackle education reform. California ACORN is now at a point, with eight chapters around the state and several years of experience working on state policy, that we have the capacity not only to work at the district level but to look beyond, to the state, for meaningful changes.

2) The political environments in which local ACORN affiliates exist vary considerably, but local ACORN operations appear to be able to establish a role in school improvement issues, sometimes with only moderate effort. This success and effort are not to be confused with the effort required to be successful in actually improving schools.

The school reform scene is relatively populated in a few places such as Chicago, New York City, Oakland, and Philadelphia. As we note in the section on Legitimacy, the playing field is often less crowded in other ACORN cities. In addition, in some cases, local offices appear to have excluded some obvious players from their operative context. (See Allies.)

In New Jersey, the perception is that “There is a lot of advocacy happening but not organizing. Nobody’s moving folks.” In San Diego, we were told that there is “no particularly strong parent group that influences education policy. [There are] random insurrections but no real organized effort now.” In St. Louis, “Education is not on people’s radar screen...”

In Albuquerque, “None of the school board members, who are “in some sense, pretty powerful, have a slate of reforms they are fighting for.” An organizer who previously put in time in the Bronx shares a similar perspective on the surprising toothlessness of players one might expect to define the environment, “Teacher unions, school board members, and superintendents really didn’t have the kind of impact that we wanted them to...or [for that matter, did] the chancellor.”

San Jose has its fifth superintendent in four years, and in the Alum Rock Independent School District where ACORN members are quite active, the teacher’s union and a PICO- affiliated group provide the rest of the organized stakeholders in school issues..

Some generic factors affect the context of multiple locations. Community groups have difficulty, for example, maintaining momentum and continuity of issue campaigns in typical urban setting where chancellors and superintendents regularly rotate out. A recent spate of state takeovers (Philadelphia, Baltimore, Hempstead on Long Island) as well as mayoral initiatives (New York City, Oakland) also complicates the context for school-related organizing and, at the same time, ups that ante by requiring groups to operate at higher levels of decision-making: City Hall, state education department, the governor and legislature. If actually enforced, NCLB regulations for schools in need of improvement could also derail local negotiations or be used by districts as excuses for avoiding them (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002).

3) Absent an organizational consensus around strategy and content of education reform, organizers have sometimes evaluated school-related organizing in terms of its strategic contribution to their organization’s ability to operate in the local political environment and its capacity for building power for low- and moderate-income communities.

In Albuquerque, the Edison victory means that, “We’re seen as a power not just in education circles...[the campaign] developed really good leaders...won stuff for our members that we think has really made a difference and that they’re happy with... made us an institution in the community.” In the Bronx, one of the benefits of the South Bronx School Improvement Zone Campaign “was that it got us a lot more recognition in general.”

The symbiotic demands of the political ecosystem in which an ACORN affiliate sometimes operates can also delimit how power can be deployed, as in the case of one California city where,

When we started, we were fighting for power. Now we have some power, so the question becomes how do you wield power. So, it becomes tricky. Other groups have more power than we do, so now we are...looking for larger policy campaigns that don’t have to attack our allies [e.g., a sympathetic superintendent or principals].

External and Internal Accountability

1) The more directly a commitment connects to the quality of instruction and educational outcomes and, therefore, to some change in a large, inertial bureaucracy, the more difficult it is to hold officials accountable for its implementation.

As an issue, teacher quality lends itself to at least some numeric indicators that parents can use to enforce commitments and monitor implementation. Chicago ACORN's approach, described in the overview of the ACORN school and education reform organizing at the beginning of this discussion, incorporates data monitoring into the design of the campaign so that demands are made relative to an initial baseline and commitments monitored in terms progress against that baseline. The next round of demands uses that progress as the point of departure.

But, ramp-up or delivery on other policy or program wins is more difficult to enforce when the change involves a teacher mentoring program that might take two or three years to put in place and two or three more years to evaluate, if indeed evaluation is even part of the plan. Or, the true impact of budget commitments for class size reduction can be both particularly slippery when averaged across hundreds or thousands of classrooms and difficult to defend in lean budget years like those many cities and states are currently experiencing.

Bronx members invested three years extracting various promises from a Chancellor who was gone before the wheels of so-called change had even begun to creak. A organizer who inherited those promises laments, "It's hard to get things implemented because of politics and funding and turnover." Her predecessor echoes that point: "You really have to be able to track the schools for some time to make sure that [the commitments are] implemented and that they are having the effect that they are supposed to."

In Boston, education organizing "is more of a bigger picture. You have won [something] if there is a policy change...[But,] we are constantly trying to monitor the implementation."

Even when monitoring is straightforward, ACORN affiliates sometimes confront serious legal limits in enforceability of what are essentially political handshake deals. For example, the charter school legislation in Minnesota provided no formal authority for ACORN or the community after the group secured the charter, organized the school, and hired the staff. The law required a majority of the charter school's board to be drawn from the school's teachers. This group solved the faculty's differences with management by calling a meeting one weekend when both the principal and the ACORN head organizer were not at the school and firing the principal.

A more optimistic Florida staff member feels that, "It is up to groups like us to set up communication. There has to be a parent body who does education reform in order to change this school culture."

2) A major strength of community-based, as opposed to school-based, school reform efforts is the capacity of leaders, staff, and members to outlast the targets.

Assuming they can keep the plans for commitments they have won from disappearing altogether in the frequent leadership, faculty, and administrative turnover and purges that plague many public school systems, ACORN members, leaders, and staff can function as the institutional memory for local school reform efforts. Given the organization's ability to create a vision, generate consensus for a strategic direction, and institutionalize (i.e., remember and maintain) the commitment to the vision and strategy and, of course, provided adequate resources, ACORN affiliates are much better suited to outlast the local bureaucrats than the leaders of the stereotypical beleaguered parents association or Title I committee

3) As education reform occupies a more prominent place in the Association's agenda, more of ACORN's formal and informal accountability mechanisms will come into play.

In most ACORN cities, the local executive board, made up of an elected officer from each neighborhood group and sometimes citywide special issue groups (e.g., a committee to organize workfare workers) has responsibility for planning, monitoring, and negotiating for major campaigns including school reform efforts. As an office's education organizing moves from neighborhood-based school issues to district-wide school reform, some ACORN affiliates are forming education committees that plan campaigns and encourage and support leaders who thoroughly understand the issues and local educational environment. These are usually linked to the executive board by one or more committee members who also represent their local groups on the executive board. (New York ACORN has an education committee that provides the organization's oversight for the three high schools members have won. Education issues campaigns there remain the responsibility of the executive board.)

Executive boards and citywide education committees that plan and lead local campaigns are staffed out by organizers who generate background materials that help leaders understand the issue, share what they know about ways other groups have dealt with it, and provide information and perspective on the possibilities and consequences of various organizing and political strategies. The ACORN staff is in daily contact with rank and file members and potential members "on the doors" and, therefore, can provide additional input on any groundswell of interest in a problem that might be occurring. According to one organizer who has staffed out various leadership committees, "If something is being proposed that is against what the community wants, the organizer will step forward [and offer input]."

Members and leadership expect organizers at local and national levels to collect synthesize technical information and best practice for complicated issues. That input helps to shape strategies to pursue goals identified by or reflecting broad needs of the membership. Background information can also inform local tactics to implement those strategies and assist local groups in coordinating with ACORN groups in other locations when joint action will advance the issue or help the organization assume ownership.

ACORN does not yet have Association-level positions on education issues similar to existing policy positions on predatory lending or redlining; the issues are both more complex and locally contextualized. Moreover, while “don’t redline” actually provides a policy prescription, “provide high quality instruction” does not.

However, as ACORN cities begin to raise similar issues using national handles like the No Child Left Behind legislation, the Association will inevitably require some internal consensus on some major federal policies and perhaps a few core questions of educational reform (e.g., vouchers). For example, one participant in the Estes Park colloquium defined a need for an ACORN position on “achievement and scores.” The same session identified the need for a succinct set of educational and political objectives that the organization can bring to discussions with potential national partners. ACORN has a national platform, which includes a section on education, but it does not address school reform issues in detail. According to a senior staff member, the national board has discussed the updated version of “Elements of an ACORN School,” the pedagogical portion of which is prescriptive at the classroom level.

ACORN leaders assemble annually for a five-day legislative conference where as many as 80 leaders from around the country participate in workshops and discussion around issues of Association wide concern. (Another 500 members come for the last day of actions in D.C. to spotlight the Association’s priorities.) According to a member of the national research staff,

In general the conference focuses on national campaigns of ACORN which can be influenced in Washington DC. So it will be much higher on the agenda this year due to NCLB and the big need for more funding for states and school districts.

This year’s conference, which was held in March, included workshops on No Child Left Behind; a keynote speech Sunday morning by Reg Weaver, newly installed president of the National Education Association; a rally including the Senate Minority Leader built around the theme of “money for schools, not for millionaire tax cuts.”

ACORN Schools

1) ACORN organizers and leaders relate to “ACORN schools” from three distinct, though not necessarily exclusive, proprietary perspectives:

- The school as both a *local target* and a place where policies that are decided at a *district, city, and state* level take their toll on the children in ACORN neighborhoods and, by extension, ACORN’s low-income constituency.

The local public school is the provider of essential neighborhood services and frequently the most serious piece of publicly owned capital and underutilized space in the community. At this most general level, ACORN schools are those that serve the

communities represented by ACORN. Chicago ACORN, for example, monitors data on the teaching resources available in 68 elementary schools in its neighborhoods compared to schools in better-off areas. Members use such comparisons to push for district-wide reforms that improve all schools serving low-income children.

- The local school as a potential *ally*.

Working on quality of school life issues that do not threaten the principal or teachers (e.g., crossing guards) or on district or state level policy issues that bring resources into the schools can set the stage for working with specific schools around quality of instruction concerns. Albuquerque ACORN fought proposals that might turn over specific schools in ACORN neighborhoods to Edison, and San Jose members in Alum Rock organized to win new textbooks in the two or three schools their children attend. Campaigns like these can provide the necessary opening for local ACORN groups to work with individual schools to develop policies and program components that implement the elements of an ideal “ACORN school” even though ACORN as an organization has no structural relationship with the school.

- A *liberated zone* in which parents have a significant say over the educational program and culture of the school.

ACORN schools in the sense of a facility providing public education to local children that is more explicitly controlled or influenced by ACORN exist or have existed in two formats. Some early experiments were charter schools that had a level of legal or corporate independence from the local school district. This level of operational autonomy has some political appeal to a community group. The significant decrease in bureaucratic control, however, comes with a significant decrease in bureaucratic support from the district. On more than one occasion, head organizers in local offices found themselves filling in as school administrators when principals quit or were fired by the charter school board or negotiating bond issues to finance school construction.

An analysis by senior staff of the ACORN experience with charter schools in three states concluded that the benefits this form of community control might offer do not justify its liabilities in terms of financial and staff resources or organizational credibility. There are, however, other formats that can also give parents and students a say in how their schools are run. ACORN leaders have had some success in negotiating for community schools that, while still officially under the jurisdiction of their local districts, provide a strong and explicit role for parents and the community that is recognized in a written memorandum of understanding with the school officials or a publicly acknowledged commitment from local elected officials. New York ACORN is, for instance, working to translate commitments from the Board of Education (now the City Education Department) into three community high schools that focus on themes of social justice and grassroots organizing.

2) Whether the ACORN school is a target, an ally, or an extension of the local ACORN organization, local definitions of what constitutes the content of an ACORN school tend to agree on political elements but vary on educational specifics.

Written statements of what makes an “ACORN school” used in leadership development settings across the Association are frequently the lineal descendents of lists created by Brooklyn ACORN members in the mid nineties during the design process for ACORN Community High School. This process was an extended leadership development exercise that drew on effective schools and small schools models (Edmonds, 1979, 1986; Comer, 1993). The latest version represents an evolution based on ACORN’s experience of being directly involved with three ACORN high schools over the past six years. The original version, which we ran across in Oakland, is still in circulation.

During interviews and events that we observed, the question of “What is an ACORN school?” was a recurring topic. In Baltimore, the answer is simply, “the schools we work with.” In San Jose: “I don’t know that we know yet: Certified teachers, small classrooms, after school, proven math and literacy programs that are coordinated across the district.” From New Mexico: “We are currently having that conversation with the membership, no consensus yet. Quality teacher attraction and retention programs. Some sort of parent input structure in the school...a role for ACORN organizing parents.” The same organizer also mentioned variations on bilingual issues. Another organizer from Phoenix suggested that an ACORN school would be, “Basically, the same as we have talked about in Colorado [at the Estes Park colloquium]. [It would have] parent involvement, smaller class sizes...bilingual education...more reading programs and more standardized programs in district.”

Speaking from the organization’s experience in several cities in California, one Los Angeles-based organizer defines an ACORN school as one,

...where the leadership of the school is shared between the teacher, residents, and community, [where] there is local control over the direction of the school...classroom size is small...teaching method is participatory...school serves basically low-income students.

But in Oakland, where ACORN members supervised construction that transformed a vacant lot being used to store building material into a new school for which they had fought and won, what constitutes an ACORN school is no longer an abstract question. According to an organizer who inherited the implementation phase of the victory, “Being a community school, the members wanted to hire the staff and did.” After a first-year misstep, they installed a new, dynamic principal who focuses on instruction and asserts that, “Here we do not work on a deficit model.” She feels that the school is “unique” for its interface with the community.

The school, now in its third year, and Oakland ACORN recently hosted a large leadership development event that was a first for Bay Area/Sacramento members from four cities. At the meeting, which unfolded primarily in Spanish with simultaneous translation provided over headsets for English speakers, parents stressed the need ACORN schools to emphasize parent involvement; integration of families, students, and schools; communication between school and family as well as the need for qualified teachers. Interestingly, no one raised content areas such as literacy, math, or English.

3) The range of local approaches to schools organizing notwithstanding, the Association leadership has in the last six months begun to develop consensus around a number of policy positions that will inform ACORN organizing around the country.

A number of factors have contributed to this internal evolution. These include the crystallization of lessons learned from high profile schools campaigns such as those in Chicago (teacher quality), New York (equity and budget fights), and Philadelphia (privatization); the simultaneous challenge and opportunity of the federal No Child Left Behind Act; and the organization's Hewlett-sponsored internal dialog around education reform organizing.

During this period, the Association has moved from having a largely conceptual education platform rooted in the organization's core principles to a more specific set of policy proposals that can be promoted by local ACORN organizations. While this shared list is still a work in progress, its center of gravity is instructional quality as measured by indicators that are intuitively obvious to parents: teacher experience, certification and degrees, professional development, and mentoring for newer teachers.

4) Arguably ACORN schools, in the sense of ones that local ACORN organizations "own" officially or politically, contribute to the Association's evolving legitimacy as a stakeholder in the *national* education reform debates. As a local education reform strategy, however, ACORN schools have been a high casualty experiment: five states, nine schools (three charters), four left standing (no charters).

This category of ACORN schools – specific schools, with or without charters, that have been newly constructed physically or totally restructured administratively and then designed and planned with high levels of member participation – represent the ultimate attempt to use power to ensure educational quality for the low-income children from individual ACORN neighborhoods. These infrequent but intense experiences date from 1992.

We spoke with organizers who are knowledgeable about all four surviving schools and the five that are history (three terminated relationships, one closure, one restructuring). Every respondent mentioned the severe opportunity costs, political tradeoffs, or drain on staff and financial resources. Almost every school had some sort of negative experience or conflict with or over a principal. Interviews for this study revealed a very low level of awareness of the critical importance of an effective educational leader – a principal or teacher director – to the success of an ACORN or any other kind of school. (Educational Research Service, 2000) One organizer did strongly stress the reality that urban public school systems place so many demands on principals and, on a practical level, support them so poorly, that those systems render moot any accountability on the part of a principal to the community.

The Jersey City charter school "was an immense drain on resources," particularly on the head organizer's time, because she could not assign the phase out of the school to a less experienced organizer. The St. Paul charter school and Oakland community school similarly taxed their sponsoring local ACORN affiliates.

5) Some senior staff and even outside observers have positive things to say about the ACORN schools, living and deceased.

During the Estes Park discussion, a very senior staff member argued strongly for the necessity of maintaining half dozen laboratory high schools nationally. Underlying this position is an assumption that community controlled schools provide the membership and constituency with examples of what is possible when they organize and set a standard for what the rest of the schools in a district could and should be. As someone on the national staff summarizes:

We shouldn't be running charters, but we should have some places where our heavy involvement shows the reality of the reforms we are pushing.

Elementary in Oakland, for example, has three parent groups that meet weekly. Enrollment is small enough that principal and faculty can shape their curricula selection and staffing to meet the specialized needs of a student body that contains many English Language Learners and non-Hispanic foster children. By adding a music teacher to the faculty, the principal has been able to free up classroom teachers for regular half-day grade level planning sessions (Cousins, J. B., et al., 1992).

Moreover, the dividends from actually winning a community-controlled school can be disproportionately large relative to the actual size or duration of the victory and the costs of implementing it. For example, the ACORN High Schools in Brooklyn and Upper Manhattan were implemented and are maintained at a huge cost of internal resources and local political problems. The political context of these schools, however, is largely defined by two historical factors that gave the organization a legitimacy within the public school bureaucracy that has survived multiple campaigns against various Board of Education policies as well as regime changes of three or four chancellors. The first was the massive accountability session in 1993 that cemented the political commitment for those schools. The second was ACORN's subsequent demonstrated ability to manage the physical and programmatic launch of these schools.

A veteran of the early stage of the nation's first dual-language Hmong-English charter in St. Paul concludes that ACORN "lab schools" force parents to grapple with issues of content and to defend the original mission that embodied their preferences on content.

New York ACORN participated in the local Annenberg-funded consortium, New York Network for School Renewal (NYNSR). From 1995-96 through the 1999-2000 school year, reading and math scores for the NYNSR high schools, which included the early ACORN high schools, improved more compared to both citywide averages and to a matched cohort of schools with similar demographics and disadvantages. Moreover, the Annenberg Institute has documented the cost effectiveness of key elements of the NYNSR approach to community schools, including smaller enrollments, truly

collaborative parent-school partnerships, administrative transparency, and collaboration between and among teachers and administrators in neighboring public schools. Relative to the comparison cohort, these schools have a lower cost per four-year graduate. The Annenberg evaluators also anticipate a higher seven-year graduation rate when data for that indicator become available (Lockwood, Fruchter, et al., 2001).

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Construct an internal support structure for an association network of staff and leaders working on education reform issues.

The work of a number of ACORN affiliates has begun to generate a store of best practice for schools organizing and education reform. Senior organizers have begun to analyze the lessons from the extensive but varied results of the organization's years of work with school-based issues, community controlled and charter schools, and, increasingly, education reform efforts. Nationally, ACORN has built an extensive, probably underutilized, external collection of allies and resources that are willing share political agenda and expertise with the organization. What is missing to lever the organization to a next stage of local and national impact in the struggle for high quality public education for low-income children is an infrastructure to disseminate best practice, provide or coordinate technical support and funding assistance to local school-related organizing efforts, and insert the perspective and influence the membership into national education reform policy debates.

The degree to which ACORN organizers acknowledge the long term nature of the school reform fights or the likelihood that entire decision making and resource allocating structures at multiple levels of government be overhauled still varies. Historically and institutionally, however, ACORN has repeatedly displayed an ability to master and even brand complex issues by creating internal systems that combine a national perspective, knowledge base, technical assistance capability, and delivery systems for all three that share these assets among the organization's far-flung offices. The ACORN Housing Corporation provides mortgage counseling, brokers mortgages, develops affordable housing, and staffs out ACORN's national leadership in negotiations with federal regulatory authorities and major money center banks. The Living Wage Resource Center has provided back up for scores of local living wage campaigns conducted by ACORN-led coalitions and labor allies. The relatively new Financial Justice Center is an outgrowth of the demands of ACORN's highly successful campaigns against predatory lending.

An Education Reform Organizing Center would perform two major functions. First, it would centralize a small group of full time staff who could provide and link local affiliates with research, policy and data analysis, and education campaign expertise. EROC staff would also function as liaison to and occasionally convener and coordinator of national education reform debates and coalitions and monitor of policy debates and proposals in Congress and the Department of Education. Second, the Education Reform Organizing Center would establish and maintain an internal ACORN education reform network of staff and leadership who are working on school and education reform issues. This network would support internal discussions and training on national education policy, disseminate information about local campaigns and emerging best practice, disseminate action research and studies from local campaigns, and, as appropriate, coordinate regional or national actions to advance ACORN's school reform agenda. An in-house education reform network would employ newsletters, briefings, and

workshops but also tech-savvy mechanisms like listservs, phone conferences, on-line publication and distribution, sections of the ACORN website reserved for members of the network, etc.

2) Develop, refine, and implement a cohesive model of education reform organizing with an aim of bringing all ACORN education organizing up to a level where the priority, if not necessarily exclusive, focus is on issues that have a positive impact on educational outcomes.

ACORN has extensive experience in pioneering clear models for building the organization, mounting national campaigns on complex issues, and implementing victories from those campaigns that would have overwhelmed an organization that was unable to devise such sophisticated tools. ACORN has grown a multi-state organization with hundreds of neighborhood groups by applying an organizing model that originally drew heavily on tactics of the National Welfare Rights Organization supplemented with features borrowed from more obscure corners of organizing history such as the North Dakota Non-Partisan League. Because that model generally combines starting a new ACORN chapter, training a new organizer, training a trainer, and recruiting and cultivating new community leaders, ACORN was able to expand rapidly while maintaining fairly standardized expectations and transmitting a common organizational culture.

At the campaign level, ACORN won billions in affordable mortgages and housing development funds for traditionally redlined communities by acquiring an expertise in analyzing and using the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) lending data in coordinated local campaigns that forced national negotiations with lenders like Citicorp. Equally important was the creation of replicable administrative mechanisms (e.g., a loan counseling model, bank fairs) that ensured that low-income families took advantage of the mortgages and that affordable housing was developed.

The results of our study suggest that ACORN now has experience, best practice, and perspective that could be integrated into an education reform model. An education reform model could heighten the effectiveness of schools-related organizing at the local affiliate level and position ACORN to take up a more active part in the national arena where decisions are debated and made about increasingly important policies that affect public schools serving low-income children.

ACORN Education Reform Organizing: Evolution of a Model concludes with a draft model that attempts to identify and discuss the dimensions of ACORN's approach to education issues that in our judgement combine to promote organizing that addresses the systemic reforms necessary to win high quality instruction for all public school students.

A PRELIMINARY MODEL TO UNIFY ACORN'S EDUCATION ORGANIZING

The demand for fundamental improvement of public schools differs substantially from many issues addressed by community organizing in at least three important ways. On a tactical level, the fight to improve the quality of public education takes place along a much longer time line than the classic six-week or even six-month issue campaign. On a strategic level, school improvement does not lend itself to the quick fix; it requires system – and, frequently, cultural -- change that generally extends far up the policy stream from the neighborhood school where the problem swamps our low-income students. Finally, given the redistribution of resources and power implied in improving public schools in urban center neighborhoods, changing those schools may require parents, students, and their allies to confront explicitly the overlapping realities of racism and poverty that are the foundation of how educational resources are distributed.

There is wide variation in the perspective, scope, scale, and strategies defining how local ACORN groups across the country approach school-related issues. Our inquiry into ACORN and its schools and education reform organizing suggests that resources (primarily staff and staff and leadership support) and, to a lesser extent, local context (allies and other stakeholders, base and membership, other issue priorities, legitimacy, and political capital) shape how ACORN works with these issues in various places.

That said, the cumulative experience of ACORN in this area is very wide and, in a handful of places, also quite deep. Drawing on this experience and the sometimes conflicting viewpoints of the organizers with the most experience in school-related organizing, we have tentatively identified the elements of an organizing model specifically oriented to winning substantive improvements in the educational outcomes of public schools in ACORN communities.

An ACORN Education Organizing Model should embody two key characteristics: It should address issues directly related the quality of education in public schools, and it should work within ACORN’s wide variation of local organizational maturity and staff capacity. In addition, it should contribute to the power building goals of the organization, promote membership and constituency participation and commitment, and grow and utilize indigenous leadership. The following model, which satisfies these criteria in many respects, is assembled from instances of best practice of education organizing across the organization. Although few, if any, ACORN operations could claim all these elements, all these elements exist at least implicitly in one or more of the 51 ACORN cities. The challenge for ACORN is to ensure that each local office has the resources and capacity to implement such a model.

This section will discuss the following components of the proposed ACORN Education Reform Model:

- A focus on improving educational outcomes
- Priority for issues that combine accountability and instructional quality or learning outcomes

ACORN EDUCATION REFORM ORGANIZING.....

- A policy framework to guide local education strategy
- Policy analysis and action research
- District, city, and state scope
- Base centered in existing ACORN membership
- Benchmarks
- Education Committee

A focus on improving educational outcomes: ACORN experience suggests that the “stop sign” issues of neighborhood school organizing – the broken toilets, the pushers on the playground, the need for a crossing guard or speed bumps – are not arranged along a natural continuum with issues that address what happens in the classroom. These quality of school life issues may concern local residents, may grow the local group, and may even help build a list of people who are generally interested in schools. But, other than providing visible symbols of disinvestment of public officials from our schools, they do not logically move parents or school administrators to issues of quality of education. It may be true that a school that cannot maintain its restrooms will not teach children to read. On the other hand, students in a school with shiny, working plumbing will not necessarily have great reading scores. If the priority of neighborhood residents is ensuring the academic success of their local schools, they need to understand, then home in on the policies and programs that have an impact on academic success.

Priority for issues that combine accountability and instructional quality or learning outcomes: For reasons related to the traditional theory and practice of community organizing, many ACORN affiliates continue to expend time, energy, and social and political capital in two other spheres of school-related issues that do not automatically connect to the aspirations of low-income parents for better schools for their children.

We have mentioned problems related to the security and physical conditions at a school that engage parental concern for the safety and dignity but not necessarily for the academic progress of their children. Parents and organizers alike frequently have difficulty with the paradigm shift from the concrete problem of asbestos or water fountains to the more mysterious questions of instructional quality and educational outcomes. This difficulty is rooted in realities of class, culture, and the dense jargon in which educational practice is frequently couched. One Oakland parent captured the problem succinctly (in Spanish): “Many parents from Mexico only have five or six years of education. It’s hard to know what makes a good teacher.” Nor do parents have to be from Mexico to find the culture of many public schools intimidating (Secret Apartheid, 1996).

ACORN defines its mission as building power for low- and moderate-income families. This expansive mandate leaves organizers particularly vulnerable to the imperatives of a second sphere of issues encompassing governance and other process concerns; these include school leadership teams, privatization, community control, school board elections, discipline policy, access to information, and budgets. While theoretically these “issues” might be a stage of an organization’s strategic march toward influencing learning outcomes, as in the case of Albuquerque described above, for many local groups, they become ends in themselves. The local calculus of turf-based politics often assigns credit (legitimacy, respect, access) for the successful exercise of organizational muscle required to dominate or even gain a toehold in governance structures or the forums where issues of control (e.g., privatization) are debated. As we discussed in the findings on becoming a player or stakeholder in the local school reform environment, community groups can engage in these struggles for power without a clear answer to the question “Power for what?” When they win, they discover that their new chips cannot be cashed in for the change they wanted.

Money issues can also become divorced from questions of actual educational quality. Like shiny bathrooms, a generous budget may not ensure quality instruction. However, budget cuts will often threaten what little classroom level change teachers, principals, and community may have constructed together. Recently, ACORN groups have had to take up budget fights, process issues though they may be. ACORN members in at least five cities -- Boston, New York City, Oakland, San Diego, and Pittsburgh – have launched local anti-cut campaigns; New York City and Pittsburgh have taken leads in pursuing their budget fights to the state level. But, such fights are intrinsically defensive and do little to move new reform initiatives.

After a certain amount of trial and error, some ACORN affiliates have moved beyond the school-specific grievances and governance (including budget) questions to grapple with the educational outcomes of schools serving low-income children. This approach represents an evolution in the sophistication of the organization’s school-related organizing and, simultaneously, a strategic streamlining of the organizing process. There are relatively few broad factors with demonstrable impact on student outcomes that are within the control of the public schools and local, state, and federal governments that support them. Many, though not all, relate to previously cited issues of quality of instruction (or teaching quality): teacher qualifications (training and experience), professional development and teacher support, and instructional leadership (i.e., qualified principals) as well as class size (Finn, Achilles; 1999), attendance (Romer, 1993), and textbooks (Lopez-Acevedo, 1999).

These issue areas have several advantages:

- Their importance and connection to quality education are intuitive to parents and community leaders.
- Most of the factors are susceptible to political will at both the policy and administrative levels.

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- Many, though not all, of these factors lend themselves to relatively straightforward measurement, and, therefore, monitoring and accountability; e.g., years of experience, possession of subject area license, absentee rates.
- These indicators permit cross-school and cross-district comparisons to substantiate parent claims around inequities in the distribution of educational resources.
- The value of these inputs or relevance of indicators is research-based and, therefore, allows parents to invoke outside expertise to bolster their demands.

Although an indicators approach enables rank and file members to begin organizing around demands that can make a concrete difference in their children's schools, some core concerns of school reform (e.g., ongoing, strategically planned staff development and retention) embody important qualitative dimensions. ACORN staff members and leaders have, therefore, begun to grapple with the question of how to frame demands, negotiate necessary policy change, and monitor – and in some cases supervise -- the implementation of sophisticated program elements like targeted induction and orientation activities for new teachers in high turnover, high vacancy schools. Last summer (August 2002), for example, Chicago ACORN joined with the North Lawndale Learning Community and the Steans Family Foundation to plan and run a four-day pre-service summer institute to provide 37 new teachers the opportunity to become familiar with the community, parents, classroom management skills, and each other. This summer's program will include home visits for the new teachers.

Moreover, this hands-on creativity has fueled a discussion among Chicago leaders and staff of a possible "grow your own" program that would combine recruiting and educational assistance mechanisms to put local high school graduates on a career track to teaching in local schools.

The need for understanding the qualitative aspects of school reform notwithstanding, initial organizing around the inequitable distribution of recognized, readily understood, measurable education inputs can mobilize concerned parents and their allies, raise the local organization's profile, and establish momentum for its education reform organizing.

A policy framework to guide local education strategy: The list of research-supported, outcome-related educational resources is not exhaustive. It is, however, of the correct order of magnitude (i.e., relatively short) and embodies a core of research-supported *content* that should be considered in any strategic approach to improving local public education. Developing a local short list of long-term priority areas simplifies leadership and staff development efforts. By being able to hold officials and administrators accountable for an educational program that addresses those areas, the organization can avoid being wedded to mechanistic or reductionist demands such as specific reading programs or debatable dollar amounts or, at minimum, to make more nuanced judgements about these or similar second order policy alternatives.

Since at least some of these areas might be improved simultaneously (e.g., attendance and professional development), the local policy framework is more of a mosaic to be viewed holistically or a puzzle to be gradually assembled than a sequence of demands. Local circumstances (e.g., the organization's relationship with the teacher's union) will shape when and how some demands are made. But, with a consensus around such a framework and a thorough understanding of its content, an organization can better respond to opportunities - or, crises - in a prepared and measured manner. Leadership and staff are more readily able to distinguish the organization's long-term *education* agenda from shorter-term, *school-related* fights that inevitably arise; for example, Brooklyn ACORN's recent successful, youth-led campaign to reverse budget cuts that would have eliminated drug counselors in local high schools. A policy framework not only disciplines district and state level demands but also adds heft to organizing that will inevitably occur in specific ACORN neighborhoods around individual problematic schools.

Policy analysis and action research: In a more egalitarian society, the experience of students and their parents in the public schools would suffice to document the failure of a school or district. The enrollment of many urban school systems, however, consists overwhelmingly of the triply powerless: children, of low-income, of color. Several ACORN affiliates have become extremely adept at using data and policy analysis to reinforce the anecdotal evidence presented by the membership.

ACORN affiliates have used imaginative, accessible reports to prime leaders, mobilize members, attract media attention, pressure officials, and provide a groundwork for legal action. By providing school-by-school or district level comparisons, these studies incorporate additional under performing schools into the public's understanding of the issue and raise the stakes for officials who attempt to ignore the problem.

New York ACORN exposed race skewed tracking that begins with kindergarten enrollment. Oakland and Philadelphia ACORN spotlighted the distribution of teacher vacancies and substitutes that disproportionately affects schools in low-income neighborhoods of color. *Parents Left Behind*, a recently released national study uses a simple but powerful analysis of state by state data to demonstrate how urban school systems have been unable or unwilling to implement the expanded academic and compensatory options for low-income students promised by the Federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Some offices like Chicago ACORN have in-house capacity for research and analysis. Others, like New York, have formed working relationships with research centers such as the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy and on occasion have been willing to employ carefully selected research capacity on a consulting basis for specific projects.

Organization wide, however, most offices lack in-house or local access to policy advocacy resources. National ACORN staff provides some policy support and has also formed a working partnership with the National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham. According to one head organizer who has cultivated both local and national

resources, “It helps enormously that we have access to information nationally that puts us out first and access to local data that makes us unique.” But at present, the semiformal support within the organization specifically for education organizing consists of ACORN’s national research director in Dallas, occasional phone access to the Chicago head organizer, and the NCSC, which is funded to work with just a handful of ACORN affiliates per year.

Scope: Issue campaigns target one or more levels of decision makers who can make or enforce the policy demand the organization is pushing. Teachers have virtually no control over supplies, textbooks, class size, and, in many cases, curricula. Principals in inner city schools have little or no control over budget, professional development resources, class schedules, whom they can hire, and in some cases, when the school is open or closed and whether or not the toilets work. ACORN organizers have gradually learned that the school level educators make poor targets but sometimes useful allies. To paraphrase one senior organizer, we find that solutions to our problems are all downtown; i.e., with the superintendent or the school board. Increasingly in big cities like Baltimore, New York, Oakland, or Philadelphia, educational campaigns may also need to go after the mayors and occasionally even governors who control budgets or have taken over local school boards. With members in eight cities, California ACORN is now positioned to facilitate the large-scale involvement of low-income parents in the state’s master plan for public education.

Base: A district scope has implications for who will participate in ACORN schools campaigns. With some exceptions, head organizers appear to be arriving at a consensus that the core of a schools campaign is the same as any ACORN initiative: the active members. A particular campaign may attract new members but need not wait for them. (This notion probably applies to education reform campaigns more than quality of [school] life issues.) The operating assumption that most real change occurs in bureaucracies or other decision-making structures above the school level permits, even encourages, an organization to push positions with broad participation from several schools or even neighborhoods.

Organizers experienced in both varieties of schools issues – reform and localized safety, maintenance, and dignity questions – point out that success with this approach to mobilization can backfire when capturing some level of district level influence opens up previously unavailable negotiations at schools where there are ACORN parent members but not necessarily strong leaders. In addition, a minimum level of per school parent involvement is necessary to maintain an organizational presence and to monitor the delivery of promised educational program elements. These two points are, however, caveats, not contradictions, to the notion that local ACORN affiliates can win important policy changes that have a positive impact on local schools without massive turnout from any given school.

ACORN leaders and staff have also learned that, while basic community organizing techniques can, if necessary, run circles around the officially sanctioned parent leadership in many urban schools, organizing within the parent association, parent-

teacher organization, or Title I framework does not lead to broader policy changes in the school, let alone beyond it. At best, these organizations are under-resourced and hold little real power beyond a formal right to check-off on school planning or budget documents they do not draft and are given no time or training to understand. At worst, they are co-opted by school administrators who use them as human shields against substantive parent involvement in monitoring and evaluating the school's educational plan.

Benchmarks: Sustaining membership, media, and public interest in the age of the limited attention span is difficult. For example, teacher quality is a central but long haul issue in school improvement. A campaign to ensure that every classroom has a licensed, content area certified, permanently assigned teacher might, therefore, begin by fighting for regular coverage by instructional personnel for every classroom (i.e., no security guards watching the class and no classes watching cartoons in the cafeteria) and move on to eliminating long term substitutes in low-income schools. Then, the next school year, the demand might be for a licensed, permanent teacher in every regular classroom and the year after for subject- or specialty-certified teachers in all classrooms, including those for special education and English Language Learners. Data baselines also provide benchmarks as in the case of Chicago ACORN where teacher qualification campaigns began with documenting the number of vacancies and uncertified teacher in several dozen targeted schools in ACORN neighborhoods.

Education Committee: Systems change, particularly in larger school districts, may require planning and coordination across neighborhoods. A citywide education committee allows interested members to educate themselves on the issues, produce a vision of what their kids schools should be, identify opportunities for policy changes that move schools toward that vision, and mobilize their neighbors to pressure district administrators and the elected officials ultimately responsible for them. Education committees also provide another forum in which new leaders can develop and can serve as repositories of institutional memory. The requirements of internal accountability suggest that education committees have some explicit linkage with the local Executive Board.

APPENDIX

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ELEMENTS OF AN ACORN® SCHOOL

1. Parental participation
 - Parents should be welcome in the school at any time
 - Parents should have real input into principal and teacher hiring as well as the school budget and programs.
 - Activities for parents should be at convenient times
 - There should be someone at the school who speaks the language of the parents
2. There should be a highly qualified teacher in every classroom.
 - Highly qualified is defined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001
3. There should be a master teacher program to mentor other teachers
 - There should be one full time master teacher/mentor for every 12 teachers.
 - Classroom evaluation and feedback will be part of this program
4. There should be a highly qualified principal at the school.
5. Small class sizes
 - For grades K to 3 this should be 20 or less.
 - For all other grades this should be 25 or less.
6. Longer school day and/or after school programs
 - The school day should be longer than the “normal” 3 pm to provide adequate time for instruction.
 - ACORN schools should have an after school program which moves students towards academic excellence and which is available to all students.
7. Research based reading program
 - All ACORN schools should implement a research based reading program such as Success for All.

ACORN® People's Platform (“Education” section)

Education

Public schools are most effective in educating students when they are run democratically by the community, when they are adequately funded, and when they serve the community's interest.

I. Make parents an integral part of local schools

- Individual elementary and high schools should be controlled by local school councils, consisting of members elected separately by parents, community, residents, teachers, staff, and students, with the principal automatically a non-voting member.
- The local school councils should have influence over curricula, and be empowered to approve or disapprove
 - renewal of the principals' contract;
 - non-personnel budget items.

II. Equalize funding

- Funding for all schools should be set so schools in affluent areas do not receive more funding than schools in low- and moderate-income areas.
- Extra funding should be available for schools with high proportions of students with special needs.
- Funding for schools should be adequate to provide support or services children are unable to receive at home.
- Funding should be for schools, not individuals, and no federal money should be used for vouchers or a voucher system.

III. School curricula should meet students' needs

- School curricula should stress basic skills.
- Schools should acknowledge the cultural and language backgrounds of their students by including courses that study those backgrounds in core curricula.

IV. The school should be part of the community

- School should be available for community needs, like adult education.
- Local business communities should be encouraged to be involved in schools.
- High school students should receive job training that is linked to specific employment upon graduation.

**National Alliance on the American High School
Site Visit to ACORN Chicago at Robeson High School
October 24, 2002**

School Address: Robeson High School
6835 South Normal
Phone: (773) 535-3800
Guide/Contact: Madeline Talbott, Head Organizer, ACORN Chicago

Itinerary:

11:15 Arrive at Robeson High School

11:30 Introductions and welcome
James Breashears, Principal

- Presentation on Teacher Quality Campaign of Chicago
ACORN, Madeline Talbott,
Community members and Educators

12:30 Lunch

- Discussion on Effective Teaching
James Breashears

1:15 Visit classrooms

2:00 Tour of ACORN neighborhoods (Englewood, Little Village, Lawndale)

3:30 Return to Loop to debrief

ACORN Schools Campaign Planning Meeting
Grover Cleveland School
October 21, 2002
Chair: Willie Mae O'Neal

1. **Opening prayer:** *Pastor Keslock Mitchell, Mattapan*
2. **Introductions:** *Juanita Mumford, Mattapan*
3. **What is ACORN:** *Phyllis Evans, Dorchester*
4. **Report on Board of Education meeting:** *Angie Wilkerson, Dorchester*
5. **BPON Strategy Team report:** *Edna Thompson, Dorchester*
6. **Overview of Title I:** *Edna Thompson*
7. **Demands/Next Steps:** *Angie Wilkerson*

Are we getting the runaround from Superintendent Payzant?
(See green sheet)

Have any parents received any notices about Title I?

If a school is in need of improvement for two years parents should be notified that they can transfer to a different school. If the school is in need of improvement for three years parents can request supplemental services.

Timeline for Supplemental Services

Action on the School committee on November 6th.

Should we demand that the School 'committee force the BPS to start notifying parents?

8. Next Planning Meeting: *Gladys Alexander, Hyde Park*
When should we have this?

Membership: *Willie Mae O'Neal, Dorchester*

9. **Announcements:** *Bettye Ward, Dorchester*
GOTV – Get our the Vote campaign see flyer
ACORN T-Shirts for sale. See Owen for details.

10. **Closing Prayer:** *Pastor Keslock Mitchell*

California Leadership Training
November 23, 2002
Woodland School

Volunteer Chair: Fannie Brown, Oakland ACORN

- I. Welcome and Introductions (10min)**
- II. ACORN'S Education Work (20min)** **Fannie Brown**
 - A. ACORN'S Campaign for Woodland
 - B. San Jose Wins **Yvonne Vasquez**
- III. What's an ACORN School? (30min)** **John Beam**
- IV. The Reality of Our Schools (45min)** **Miguel Medoza**
 - A. Slide Show ACORN Staff
 - B. Discussion
- V. BREAK (20min)**
- VI. The Role of the State (20min)** **Noah Delissovoy**
 - A. State Funding UCLA Institute for Democracy Education and Access
 - B. This Year's Opportunities
 - a. High School Exit Exam
 - b. Master Plan
 - c. William Law Suit
 - d. No Child Left Behind
- VII. ACTION Plans! (20min)** **Chris Jones**
 - A. Fighting Locally to Build Statewide Power
- VIII. Wrap-Up – Next Training...(5min)**

total 170 minutes – 2 hours and some minutes