

*Oakland Community Organizations has engaged in parent organizing for education reform for over ten years. This article details OCO's strategies, challenges, and accomplishments.*

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## Faith-based organizing for youth: One organization's district campaign for small schools policy

*Ron Snyder*

IN 1996 OAKLAND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS (OCO) initiated an education reform campaign to transform the Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, California, so that every family would have a choice for a quality school.<sup>1</sup> We envisioned that children would be known by their names and would have the support of an adult community to develop to their fullest potential, preparing them for college, career, and citizenship. Since then, OCO leaders have created a grassroots movement responsible for the creation of forty new small schools and ten small charters across Oakland, new school facilities in which to house them, stronger parent engagement, and better outcomes for children. This article describes OCO's organizing and advocacy work to achieve these results and examines the role of parent self-interest, political positioning, and the leverage, alliances, and action that led to successful advocacy.

Leaders of OCO began their work on education reform through hundreds of one-to-one conversations to learn the concerns of

parents, teachers, and community residents. They heard frustration and anger about unsafe, dirty, overcrowded, and underperforming schools. Despite Oakland's population growth, the school district had failed to build a new school in thirty years. Schools originally built for six hundred to seven hundred students were serving a thousand to as many as fourteen hundred. Oakland schools ranked among the lowest in the state, and many students were dropping out. Children of color and children living in low-income communities carried the brunt of this grave injustice. Parents and community leaders knew they needed something better for their children.

To date, thousands of parents, along with hundreds of teachers, have undertaken the hard work necessary to improve educational opportunities for Oakland's lowest-achieving students. Oakland Community Organizations is making a place for parents in the education of their children and rekindling hope in teachers and administrators. Over the past year, its leaders have worked in thirty-one small schools and charter schools to bring about meaningful and sustainable parent engagement and improved student outcomes through the small schools movement.

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### *Understanding parent organizing in an urban context*

Ordinary people understand the source of parental advocacy to be love. From the beginning to the end, most parents act out of their deep love for their child. For OCO, the key to effective organizing and advocacy for youth is to agitate the individual and collective response to the question, "Whom do you love?" We call this self-interest. As we OCO leaders sort through our own motivations and those of others and make judgments about tactics to achieve our ends, we have left ourselves open to be judged by our faithfulness to our values through this same question: "Whom do you love?"

Although we have involved large numbers of young people in education reform, OCO primarily develops adult leaders. Therefore, education organizing is from the perspective of adult advocacy on behalf of children. There are many forms of educational

advocacy: political organizing, volunteer work, school site governance, student advocacy, and academic support. In our observation, parents with advantage or privilege (those who are white or affluent, or both) naturally feel entitled to operate at every level. Most parents with less formal education, those without English as their primary language, or immigrants or poor parents of color do not easily move into any of these arenas of advocacy. Stories about successful advocacy in low-income communities of color tend to focus on the individual hero: the principal who transforms the inner-city school, a teacher who gets all of his or her students to pass the Advance Placement class, or the exceptional student who overcomes immense odds to become successful. Oakland Community Organizations goes beyond examples of individual success by developing leaders from communities that do not have easy access to power and supporting them while they learn the skills and gain the confidence to act successfully on behalf of their children, individually and collectively.

Oakland Community Organizations increases parents' ability to advocate at every level, focusing primarily on the political arena. Using the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO) National Network method, we empower individuals through a collective faith-based model of organizing that emphasizes shared principles and a process for leadership development and is grounded in local institutions. As people grow in their understanding and ability to lead in the public arena, they also apply their learning in personal, interpersonal, systemic, and institutional settings. The PICO model is built on the principle that power is a product of relationships and that building relationships of trust through face-to-face visits and house meetings allows people to move together. With staff support, leaders use research to document issues and develop solutions for commonly held concerns. Research is followed by large action meetings where commitments to solutions are negotiated with public officials and witnessed by the community, demonstrating power that continues to expand as the process repeats itself over time.

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### ***Organizing context***

Oakland Community Organizations develops effective leaders within the context of the city of Oakland, taking into consideration the city's demographics and political environment. Of Oakland's nearly 400,000 residents, almost 20 percent are foreign born, 15.5 percent are Asian, 21.89 percent are Hispanic/Latino of any race, 36 percent are African American, 31 percent are white, and 12 percent are other, leaving no racial or ethnic majority. Only 35 percent of Oakland's residents are home owners, and the poverty rate is nearly 20 percent. Thirty-one thousand of the school district's 46,000 students qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch in 2006.

OCO leaders are from congregations and schools located in Oakland's low-income neighborhoods. Oakland's politics are liberal to left by most definitions. The need for education reform is well documented in Oakland and across the rest of California. As OCO leaders push the Oakland education reform effort, we know that economic and social conditions need to be considered if our work is to have lasting impact. We continually refine our organizing strategy to address both immediate and long-term needs by the many Oakland families and students who have poor educational options.

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### ***Organizing for better education in Oakland***

After successful OCO campaigns resulting in programmatic improvements including class-size reduction, after-school programs, and school-to-career academies, OCO staff and leaders were not satisfied with results, so they continued to search for systemic approaches consistent with our organizing model that would get sustainable educational improvement for our children and their families.

### ***Phase I: Planting the seeds for a movement***

Oakland Community Organizations' small schools movement began in 1999 with conversations in people's homes (our model describes these as "one-to-ones") where OCO organizers asked

parents about their children's experiences in school. These conversations quickly moved to groups of mothers and a few fathers gathering in the church hall while their children were in Bible school. Led by parents with the support of an organizer, the conversations, in the words of OCO leader Lillian Lopez, became deeply meaningful: "This is the first honest discussion we had in all my years of being in the PTA or School Site Council. We finally talked about more than dirty bathrooms and playground fights or rubberstamping the principal's budget. We talked about whether our kids can read. I was scared to death that my last son was going to drop out of school like his older brother."

The first transformation in parents' sense of empowerment is internal, but the journey to change conditions cannot be taken alone. The one-to-one conversations and formal training help leaders learn how to develop their understanding, skill, and emotional intelligence to become organizational leaders and individual advocates. After every experience or activity, it is the job of the organizer or a veteran leader to reflect on that experience and draw out self-understanding, social dynamics, and challenges for the next step in the journey.

Tapping into the stories of pain draws people into the discussion. What is necessary to keep and develop leaders is clarity that organizing and leading people will bring about real change. The easiest organizing is about opposing something. Oakland Community Organizations' work is about building something new. Oakland's Jefferson Elementary is a case in point. Reading and research led to the conclusion that overcrowding at the school was a critical cause of many of the problems, from dirty bathrooms to school yard fights and, most important, student failure. Built for eight hundred students, the school now housed twelve hundred. The school ran on a year-round schedule requiring students and teachers to use several days each quarter to pack up and move to a new classroom resulting in the loss of more than thirty days of instruction time. Because one-fourth of the teachers were always on vacation, staff did not know each other and it was impossible to build a cohesive team. Equipped with this evidence and supported by data, parents reached out to teachers and the principal and asked to create a small school

pilot on one corner of the campus. Opposition from the teachers' union and the district defeated this first request. We had love but no leverage. Effective advocacy requires strategic use of political leverage.

Leaders at OCO decided to build momentum through deeper research. To understand more fully the power of the ideas behind small schools, twenty OCO leaders traveled to New York City to District 2 in Harlem to see small schools in action. They concluded that change could not take place one school at a time because pilot projects could be washed away at any moment. We needed to change district policy. When the petition to pilot a small school at Jefferson was turned down a second time, OCO pursued the idea of opening charter schools as a preliminary strategy in developing small, autonomous, parent-engaged schools. Parents quickly organized parent meetings in congregations across East Oakland, tapping into feelings about how their children were doing and sharing information about size and test scores. Two critical factors helped build the leverage needed to get the attention of the school district: the role of faith institutions and a landmark piece of research comparing hills schools (those of the wealthier families in the city) and flatland schools (where most of the low-income children went) regarding size and test scores.

After researching the pros and cons of charter schools, six parent groups worked with charter management groups to write charter applications. A critical factor in moving this forward was the interest of churches in playing a vital role in education reform efforts, building on the long history of advocacy for public education in the African American community. The biggest challenge beyond politics was finding adequate facilities. A number of clergy had existing school facilities and were willing to support parents who wanted better public school options. After several months of parent-led small meetings with school board members and public actions involving thousands of parents, the school board approved the six charter proposals developed by OCO leaders. Ultimately three charter schools opened in this first round.

Approval of these charters gave us important leverage to reengage the school district around opening small schools in the dis-

trict. Oakland's new mayor, Jerry Brown, had just been elected with a huge majority and was a vocal supporter of charter schools. The superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District, Carol Quan, had been fired by the school board, and Brown had his assistant city manager named as interim superintendent. With OCO support, voters had just passed a school facilities bond, part of which would be used to build new schools. The window of opportunity to do something new in Oakland was open. Successful advocacy requires good judgment about political opportunity.

Working with this opportunity, we began a relationship with the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), which added the credential of educational expertise to the community power of OCO. Together we wrote a small schools policy requiring the school district to open ten new small, autonomous schools. We had congregational and parent support but needed teacher allies to overcome anticipated opposition. In the summer of 1999, we reached out to over two hundred teachers in one-to-one conversations to listen to their pain and examine whether their vocational love for children could be recaptured through the idea of small schools. We found support.

That same year, an OCO action at St. Elizabeth Parish involving two thousand parents and leaders gained commitments to a small schools policy and construction of new small school facilities from all major political players in Oakland: Mayor Brown, State Senator Don Perata, City Council President Ignacio de la Fuente, and school board members. That policy was passed in May 2001. Creating new schools was strenuous work, and many parents moved from political advocacy to working with charter companies, interested teachers or principals, and education partners like BayCES to begin the design of the new schools. Countless meetings took place: we designed and found space for new schools and dealt with the logistics of getting the district to follow through on everything from education code numbers to finding desks and textbooks. In fall 2001, five new schools opened.

A critical understanding of organizing is that system change does not easily come from inside the system. Individual advocacy to make existing systems work can be effective from the inside, but system

change requires leverage from the outside. Congregations provided a stable institutional base outside the school system from which to leverage change. In addition, congregations provided powerful language and symbols for the moral high ground of equity for children. Powerful ideas presented in powerful ways by leaders representing the power of an organized community won powerful results.

***Phase II: Partnership as a form of advocacy: Organizing from the inside***

In the landscape of urban school systems, most reform efforts come from the top down by strong superintendents and more recently by mayors who take over school systems. Following the tragic murder of Marcus Foster in 1973, Oakland had several superintendents who each initiated their own programmatic reform. But in 2001, a new superintendent, Dennis Chaconas, was hired who was recognized for both academic and political reasons as an important ally with OCO, which gave us the chance to advocate for systemwide reform. BayCES provided the research and support to help design and support new small schools. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation invested \$17 million in this effort to develop small schools in the shared belief that they are a critical strategy for improving and reforming education. With the confluence of these forces, OCO leaders began to see their organization as not only a political force that originated this effort but perhaps the guardian angel protecting small school reform.

With OUSD and BayCES and with the support of the Gates Foundation and other funders, OCO was able to build the momentum to create another nine new schools over the next two years. Many OCO parents moved their advocacy from the outside political environment to the inside through parent engagement in roles of governance, volunteerism, and academic support in the emerging small schools. OCO provided leadership training and support in schools where principals requested our assistance. From the perspective of an internal partner, we were able to advocate without public action for powerful ideas that promoted equity.

But internal partnerships do not guarantee that all things go smoothly. A consequence of Gates Foundation funding required

OCO to support the strategy to break large, comprehensive high schools into small schools. These conversions did not build on organized constituents' desire for change. Our interest in supporting system reform meant we could not allow this critical strategy to fail, so we invested staff resources into organizing strategies at the high school level. What we found were incredibly difficult environments. Teachers felt disempowered and resistant to change. Parents felt uninvited and unwelcome. Their students did not want them at school, and neither did school site staff. There were also strong racial divisions at parent and student levels that led to battles for power among adults and conflict and violence between students. OCO organizers played a critical role in response to these conditions.

At Castlemont High, for instance, OCO organizers engaged two local pastors to discuss the possibility of addressing their congregations' issues through the small schools' promise of a safer environment and better student outcomes. An alliance was born, and five hundred African American and Latino leaders secured the commitment from the school district administration and principal to transform Castlemont into small schools. The OCO action created the political will and political cover to undertake this reform over the objections of teachers and others who resisted change. Since then, OCO has been involved at Castlemont, coaching principals, teachers, parents, and students in how to build a relational culture at the school.

In this second phase of advocacy, we moved much of our work to inside the system via partnerships at the school site and district levels. Maintaining the partnership with the school district and others while organizing inside schools and the district has been a challenge. Complex questions about leadership, roles, expectations, and accountability in the partnership were not easily navigated in an environment where mission, vision, and leadership were different. Where we were able to focus on common agendas and agree on specific projects, we were successful. Where the district lost focus on the centrality of reform as a community-driven process, we struggled with creative tension. Schools in which principals believed in organizing and parent empowerment became powerful partners with good results for their children, found a guardian angel in OCO, and are

becoming powerful advocates for ongoing systemic change. Partnership grew thin over time in schools with principals who did not incorporate organizing principles in the culture of their school. Despite this complexity, OCO has demonstrated that there can be effective advocacy and organizing from inside schools and the district. However, there must be buy-in and true support from principals at the site level and from the superintendent at the district level. Also, unless OCO maintains the ability to organize externally, leverage for change and accountability will erode over time.

***Phase III: Advocacy in arenas beyond local reach: The power of a model and a network***

As we developed our inside-outside strategies, we thought we were on the road to powerful change. Momentum grew through building new schools around a unified vision that provided parents and students a place at the decision-making table and included them in the redesign of the district administration to support school autonomy and accountability, parent and student empowerment, and choice. Then we ran into a major obstacle: discovery too late that the district budget would be overspent by \$50 million. Efforts to find ways to borrow against other accounts, reduce the offer of a teacher pay raise, or find other measures to address this gap all failed. In 2003 the state ultimately took over OUSD and put in place a state-appointed administrator. Oakland Community Organizations leaders were frightened that five years of reform work would be taken away because of this single act in Sacramento.

Staff and leaders at OCO quickly developed a strategy to sustain small school reform within this context. In the first six months of 2003, they held sixty action meetings where thousands of people focused on the message, “Do what is right for students.” For OCO, that meant tying advocacy for small school reform and its principles to the positive test scores and attendance results for children in the small schools. Emphasizing improved student outcomes increased our leverage. The decision to take over the district had been made, so we knew the target of our efforts had to include specific language in the state takeover legislation that would protect small school reform efforts.

In addition to the sixty local actions, we had several small negotiating meetings and one large action with Senator Perata and the state superintendent of education, Jack O’Connell, seeking to protect small school reform. And after local actions and negotiating meetings with a state senator and the state superintendent of education, the state take-over legislation, SB 63, did incorporate language that supported small school reform.

We also understood that although the legislation encouraged the state administrator to support promising reform efforts like small schools, it did not mandate him to do anything. With the arrival of state-appointed administrator Randolph Ward, we set up a meeting to make the case for small schools—how they were getting better results for students, maintaining better attendance, and keeping more money in the system—as well as offering parent, teacher, and principal testimony that showed they were on the same page as advocates for the children. While noncommittal in detail, Ward delivered the message that he was all about children and that the mandate he had from the state was exactly what small schools were doing: getting better academic results for students and saving money through better attendance.

This set the stage for the district to make the principles of the small school reform effort the central idea for district-wide reform. Our partner from earlier days, BayCES, over time developed a strong working relationship with Ward. Together they raised significant funding to continue small school development and central administration redesign based on principles of small schools. Over the course of the next few years, more than thirteen new schools were designed. The “Expect Success Central Administration Redesign” began to roll out. At the school site level, OCO worked with parents at new small schools as they opened and when we were welcomed by the principal. However, we were not included in the central administration redesign conversations. The inside-outside phase had ended, and we were once again on the outside. Nonetheless, OCO continued to have a profound effect: thirteen more schools opened with strong parent involvement and opportunity for school site advocacy.

It is important to observe a critical element that enabled OCO to generate the power needed not only to protect the small school reform ideas but expand and make them central to the reform of the entire system. This kind of power comes from the use of a common and consistently applied organizing model. The fact that OCO congregation and school leaders used the same PICO model over years allowed them to move with trust in each other and the organization they created. The use of this model also created the relationships needed to call on PICO California Project support. Because of history, reputation, and internal and external relationships, OCO parents and congregations were able to exercise power that sustained the small schools policy through a period when parents alone would not have had access in these more distant arenas of power. Being part of an organizing network in which there were strong relationships, a common organizing model, and shared democratic and faith values elevated OCO's ability to advocate in an arena where alone we would have been powerless.

#### *Phase IV: Threat from afar: No Child Left Behind*

In January 2004, we learned that the administration was proposing a radical and immediate solution to deal with thirteen schools that had reached the point of reconstitution after several years of failure in meeting the benchmarks mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Ten of these failing schools were the overcrowded schools where parents had organized to give birth to the new small schools. Oakland Community Organizations had relationships with many parents in these schools through member congregations or previous school work.

Although it was not clear that NCLB required reconstitution (removal of all staff), the administration decided to start its own charter management organization and change most of the failing schools into charters. Part of the motivation for this appeared to be the additional money that was available from the private sector by pursuing this path. This proposal drew strong ire from the Oakland Education Association (OEA) because these schools would be excluded from their contract. The union wanted OCO to stand up for its teachers and oppose the composition as charters. Legally, changing

a school to a charter required a majority vote of tenured teachers or a majority vote of parents. Oakland Education Association began to organize teachers to oppose; OCO took a different route.

Oakland Community Organizations once again focused on empowering parents with information and choice. We developed a series of training sessions to explain what NCLB was rather than oppose it. We helped parents understand the legislation as a tool to see if performance expectations were different from their own. Universally parents felt that their children should be able to read and do math at the level suggested by NCLB, and we explored together whether reconstitution or formation as charters were the only or best alternatives. We encouraged parents to look at the formation of new small schools as another alternative. We conducted one relatively small action—two hundred people at a local church—and asked Ward to ensure parent voice in the decision-making process and include new small schools as one of the options. Realizing that the power to make the final decision ultimately rested with him, we framed the issue around what was best for children and the need for parents to be part of the decision-making process. He agreed to a process that included a visit to each failing school to hear from parents about their ideas.

Over the next two months, we organized parents to prepare for these meetings and further explored the option of charter formation. Through visits we organized to other small schools, parents discovered that they could be involved in the design of such schools and have a role in their governance, curriculum, and culture. We also encouraged parents to meet with the charter school operators selected by the district to understand their vision for schools. The central idea for these charter organizations was built around tight control of curriculum and scripted work for teachers with the intent to lift low-performing children's test scores. The parents' role was to support the academic work of students and the culture that the principal thought essential to the operation of a school with this focus. Oakland Community Organizations was not opposed and in fact had supported opening a KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) school that operated with a rigorous environment. OCO was not opposed to a highly scripted program and in fact had supported

opening a KIPP school that operated with just such a rigorous environment. What we saw as crucial was that parents had a voice and a choice.

As parents met with Ward or his representatives in follow-up meetings, most schools chose the small school option and petitioned to enter the district's small school incubator to begin redesign. In the end, at two schools the district defined which teachers could vote, and those schools were turned into charters. Two other schools were deemed close enough to the NCLB benchmarks to be provided another year. The rest of the schools were invited into the small schools incubator over the next two years. Parents were pleased with the success of their organizing advocacy. Forty-five schools are now open, and another three schools will open in fall 2008.

In this phase of advocacy, we used NCLB's mandated tools, and the parent choice option was created as a central principle at the district level because of our reform work, turning both to our advantage. We used NCLB to agitate parents to not protect what exists, and we used the choice option to force the district to create real alternatives rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. The tool of exposing contradictions became a lever to protect and advance reform.

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## *Conclusion*

We have come full circle. As we find ourselves returning to our starting point, supporting the development of new schools and new facilities, we must be vigilant to develop leaders who build the power of their own organization to protect the interests of their children.

I have described our work over the past ten years and highlighted key lessons learned about advocacy: the centrality of love (self-interest) as a motivator to advocacy; the importance of quality research and powerful ideas (a vision for the future) as alternatives to the status quo; application of a model that creates a common structure, language, and experience to sustain leader trust and loyalty over time; the need for institutional and network power to apply leverage; the flexibility to see and seize opportunity when the

window is open; and, finally, faithfulness to the object of our love: our children.

**Note**

1. The mission of OCO, founded in 1977, is to develop leaders who build a powerful organization, embodying faith and democratic values, to cause change and improve life for our families. Oakland Community Organizations works to unite people across diverse Oakland communities in order to collectively improve the quality of life for families, especially those in greatest need. We envision Oakland as a city in which all people have equal access to a first-rate education; affordable housing and home ownership; skills training and good employment opportunities; quality health care; and safe, clean streets in vibrant neighborhoods. Oakland Community Organizations is a federation of forty congregations and allied community organizations representing forty thousand families from East, West, and North Oakland. It is a member of the PICO National Network, one of the largest grassroots efforts of faith-based organizations in the United States.

*RON SNYDER has organized with PICO network for thirty-five years. In addition to directing OCO, he founded PICO affiliates in two states and the PICO California Project.*