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Eye on Research

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Community Organizing Seen as Help to Schools

By [Lesli A. Maxwell](#)

Grassroots organizing efforts to reform schools in seven urban districts are contributing to myriad improvements that include more-robust parental involvement, more-equitable distribution of funding to underserved schools, and better student-attendance rates and academic achievement, [according to researchers](#) from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

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In Chicago, the researchers found, community organizers and parents who began pushing for better-qualified teachers in neighborhood schools helped create a new recruitment and training pipeline to prepare more African-American and Latino community members to teach in hard-to-staff schools.

Teachers get special rates.

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Founded by Educators for Educators

Community organizing in South Los Angeles helped steer more than \$150 million in bond money for repairs to high schools in high-need neighborhoods. Such activism also helped spearhead a successful campaign that persuaded leaders of the Los Angeles Unified School District to develop a college-preparatory curriculum for all high school students.

In Austin, Texas, teachers reported to the researchers that they had good relationships with parents, and that their schools had fostered strong cultures of achievement—attributes they said stemmed from the schools' involvement with a local community-organizing group.

And across the seven school districts where the researchers closely followed the work of community organizers, reports from school administrators, teachers, and local officials attested to the groups' influence in driving policy and decisions that increased resource equity and built capacity in historically low-performing schools serving poor and minority children.

Making Connections

Such sentiment “does speak to both the increasing sophistication of organizing groups and their ability to support their reform demands with real data, and the fact that they are now on the scene—and are consistently on the scene—and that they are entities that schools system see now that they have to engage,” said Kavitha Mediratta, the principal investigator for the study.

“Leaders in these districts and cities were clear about why they listened to these groups, and often it’s because they provided connections to communities that they hadn’t reached on their own,” she said.

Released March 26 as a 31-page preview of a full report that will come out this summer, “Organized Communities, Stronger Schools” was produced by the [Community Involvement Program](#), which

provides training, organizing strategy, and policy research to help community groups working to improve urban schools. The Community Involvement Program, which was initiated in 1996 at New York University, joined the Annenberg Institute, based at Brown University, in 2006.

Ms. Mediratta and her co-researchers presented their preview in New York City last month at the annual meeting of the Washington-based American Educational Research Association.

The study of the seven community organizing groups started six years ago and has been underwritten by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, of Flint, Mich., which has also funded many community organizations directly.

A steadily increasing number of organizing efforts to push for school improvement in urban districts have emerged since the early 1990s, but little research has been done to measure their effects, Ms. Mediratta said.

"It has now reached a point where there is enough work on the ground and has been going on for a sufficient period of time to ask those questions like, 'How is this changing things?' " Ms. Mediratta said.

Impact of Small Schools

Researchers chose the groups after determining that each already had a track record in education-related organizing. They also considered geographic diversity in selecting the sites, as well as ensuring a mix of groups that are part of larger, national organizing networks and some that are not.

For the study, researchers did 321 interviews with various stakeholders across the seven sites; observed organizing strategy sessions, campaign activities, and actions; collected hundreds of surveys from teachers, students, parents, and other adult members of the community-organizing groups; and used publicly available school-level data to analyze various district-, school-, and student-level outcomes.

In Oakland, Calif., for example, researchers found that new small schools that had been developed with support from the Oakland Community Organizations scored "significantly higher on the California Academic Performance Index than the large schools from which they emerged."

And in Philadelphia, where a group called Youth United for Change worked with the city school district to establish new small high schools, researchers saw a "10 percent gain in student attendance and a 25 percent gain in the percentage of graduates planning to attend college between 2003-04 and 2005-06," according to the report.

The study, said Mark R. Warren, a professor at Harvard University's graduate school of education, marks the "the most systematic effort to demonstrate that organizing efforts can and do improve student outcomes."

Mr. Warren, who teaches a course in community organizing and is in the midst of his own study on the impact of such efforts, said the authors' findings offer lessons for school practitioners. Notable among them, he said, are the payoffs—in better test scores and other measures of student achievement—that result when districts commit to long-term strategies that organizing groups often advocate.

"The evidence they found that district-level officials credited the organizing groups with making a real contribution to the improvement of schools is really important," he said. "I think there are a lot

of pressures against educators from collaborating with groups like this with the narrowness of focusing on improving test scores by tomorrow.”

Advocacy Perspective

Because the Community Involvement Program provides support and training to grassroots groups involved in organizing for educational improvement, Ms. Mediratta said she had anticipated some pushback from critics who might view the research as advocacy. So far, she said, there has been none.

The program has used an advisory group of researchers and educators to “hold ourselves accountable,” Ms. Mediratta said. And, except for herself, she said the research staff is separate from the operating staff.

Mr. Warren of Harvard said the value of the research should not be dismissed because of the group’s advocacy for community organizing. He, along with Harvard lecturer Karen L. Mapp, recently formed a new special interest group at the AERA that will focus on producing research on grassroots organizing.

“Frankly, in the field of education research, there are plenty of people who design interventions and then evaluate them,” he said. “I don’t think there are many people in the world of education who don’t want to see community engagement increase, even if, sometimes, the strategies can be controversial.”

Steve Barr, the founder and chief executive officer of the Los Angeles-based Green Dot Public Schools, agrees. His charter school organization has used grassroots organizing campaigns to create a parents’ union and its lineup of small charter high schools in some of the poorest city neighborhoods.

“Obviously, it’s the missing link,” Mr. Barr said of such organizing. “Almost all reforms have come from the top down and are then foisted on communities that have mostly been neglected for decades. It might get you some short-term gains, but unless you understand the community presence, the gains will never be more than that.”

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