



Building Trust: Parents, Teachers and Administrators Come Together New Settlement Apartments Bronx, New York

One sure way to undermine progress is to divide the very people who must come together to create genuine and lasting reform. Yet it seems, sometimes, that the most common response to poor performing schools is to cast blame: teachers are accused of not trying hard enough; parents are criticized for not being involved enough. Central office is blamed for its very *existence*. Everyone seems to be willing to point fingers, and few seem willing or able to find ways to work *together*.

In the South Bronx, New Settlement Apartment's Parent Action Committee (PAC) is taking a different approach, and it's paying off. With dedicated recruitment and engagement of low-income parents, and a foundation that assumes a common interest in children and schools, the Parent Action Committee has built genuine relationships and trust between teachers, parents and administrators. *Together*, they have become a force for positive change.

The Parent Action Committee works first to build a legitimate voice for parents in the South Bronx. PAC then moves strategically to build relationships with other powerful interests in the New York City Schools and to unify these interests around plans for substantive steps to improve teaching and learning for low-income students and children of color. As part of citywide parent and community collaborations, PAC has developed the credibility and power to sit at the table with the New York City Department of Education, the city's powerful teachers union and others. These relationships have helped them win significant victories citywide. It also gives PAC, and low-income parents in the community the ability to improve individual local schools.

Rafael Hernandez Dual Language School – also known as PS/MS 218 in the South Bronx's District 9, is a kindergarten-through-eighth grade school that teaches both English- and Spanish-dominant children in two languages. It is a fairly new program in District 9, an extremely diverse, predominantly low-income section of the Bronx that also includes some of the city's lowest-performing public schools.

PS/MS 218's dual language program was welcomed by the community. But some of the school's parents have not been satisfied with implementation of the school's nationally-proven model.

Carmen Jerez, who has two students at the school, raised her concerns along with other parents at a meeting of the Parent Action Committee (PAC) of New Settlement Apartments (NSA). NSA is a housing and community-building organization, and an anchor in the neighborhood: with a staff of 103 professionals, it operates after-school, evening and summer programs for 3,600 children, teens and adults in the surrounding neighborhood; manages 1,000 units of low-to-moderate-income housing in 16 buildings; and sponsors a wide-range of educational and community programs and revitalization projects open to all residents of the neighborhood. NSA understands that a thriving, stable community requires more than just bricks and mortar and, with support from the Hazen Foundation, the Parent Action Committee emerged 10 years ago out of New Settlement's conviction that authentic parent organizing would help rebuild the local public schools.

In 2002-2003, PAC joined forces with other community groups to form the "Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools" (CC9 later expanded to encompass all of the Bronx, and was renamed CCB). The collaborative launched a dynamic campaign to win a pilot teacher development program in ten South Bronx schools. This program, which put highly experienced teachers in the schools as leaders and mentors, was the product of careful relationship-building between community groups and their parent leaders, teachers and the powerful United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and the multi-layered bureaucracy of the New York City Public Schools. So strong was the partnership among the stakeholders, that the UFT and the City's Mayor, who controls the schools, invited the Community Collaborative to send representatives to contract negotiations between the union and the district as they hammered out the details of the Lead Teacher Program. It was an endorsement that is unprecedented in New York, or elsewhere.

In its first year the Lead Teacher program proved so effective at raising reading scores at the ten schools that the Department of Education eventually expanded the program to hundreds of schools city-wide. It was an enormous victory, and one that demonstrated the power of collaboration. The lessons of the campaign were not lost on the Parent Action Committee.

As Carmen Jerez, leaders of the school's Parent Association and other parents looked at PS/MS 218, they quickly recognized that their school needed stronger leadership with experience in dual-language education. Using some of the relationships they'd built through CC9, PAC convinced the district to hire a new principal for PS/MS 218 and won a voice in the selection process. The new principal Leticia Rosario is young, energetic and was raised in the South Bronx. She is also experienced with and enthusiastic about dual-language education.

"I knew that working with the Parent Action Committee was going to be key in terms of having the power to get the school back on track," says Rosario, describing her first weeks on the job.

Together with Rosario, the parents began to systematically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their school and its program. They interviewed teachers and administrators, visited schools with successful dual-language programs, attended conferences and gained in-depth knowledge of how high-performing programs are run.

“We listened to the teachers. The teachers agreed that the model wasn’t being implemented aggressively,” says Ana Maria Garcia, a mother of four. “We realized that *everyone* in the school had to be totally committed to this mission, and *supported* so they could deliver on it.”

The Parent Action Committee was invested in collaboration from the start. They formed a committee with representation from all stakeholders. They sat down with the teachers union, and they sat down regularly with administrators. They built a relationship with the district’s head of dual language programs, who agreed to work with them.

Together, the partners created a package of supports for the school’s staff, administration and parents. Everyone’s needs and interests were respected: parents are being better educated about the school’s program, and offered opportunities to contribute to its success. Teachers are given better training and are then supported in implementing the dual-language model. And the culture at the school is becoming one of trust, respect and transparency – a change that parents, teachers and the principal at PS/MS 218 largely attribute to the work of PAC.

“When I first became principal here,” says Leticia Rosario, “it was a windstorm, trying to figure out the history, understand dynamics, and build trust. There were times when it was hectic trying to untangle what everyone wanted. My job is to keep myself and the staff focused on our mission. I also know that whatever I do has to be very public. I have to explain why things are being done. That really helps to build trust so that this school can move forward...I can’t do that without the parents.”

Ana Garcia agrees. “We are all concerned about our children’s education. We have to work together. Sometimes we don’t agree. Sometimes we get angry. But we don’t lose respect for one another. This group of parents is very clear about what they want and how they want to move forward.”

“The teachers have worked as hard as we have,” says Carmen Jerez. “They also want change in the school, and in their relationships with parents. When we come together, I know it can be better...”

The Parent Action Committee has had a profound impact. In their grounded and systematic attention to parent and community organizing, and their refusal to join in the finger-pointing over who’s to blame for struggling schools, the Parent Action Committee is building alliances with teachers and principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools and across the city.