



Cultivating a Powerful Voice Citizens for a Better Greenville Greenville, Mississippi

The powerful Mississippi River flows past the town of Greenville as a force of nature. Watching the river go past, one can hardly help thinking about its ability to change course over decades and centuries, transforming the very land through which it passes. A similar force has come to the town of Greenville, Mississippi and is bringing change at a much faster pace. Through persistent organizing and commitment, members of Citizens for a Better Greenville believe they have harnessed some power, and are demanding accountability and a voice for low-income residents.

Citizens for a Better Greenville (CBG) received a seed grant from the Edward W. Hazen Foundation in 2003. What Hazen saw in CBG was an organization with a mission to build legitimacy for a community voice, and to demand equity and accountability from an age-old and entrenched power structure.

“Hazen came in early and invested in us when we were still living on donations, volunteer time and lots of faith,” says Joyce Parker, co-founder of the organization. “It enabled us to move our work to the next level.”

Citizens for a Better Greenville is a multi-issue organizing effort. But the primary focus has always been on increasing equity and quality in the city’s public schools. In a school district with a student population of over 95%, and with white students predominantly attending private academies, there was little political will for high performing public schools. Parker and the group’s leadership knew that the biggest hurdle to improving the Greenville city schools was the lack of accountability to the community, and particularly the families whose children attend the public schools. Decisions were made through a secretive, back-room process, by a school board that was not elected, but appointed by the City Council. The City Council had long been dominated by landowner and business interests, and their appointments to the school board reflected their interest in maintaining that authority. The route to systemic change in the schools, believed Citizens for a Better Greenville, was to bring decision-making into the open, where the committee could be answerable to parents.

CBG began to attend school board meetings. Groups of leaders would go each month, time and again. They listened; they spoke up; they asked questions. They were largely ignored.

“We thought that if we packed the board room during school board meetings, things would change,” reflects Parker. “But we were wrong...because decisions weren’t being made in that room. We realized that we were going to have to interrupt business as usual.”

Citizens for a Better Greenville began to build a diverse base of parents and students. They provided training for parents to advocate for their own children’s rights and for each other while building their understanding of how the policies and practices of the system needed to change.

The group strategically took on a campaign around parks and recreation. After a rash of incidents in the parks, CBG turned out over 200 people to renounce the violence and take back the public space for the community. Their reputation in the city began to grow. Concrete victories mounted as well: they won \$240,000 to improve a high school science lab, a \$500,000 increase in textbook allocations, and more. These resources helped to win over allies among teachers and school administrators.

The numbers of CBG members attending school board meetings continued to grow. Still, CBG repeatedly found that critical decisions were being made behind closed doors. And School Board members continued to answer to their sponsors on the City Council rather than the community.

CBG kept at it. They chose activities that engaged whites and blacks, moderate income families and mothers on welfare. They included and welcomed young people, professionals, teachers and ex-offenders. Their openness and transparency won them trust, credibility and strength.

As their base grew, Citizens for a Better Greenville began to encourage community residents to seek seats on the City Council, and appointment to the School Board. Over a 4 year period, they won the appointments of three “community friendly” members to the Board. It wasn’t without conflict, but they held their ground. It was a process of establishing relationships, challenging “business as usual,” and steadfastly refusing to sit back and let the game be played without them.

Through skirmishes over board appointments and school policy and program debates, the new board members have insisted that the voices of parents be heard. With a CBG delegation at every School Board meeting, new members remain accountable. They have also taken opportunities to demonstrate the breadth of their support in the city. In January of 2007, CBG members began walking the community with petitions calling for a comprehensive audit of the school district.

They collected over 1,000 signatures, a feat that sent a clear signal to the school administration in such a small city.

Even set-backs seem to reinforce their sense of mission and commitment. When the school board announced in early 2007 that they would consolidate all the school's pre-K classrooms into a single building for the start of the 2007-08 school year, Citizens for a Better Greenville was baffled. They didn't understand how such a move would benefit the children, or what would happen to the elementary students currently in the targeted building. And most of all, they didn't recall any public discussion of such a proposal, nor could they find any record of it in the Board's meeting minutes.

CBG uncovered the Board's back-room process. Their protests won a meeting between parents, School Board and City Council members – a major accomplishment in a city used to controlling the opportunities for community input. In the meeting, parents called the board members – even their friends – to task for failing to exercise their own power. They painstakingly documented the lack of public input, education and decision-making on the pre-k proposal. They revealed that the Board had never formally authorized it, but that the administration had taken the Board's agreement to *study* the idea, as a green light to act.

The accountability session “helped our community friendly Board members maintain their integrity,” says Parker with a smile. “It's easy when you get inside, to become part of the system. The Board members have to know that they are expected to think and act for the community. If they want to go against the wishes of the community, they need to convince us that theirs is the better course to take.”

CBG lost on the pre-K consolidation. But they see the experience as a milestone for accountability in Greenville. There are signs of change: a new principal was appointed to the local high school in response to community concerns about the increasingly punitive atmosphere at the school. The new principal has sought support and input from students, parents, support staff, teachers, and CBG. They are teaching the state's first social justice curriculum in the public schools. They have gained the respect of a juvenile court judge, who is working with parents to keep kids in school and out of the juvenile justice system. They are developing a partnership with the University of Mississippi on a leadership development and college exposure program for high school students. They are working with Southern Echo, a statewide network of community-based groups, on adequate state education funding, an effort that has earned the respect and participation of the Mississippi Department of Education, universities and state legislators.

“We have gained credibility in the community by insisting on being part of the decision-making process,” says Parker. “It is creating a climate of openness and transparency that will ultimately impact every area of the community,” she believes. Citizens for a Better Greenville is the new force of nature in this city on the Mississippi River.