
**Creating Effective
Schools Through
Parent and
Community
Organizing:
*Two Case Studies of the
Hazen Foundation's
Public Education Strategy***



Rainbow Research Inc.

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Prepared for

The Edward W. Hazen Foundation

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INTRODUCTION

This document shares lessons learned regarding how to strengthen public education systems through support for parent and community organizing. It presents findings from case studies of the Edward W. Hazen Foundation's Public Education strategy in New York and Los Angeles from 1999 through 2003.

The Hazen Foundation's mission is "to assist young people, particularly minorities and those disadvantaged by poverty, to achieve their full potential as individuals and as active participants in a democratic society." In 1999, Hazen began implementing its current strategic plan. This plan focuses the Foundation's efforts in two program areas, Public Education and Youth Development. These programs invest in education organizing and youth organizing as strategies to improve schools and develop youth leadership.

In 2003, the fifth year under the plan, Hazen commissioned Rainbow Research to conduct a strategic assessment of results to date and of the changing fields of public education organizing and youth organizing. This assessment was intended to inform Hazen trustees and staff as they set strategic directions for the period 2004-2010. Findings from the assessment were also to be shared with Hazen's community and funding partners, and others interested in strengthening public education and youth development.

Rainbow Research conducted the strategic assessment from January through May 2003, in coordination with Hazen staff and trustees. Rainbow's team was led by David Scheie and included Mia Robillos, Joan Othieno, Michael Bischoff and Betsy Langley. Rainbow Research is a nonprofit organization that provides evaluation and effectiveness assistance to "socially concerned organizations." We work with diverse partners including community groups, nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions, foundations and public agencies. Based in Minneapolis and active nationally since 1974, Rainbow Research specializes in projects that bring ordinary citizens and residents to the center of community life and public problem solving, and in approaches that build capacity through participation in research and evaluation.

OVERVIEW OF HAZEN'S PUBLIC EDUCATION STRATEGY

According to Hazen's 1999 strategic plan, the goals of Hazen's Public Education program are "to foster effective schools for all children, and full partnership for parents and community members in school reform." More precisely, Hazen's theory of change posits that effective schools for all children will be achieved through parents and community members becoming full partners in school reform.

The theory of change envisions three basic phases in the change process. In Phase One, "Educate, Train & Organize," individual parents and community members in minority and/or low-income communities begin coming together in a training and organizing process. They learn about conditions and practices in local schools, about policies and the policy-making process that affects their local schools, and about how they can participate in the school improvement process; and begin building relationships, skills and identities necessary for effective engagement. The anticipated outcome of Phase One is an "organized and informed grassroots constituency of parents and community members committed to improve local schools."

In Phase Two, "Collective Action," these organized groups of parents and community members take action, generally at the school or district level, to improve resources and conditions at local schools. The anticipated primary outcome of Phase Two is "changes in educational policies and practices that improve accountability, equity and quality." However, the process of working collectively for school reform goals also continues to build the capacity of that grassroots constituency of parents and other community members, through experiential learning and organizational development.

In Phase Three, "Critical Mass of Power at the Grassroots," various local efforts coalesce into larger networks and coalitions capable of achieving change at the system, state and national level, and capable of ongoing base-building, leadership development and peer support so that grassroots priorities continue to drive school performance. The anticipated outcomes of Phase Three are both structural change in the education system so that "parents and community members are full partners," and changes in education system performance so that there are "effective schools for all children."

To achieve these short-term, mid-term and long-term results, Hazen since 1999 has pursued a strategy with three major elements: (a) target funding to nine geographic sites to concentrate Hazen's resources (staff time, knowledge, grantmaking dollars, and reputation) for greatest synergy; (b) foster networking and capacity-building among grantees and others working on school reform through education organizing; and (c) leverage support through collaboration and partnering with other funders.

Seeing the strategy in action: two case studies

To understand better how the multiple elements of Hazen's Public Education strategy work together to achieve desired outcomes, Rainbow Research conducted case studies of two of the nine targeted sites. New York offered an advanced example, where Hazen has been quite active in several ways and where there has been change on multiple levels. Los Angeles provided a mid-range example, where the level of Hazen activity and change in the education system has been more modest.

Case studies are based on several forms and sources of data including interviews, site visits, documents review, and grantees survey. In New York, we conducted six interviews: five of grantees primarily engaged in organizing and advocacy, and one of a grantee that is primarily a training and research intermediary. In Los Angeles, we interviewed staff and/or leaders from seven grantees, including six primarily engaged in parent and community organizing and advocacy, and one that is primarily a training and research intermediary. We also interviewed staff of another Los Angeles-based funder in the public education field. Hazen program staff also provided input. Documents analyzed included reports, brochures and training materials produced by grantees, a summary review of grantee proposals and reports on file at Hazen Foundation, and also several reports published by researchers or other funders.

NEW YORK: DENSE COLLABORATION, MULTI-LEVEL CHANGE

The New York case illustrates how parent and community organizing for school reform has broadened, deepened, and knit together over time. As the movement for school reform gained strength and experience, coalitions began to form at several levels, and among and across several sectors. A true “field” began to take shape with a complex and dynamic eco-system. This eco-system features players in several niches that collaborate across various lines of difference for mutual advantage around shared goals: locally-rooted organizing groups, regional and national intermediaries for training and capacity-building, and various networks and coalitions for mutual support and joint action at district, city, state and national levels. These networks include some comprised of parent organizing groups; others with more diverse grassroots education organizing groups; others including both grassroots organizing groups and legal, civil rights, religious and other kinds of organizations; and a donors collaborative for joint funding and capacity-building.

This evolution can be traced in Hazen’s efforts since 1999.

Chronology, 1999-2003

In 1999, Hazen made six grants. Five were to groups doing local parent or community organizing for school reform: two in parts of Brooklyn, two in parts of the Bronx, and one in Queens. Most were established community improvement organizations that were now starting to focus on local school quality issues. Three were linked to national networks with some experience on school reform in other places: Pacific Institute on Community Organization (PICO), Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), and National Peoples Action (NPA). The other two were independent local groups. The sixth grant funded a training and research intermediary, New York University’s Institute for Education and Social Policy, which had been working since 1995 to strengthen urban public schools through policy studies, research, evaluations and technical assistance. The NYU grant was for research on organizing for school reform, but NYU’s Institute was an active connector, adviser and trainer to

New York City organizing groups city-wide through its Community Involvement Program.

One group in Brooklyn, the Community Action Project (CAP), received a three-year grant. One of the Bronx groups received a two-year grant. The other three local organizing projects received one-year grants, as did NYU. Five grants were for \$30,000 per year; the three-year grant averaged \$25,000 per year.

In 1999, there was already a fair amount of infrastructure for collaboration on school reform in New York. Besides the PICO, ACORN and NPA networks already mentioned, four collaborative projects had been active since mid-1996 with support from the Donors Education Collaborative (itself a coalition of funders working together for public school reform in New York City, formed in 1995). Two of these were focused on increasing parental engagement: the Parent Organizing Consortium (POC) and the Metro Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). The POC was open to all groups in the city doing parent organizing; the IAF worked through its affiliate congregation-based organizations, particularly those in East Brooklyn and the South Bronx. The third, New York's newest, focused on immigrant education issues. The fourth, the Equity Reform Project, took a statewide approach, pursuing broad public participation in developing a reform proposal for education statewide. These networks continued to evolve and develop during 1999.

At least one of Hazen's 1999 community grantees, Cypress Hills Alliance for Education (CHAFE), joined the Parent Organizing Consortium that year.

In 2000, Hazen made new grants to seven grantees, and one renewal grant to a group that had received a one-year grant in 1999, Queensbridge Community in Action. Four grants went to groups doing local parent or community organizing, so that now Hazen was supporting three groups in Brooklyn, three in the Bronx and one in Queens.

Hazen also made a grant to Queens Legal Services Corporation to work on Title I equity issues (presumably with a legal advocacy approach). The other two grants were to collaboratives: a two-year grant at \$25,000 per year to the Donors Education Collaborative, and a two-year grant at \$50,000 per year to a new, statewide coalition focused on funding equity issues, the Alliance for Quality Education.

The Alliance for Quality Education was spearheaded by two Hazen New York City grantees, Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition

(NWBCCC), which received a grant in 1999, and Brooklyn ACORN, which had been funded prior to 1999 and was an affiliate of 1999 grantee Bronx ACORN. As Hazen's "Interim Progress Report: 1999-2001" states, the Alliance for Quality Education "is a statewide coalition of parents, labor, service providers, advocacy and youth organizations working to increase funding for public education, and to ensure equity in the financial resources from the state directed to the NYC public school system."

So we see that by 2000, organizing and advocacy for school reform in New York had broadened from local and city-wide to include statewide action as well, with a diverse constituency and organizational base that includes parents but also several other kinds of stakeholders. Hazen was continuing to fund local parent organizing, but added support for advocacy and coalition efforts.

In 2001, Hazen made another six Public Education grants in New York. Five were multi-year (four for two years, and one for three years), and one was a one-year grant. Five were to groups doing local parent and community organizing, and the sixth was to NYU's institute.

Three were renewal grants to groups funded in 1999 or 2000, and three were first-time grants. At least two of the "new" grants grew out of earlier relationships, however: one was to Brooklyn ACORN and the other was to the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 (CC-9).

CC-9 was a new consortium of six community groups in the Bronx, several of whom had been supported by Hazen directly in the past, as well as NYU's Institute, which served as adviser and coordinator. These groups had been working to improve conditions at individual schools, and had realized that they needed to work at higher levels in the school system as well to impact local conditions. Being successful at higher levels requires a larger power base, so linking arms with other local groups made sense. They collaborated also to raise funds for their organizing work: about \$55,000 per group per year, enough for each to hire an organizer to work on education issues.

Hazen made its largest grant commitment to this group: \$50,000 per year for three years. The four two-year awards in 2001 included the three renewals plus the Brooklyn ACORN grant. The one-year grant went to a new parent-organizing project at Grand Street Settlement in Manhattan.

By this point, then, Hazen was funding four local organizing groups in Brooklyn, six in the Bronx and one in Manhattan. Funding for the two Queens projects was not renewed in 2002. Hazen was also supporting the Donors Education Collaborative (and through that, the Parents Organizing Consortium and other collaborative initiatives), the Alliance for Quality Education working on state-level funding and equity issues, and the continuing research and technical assistance work of the NYU Institute.

Analysis: nuances, lessons, implications

Many forces have affected the public school system in New York City since 1999. In addition to the organizing, networking, training, research and advocacy that Hazen has supported, two major contextual shifts stand out. One is a new wave of structural and governance change, as new Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2002 sought and received increased authority over the school system. The system, which had been decentralized into many community school districts for a couple of decades, and then grouped into 13 districts in the 1990s, is being restructured again into a smaller number of regional districts. The terms of this restructuring are now being hammered out. One bit of good news is that the community-based groups that Hazen has supported are active players in the process of redefining the structure.

The other major contextual shift is the funding crisis brought on by the economic downturn since 2001, which has created a massive state budget shortfall in New York as in many other states. This has meant that parent and community organizing efforts formerly focused on structural reform and school quality, accountability and equity issues have had to shift at least partially to a focus on minimizing funding cutbacks to schools.

Hazen grantees, in surveys and interviews and file reviews, report numerous policy and practice changes at various schools, along with their success in building the public constituency for public schools and bringing parent and community voices into systemic reform and funding policy processes.

Hazen is credited with being an effective voice for organizing approaches within the Donors Education Collaborative. Groups doing parent and community organizing report that funding is more difficult to obtain for their organizing than for service delivery, system enhancement efforts such

as parental tutoring, or professional reform strategies such as teacher and administrator training.

Grantees report many nuances and challenges in effective education organizing. Three in particular stand out: combining broad-based advocacy strategies for accountability and equity with more delicate educator-citizen partnership strategies for improving instructional quality; finding organizers and strengthening organizational support for organizing approaches; and building strong collaboration among diverse groups.

A different set of assets and strategies is required to impact accountability and equity in funding and facilities, compared to improving teacher quality and classroom instruction quality. A broad base of low-income parents and community members can be highly effective in direct-action advocacy for equity and accountability goals. However, for innovation in improving teacher and instructional quality, the bluntly confrontational tactics effective on those broad issues must be supplemented by a different kind of partnership with teachers and administrators. In addition, the subtle and complex issues of inside-the-classroom reform are harder to build grassroots campaigns around. They require advanced knowledge about instructional and pedagogical issues beyond what many blue-collar and immigrant parents feel as their competency. Progress is less easily measured, and takes longer. Many of the grantees interviewed spoke of the necessity of both/and strategies that combine base-building for large-scale mobilization with cultivation of a smaller group of 5-10 “professional parents” with the confidence, knowledge and time to participate in more extended planning and supervision of instructional reforms. Keeping the “professional parents” strongly linked, for communication and accountability, to the broader base of concerned parents and community members, is always a challenge for democratic change.

Another strategic “both/and” that organizing groups must pursue involves building capacity for both local school improvements, to which many parents are attracted fairly easily, and reforms at the district, system and state levels, which are essential but attract a smaller number of animated parents and community members. The New York City grantees appear to be doing an extraordinary job of working on both levels, the local and the systemic. Capacity for district, system and state-wide change has increased since 1999, with formation of the Community Collaborative to Improve District Nine Schools (CC-9) in the Bronx, and the Alliance for Quality Education to press for adequate and equitable state funding.

It is difficult to find, develop and keep education organizers. For example, five of six organizations in the CC-9 collaborative lost their education organizers within the first year [NYU: 4]. This is a complex job requiring substantial knowledge of education issues and skills at relationship building, leadership development and running campaigns. People capable of doing this well are not easy to find. Many people who care this much about urban education may prefer to become (or continue as) a teacher, which pays better and has more job security.

Developing into a skilled organizer, similar to becoming a skilled parent leader takes time, and expert mentorship helps. One grantee, Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition, attributes much of their success to having a core group of community leaders experienced from other issue areas. In particular, one woman on the board made a three-year commitment to help the education organizer think strategically.

Expanding the field of education organizing also depends on attracting additional organizations into the work. Education is on the radar for all of the major organizing networks, and these networks continue to expand. However, another potential organizational pool, community service organizations (including day care and after school program providers), experience tensions between their service delivery work and the change-work of organizing. These organizations are potentially strong sponsors of organizing because they often have relationships with a large number of parents and other community members. However when their parent/community organizing projects start challenging school principals and other decision-makers, many service agencies are uncomfortable with the tension injected into formerly placid relationships and fear retaliation against their service delivery contracts.

Building collaboration among groups also requires skill, time, and patience. While many groups recognize their self-interest in collaborating with other groups holding similar goals, acting collaboratively requires effort and skills beyond working individually. Organizational cultures and values must be meshed, and procedures and structures for sharing information and making decisions together must be developed. Members of the CC-9 collaborative credit staff from NYU's Institute for Education and Social Policy for their crucial role in connecting their six organizations and helping them develop teamwork structures.

In conclusion, the New York case illustrates the benefits of staying in a site for a long time, getting to know its context and players well, nurturing a diverse mix of actors with complementary strengths in different roles and

levels, and gradually building collaboration among school reform groups and funders.

LOS ANGELES: VARIOUS GROUPS ACTIVE, MORE FRAGMENTATION

The Los Angeles case differs in several respects from New York. Fragmentation is more severe and collaboration is less developed, on several levels.

For starters, while New York City has one public school system, Los Angeles County has many school districts. Los Angeles Unified School District is by far the biggest (the second largest in the country, behind New York City), but there are 81 other school districts in the county as well. Reform efforts are scattered across these multiple jurisdictions with their own governance and policy structures.

Second, there is less collaboration among education funders than in New York. In New York, the Donors' Education Collaborative formed in 1995 with 17 funders (a number that increased to 21 by 2000) who shared a commitment both to "systemic reform of the New York City public school system and the development of permanent, broad-based constituencies to advocate for such reform." (Hirota, Jacobowitz & Brown, 2000: 3) In Los Angeles, there is no collaborative of funders jointly funding either systemic reform or constituency-building.

There are some "educational partnerships" in Los Angeles, but they focus primarily on strengthening individual teachers, parents and schools rather than on parent leadership development or community organizing to build support and accountability for improvement. These include the Los Angeles Educational Partnership (LAEP), formed in 1984, Los Angeles Education Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN), formed in 1991, and the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP), which operated 1995-2001 and spawned Families In Schools, a sequel initiative to increase parent engagement primarily at the classroom level. These various initiatives and collaborative organizations have some corporate, foundation, university and civic involvement, but not a strong grassroots constituency.

Third, collaboration among community-based school reform groups is less advanced in Los Angeles than in New York. There is no counterpart to the Parents Organizing Consortium of New York, which serves as a meeting ground for information sharing, peer learning and joint strategizing among diverse parent organizing groups across the city.

The largest community-based network working on education improvement is Los Angeles Metro Strategy, which is an institution-based (primarily church-based) community organization affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation. LA Metro Strategy aspires to be the big tent for grassroots-driven community improvement in the LA region. It has about 80 congregations, unions and community organizations as members, and it has brought the Alliance Schools model for school improvement that the IAF developed in Texas, into Los Angeles. This model emphasizes parent and community organizing around individual schools, which are then knit into larger networks to achieve higher-level systemic change.

However, not all parent and community organizing groups want to be part of IAF, as IAF is not known for effective peer partnerships with other community organizations. In addition, the other major networks that add pluralism to New York's education organizing scene, notably ACORN and PICO, have less of a presence in Los Angeles.

Fourth, state-level collaboration for school improvement may have been less developed in California than in New York in 1999. New York had the extraordinary advocacy tool of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, a coalition of parent groups, advocacy organizations and community school boards that had won a lawsuit against the State of New York in 1995 calling for reform of state education funding equity policies. Efforts to sustain and implement that ruling were the basis for formation of the Alliance for Quality Education in 2000.

Therefore, Hazen has faced greater barriers and fewer assets for building a grassroots constituency of parents and community members and mobilizing collective action for change in Los Angeles.

Reflecting perhaps these contextual realities, Hazen's activity and results in Los Angeles, 1999-2003, have been more modest than in New York. Hazen has funded fewer groups and fewer collaboratives. Results have been clustered down in the Phase One end of Hazen's theory of change for Public Education: building the parent and community base primarily through school-level organizing, which hopefully is laying the groundwork for future collaboration for higher-level reform.

Chronology, 1999-2003

In 1999, Hazen made no grants to Los Angeles groups.

Hazen made grants to three groups focused on parent leadership development and organizing in 2000, in distinct parts of Los Angeles. Parents for Unity (PFU) and Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches (LAM) were both based in South Los Angeles, both within LAUSD and in adjoining blue-collar suburbs, although they had distinctive constituencies. PFU, formed in 1992, works with Latino parents in LAUSD and four nearby school districts. Funded by Hazen prior to 1999, it was awarded a three-year renewal grant in 2000 to continue and expand its parent training and organizing. LAM, formed in 1994, was an association of small African American congregations that had started a “One Church, One School” initiative in 1998 to establish church/school partnerships to improve low-performing schools through parent training, organizing and student tutoring. LAM was given a one-year grant to strengthen the parentorganizing component of the initiative.

The third grant was a one-year, first-time award to Parents Organized for West Side Renewal (POWER), a new organization sponsored by eight neighborhood-based groups in two lower-income West Side neighborhoods within Los Angeles Unified School District. This grant supported parent training and organizing to form parent teams at elementary schools in those neighborhoods.

Hazen broadened its grantee network in 2001, making grants to three new organizations as well as one renewal grant. New grantees included Community Coalition for Substance Abuse Prevention & Treatment, doing multi-cultural parent (and youth) organizing in South LA; Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA), doing parent organizing among Latinos in Pasadena; and LA Metro Strategy – IAF, doing multi-cultural parent and community organizing around schools throughout the county. Metro Strategy’s organizing included extensive relationships with teacher unions as well as churches and parents. The Community Coalition received a three-year grant; the other two got one-year grants. Hazen made a three-year renewal grant to POWER, to continue organizing around four schools in West LA.

Things were evolving during this period. Some networks grew stronger among education organizing groups. For example, POWER became a member organization of LA Metro Strategy. POWER appreciated IAF’s trainings for organizers and leaders, and LA Metro Strategy, because of its size and clout, gave POWER access to relationships with LAUSD’s superintendent and other high-ranking officials. The Community Coalition networked with CADRE, another grassroots organizing group in South Los Angeles. The UCLA Parent Leadership Institute, part of UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA) continued training parents from

Lynwood, Inglewood and LAUSD to organize using state-mandated School Accountability Report Cards and other tools. IDEA staff continued to network and agitate for state-level action along with school- and district-focused reforms.

Several groups were pursuing state-level change as well as district and school changes. POWER and several others engaged legislators to prevent state funding cuts despite the massive state budget deficit. The Community Coalition worked with others on legislation to require high schools to provide college entrance exam training. Californians for Justice, the PICO California Project (which had a few participating churches in Los Angeles), and Californians Together were other statewide organizations working on school funding and equity issues.

On the funder side, the massive Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP), a \$53 million education reform initiative begun in 1995, officially ended in 2001. Started with major Annenberg Foundation funding but also support from over 20 local corporations and funders, LAAMP left some individual relationships but just a few ongoing “legacy” programs: one focused on teacher training, another on parent engagement (primarily at the classroom level, not the policy level).

Other currents in education reform included the Los Angeles County Alliance for Student Achievement, an organization formed to create charter schools in the area. That attracted support from billionaire Eli Broad and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan became another prominent public voice for various reform possibilities. LAUSD got a new superintendent, former Colorado governor Roy Romer, who began working with LA Metro Strategy and other parent and community groups. In addition, in early 2003 a slate aligned with the teachers union won control of the LAUSD school board for the first time. However, the state budget deficit made it likely that longstanding shortages of qualified teachers, textbooks and even classroom space in many schools in low-income areas would only worsen.

Analysis: nuances, lessons, implications

The Los Angeles case shows the difficulties of achieving systemic impact in a situation that is extremely fragmented. Parent and community organizing is ongoing at a growing number of schools. Several networks, of varying strength, are active on district, systemic and state-level issues and relationships are building. These efforts have achieved many local victories

and a few systemic ones. The most significant of these may have been in 2002 when the school funding disbursement calendar was changed so that the 200,000 students in LAUSD's "B" track gained equal access to program funding resources.

Nevertheless, the city is spread out, with poor public transportation, and 82 school districts in the county, which makes metropolitan organizing extremely complex. Being 500 miles from the state capitol, when many policy and funding decisions are made at the state level, adds to the difficulty. Funders in the education field exchange information but don't collaborate much on program initiatives. Several reform ideas are competing for attention and support, including charter schools, teacher training, district restructuring, and parent engagement. Organizing and training parents and community members to be leaders in defining and implementing educational reforms attracts only a small slice of the education funding pie.

Hazen's investments of funding and staff time since 1999 have helped develop and connect grassroots parent and community groups. These have not yet coalesced into a powerful systemic force for change. Several of Hazen's grantees are working to create this – most grantees have been themselves small or medium-sized coalitions with eight to 80 member institutions, and they are in relationship with other groups -- but this process appears to be still in an early stage.