

# TURNING LIGHTNING INTO ELECTRICITY

Organizing Parents for Education Reform



By Andrew P. Kelly

December 2014



A M E R I C A N   E N T E R P R I S E   I N S T I T U T E

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## Executive Summary

Families are the primary clients of public schools, but they are one of many constituencies who have a say in how schools actually operate. In all the technocratic fervor around “education reform”—the broad effort to implement standards and accountability, reform teacher tenure and evaluation, and increase parental choice—it is easy to lose sight of the fact that public schools are democratically controlled. Democratic control means that schools are as much a product of politics as they are of technical expertise. No matter how promising their reform ideas, advocacy groups who are unable to compete at the grassroots level will find it difficult to make their voices heard.

Education reformers have often been criticized for lacking grassroots support among the communities they are trying to help. Critics cast the movement as an effort by moneyed, white elites to impose a set of reforms that poor, minority communities may not want. Even when reformers have mobilized parents and community members, they have been accused of engaging in “AstroTurf” advocacy—ginning up public displays of activism to make it appear as though their agenda has broader grassroots support than it actually does.

In the past five years, however, school reform organizations and reform-minded funders have invested in organizing and activating parents to promote reform via grassroots political action. In the past year alone, several “parent power” efforts have made headlines in districts and states across the country, using mass rallies, lawsuits, petition drives, and canvassing campaigns to push for policy change.

Despite all this activity, these efforts have not received much attention from researchers. Existing scholarly work on community organizing and education reform has focused on the effects that organizing has on schools, student achievement, and district policy. These are worthy questions, to be sure, but we

know less about how these efforts get off the ground in the first place, how they successfully mobilize parents, and how they sustain their organizations over time. These questions are fundamental in light of well-established obstacles to political participation and collective action in low-income communities.

This study provides a first look at these questions by going directly to the source: parent power groups themselves. The set of groups included is by no means a representative sample, but includes groups that reserve a primary role for parents in their advocacy work, that have statewide or multistate reach, and that were willing to share their time and insights. Drawing on more than 30 structured interviews, four site visits, and examination of primary source documents and data, this report provides a series of early lessons about how groups have structured their parent organizations, what strategies make for effective recruitment and mobilization, and what the challenges are for sustaining parent engagement over time.

Some of those key lessons are the following.

**Before they start to organize, groups must decide who sets the issue agenda and whether to partner with schools or work outside of them.** In most parent power groups, the professionals exert some influence over the issue agenda, but some devolve more autonomy to their parents than others. Some have chosen to collaborate with schools to gain access to parents; others work outside of (and often in opposition to) schools. These decisions have trade-offs: empowering parents to set the agenda can promote engagement but may lead to a focus on particularistic, school-level issues. Allowing professionals to set a fixed issue agenda and then recruiting parents to support it helps to ensure coherence but is vulnerable to charges that it is little more than “AstroTurf.”

**Organizers focus on recruiting a core of parent leaders who are already active in their schools and who have existing social networks.** Groups rely on these parent leaders to build the chapter. Organizers do not take a “butterfly net” approach to recruiting, trying to catch whichever parents they can and then transform them into trained activists. Instead, organizers are selective: they identify parents who are well suited to leadership and train them to build out the membership. Organizers spend considerable time assessing the “fit” and leadership aptitude of potential parent leaders by having them organize meetings and participate in events.

**Most affiliates have fewer than 500 active members.** Groups have different definitions of what counts as a “member”; some count anybody who has signed up to receive the group’s correspondence, whereas others count only those who have taken some kind of action on behalf of the group. The core of active members is typically much smaller than the membership as a whole, and groups rely heavily on this core in their political activity. Most organizers prioritized the quality of participation over the quantity of participants, arguing that even a small number of informed parents can affect policy. When groups need larger numbers, they rely on coalition partners and the networks of their membership to mobilize additional grassroots support. Measures of success that capture the number of members rather than the engagement of the membership may well fail to identify the most effective grassroots organizations.

**Human touch is key to recruiting and mobilizing parents.** While political campaigns have increasingly relied on the Internet to solicit donors and mobilize volunteers, effective parent organizing takes direct personal contact with parent volunteers. That means organizers conduct multiple face-to-face meetings during the recruiting phase and multiple phone calls when it comes time to mobilize. The interpersonal ties between organizer and parent leader and between leader and members create the kind of social pressure that has been shown to increase the likelihood of political participation.

**Personal stories and concrete plans appeal to parent volunteers.** In politics, the way in which an issue is

framed can have powerful effects on citizens’ attitudes and behavior. Education reformers tend to make their case for change using data on test scores and achievement gaps and by highlighting policy ideas that can lead to improvement. But parents care first and foremost about the quality of their children’s education and want to participate in actions that can improve it. Data and abstract policy ideas often fail to resonate with them, and harping on the poor performance of local public schools can discourage potential activists. Instead, organizers have found that narratives that share the experience of other parent activists, combined with a description of the immediate steps parents can take to get involved, make for the most persuasive recruitment pitches. In fact, organizers often teach new parent leaders how to share their story effectively so they can recruit other parents.

**Sustaining parent engagement is a looming challenge.** Political activists know that a policy debate is far from over when a new law passes in the state legislature. Before it can affect what goes on in schools and classrooms, that policy must be implemented via a chain of decisions that are often insulated from electoral politics. Groups are just now figuring out how they may be able to use parent power to ensure faithful implementation. In part, success requires sustained parent engagement through a law’s passage and into the implementation phase, a challenge when turnover in the ranks of parent leaders and members can be quite high. Groups have begun to focus on how best to retain parents—providing regular opportunities to participate and to take on greater responsibility. But the key to sustainability may be empowering parents to run the organization entirely.

**Organizing would benefit from additional research and development.** Organizers were quick to point out that grassroots education politics is more art than science. Nevertheless, they also believed that additional analytics could not hurt. Using low-cost randomized field experiments, political campaigns have made progress in figuring out how to nudge likely voters to turn out on Election Day. Parent power groups could partner with researchers to take on similar research-and-development efforts to hone their craft.

**Organizers need to think critically about measuring the impact of parent power on school politics.** Education reformers have a tendency to tally accomplishments in terms of policies passed and elections won. These are clearly important indicators of success. Nevertheless, the injection of parent activists into school politics may have effects that are less readily quantifiable but no less important. Authentic parent voices can

put issues on the agenda, can provide political cover for sympathetic lawmakers, and can raise the political costs of going against them by “going public.” Parent power efforts also build social capital, civic skills, and parent engagement in communities that often lack it. These benefits may not show up on a tally of legislative wins, but they can have an important influence on local politics and policy nonetheless.



## Introduction: The New Parent Power

On October 8, 2013, more than 15,000 New York City parents, students, and teachers marched across the Brooklyn Bridge to show support for charter schools and protest the proposed policies of the presumed mayor-to-be, Bill de Blasio. As a city councilman and then candidate for mayor, de Blasio made no secret of his skepticism—some might say hostility—toward the expansion of charter schooling that took place under Mayor Michael Bloomberg. De Blasio proposed ending tax breaks for nonprofit charter operators, ending a co-location policy that allowed charters to use public school space, and charging charters rent to use city-owned space. After years of friendly treatment from the Bloomberg administration, charter advocates saw trouble on the horizon. On their way across the Brooklyn Bridge, marchers in brightly colored shirts emblazoned with the phrase “My child, my choice,” chanted, “Don’t charge us rent, we’re the 99 percent!”<sup>1</sup>

Five months later, many of those same parents and students were at it again, this time at a rally in the state capital. During his first months in office, de Blasio followed through on his campaign promises by blocking three new charter schools from using city facilities.<sup>2</sup> In response, charter school proponents brought busloads of parents to Albany to put pressure on state legislators. Although the visit to Albany was not unique—New York charter networks have run an annual trip to Albany for years—what happened on March 4, 2014, was a surprise. In a direct challenge to de Blasio’s position, Governor Andrew Cuomo told the crowd of parents and students that he and the legislature would fight to promote charter schooling. “I’m fired up!” he told them. “We’re going to save charter schools, and you’re making it happen.”<sup>3</sup> Less than a month later, the state legislature passed a law mandating that the city either provide rent-free space or subsidize any rent that charter schools might be charged.

Days later in that same chamber, the legislature passed a law that ended the partnership between the New York State Department of Education and InBloom, a nonprofit firm that functioned as a data warehouse for student-level education data.<sup>4</sup> Parent activists were at work here too. What started with vocal criticism from a small set of parents who claimed that such data sharing was a violation of privacy eventually drove state and district leaders in Louisiana, Colorado, and New York to strike their agreements with InBloom. By late April, the nonprofit announced it would close its doors, and parent activists declared victory.<sup>5</sup>

Also in late April, in a state capital 1,500 miles away, a group of Louisiana parents and students hand-delivered 6,000 signatures in support of the Common Core State Standards to Republican governor Bobby Jindal. Weeks before, Jindal followed other Republican leaders and announced plans to withdraw the state from a pledge to use one of two Common Core-aligned assessments. The national standards effort has become politically contentious over the last five years, dividing many Republicans and Democrats. Yolanda Braxton, one of the parents who had gone door to door to collect the signatures, accused the governor of playing politics, putting his presidential aspirations ahead of the interests of Louisiana’s students. “We want him to focus totally on Louisiana,” she told reporters.<sup>6</sup> In early May, the statehouse’s Appropriations Committee voted down a bill that would have required the state Department of Education to get legislative approval before purchasing Common Core assessments.<sup>7</sup> By August, a group of parents and teachers had filed suit against Jindal, arguing that he lacked the legal authority to withdraw Louisiana from the Common Core assessments.<sup>8</sup> The battle rages on.

Meanwhile, out in California, a group of parent activists at West Athens Elementary School in Los Angeles entered into an unprecedented agreement with

the Los Angeles Unified School District that requires the district to respond to parent demands. Under California's parent trigger law, if a majority of parents at a school sign onto a petition, the district must implement significant changes at the school—dismissing school leadership, reconstituting the staff, or handing the school over to a charter management organization. If West Athens is any guide, just the threat of a parent trigger was enough to bring the district to the negotiating table.<sup>9</sup> In California, anyway, organized parents are forcing districts to hear what they have to say.

In these schools, districts, and states, parent activists are changing the politics of school reform. But this growing activism did not spontaneously “bubble up.” Rather, it reflects a concerted effort on the part of education advocacy groups to organize and mobilize parents for action in school politics. In each of these stories, and countless others around the country, professional advocacy groups had laid the groundwork for parent power by recruiting, training, and organizing parent volunteers.

The growing list of parent power groups includes Parent Revolution, which spearheaded the effort to bring the parent trigger law to California and helped the parents of West Athens Elementary secure a seat at the table. It also includes Families for Excellent Schools (FES), which got its start organizing charter school parents in New York City and helped put together the march over the Brooklyn Bridge and the rally in Albany. Another group is the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO, since renamed African Americans for Educational Opportunities), which organized the legal challenge to Governor Jindal's withdrawal from Common Core. And still another is Stand for Children, one of the oldest education reform advocacy organizations (ERAOs), whose Louisiana parent leaders delivered the petitions to Jindal's office.

In Louisiana, Stand for Children organizers have a saying: “We want to be electricity, not lightning.” As Westley Bayas, Stand's former city director in New Orleans, explained, “Lightning and electricity both have power, but you can't control lightning. It strikes wherever and whenever, whereas electricity turns off and on when you need it to.”<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, large-scale political protest can erupt when particular events draw parents into the fight, and

this surge of grassroots power can affect the fate of a particular policy issue. But like lightning, these sparks of energy often fade as quickly as they came.

Generating electricity, however, requires systems that not only identify and unleash potential energy, but then channel it toward particular ends. This is what parent power groups aim to do: they identify parent activists, prepare them to participate, and help them to build an organization—a sustainable generator of grassroots parent power. What we saw in New York City, Albany, Baton Rouge, and Los Angeles was parent-produced electricity, a force that can be more powerful and sustainable than a one-off lightning strike. Put another way, parent power is about organizing parents into a lasting political bloc, not just mobilizing them when the time is right.

To be sure, parents have always been involved in their children's education. But these groups are of a different ilk than the traditional parent-teacher associations, which tend to specialize in bake sales and school beautification campaigns. Instead, new groups are overtly political, designed to push for changes to school-, district-, and state-level policies. Drawing on various traditions such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Saul Alinsky's community organizing model, organized labor, and modern political campaigning, these parent-organizing groups became an increasingly common feature of districts and states in the 1990s. As education reform has risen on the policy agenda over the past 15 years, parent power groups have grown in number and in reach.

In earlier incarnations, parent groups tended to work in collaboration with local educators to promote school- and district-level changes, advocating for more funding for low-income schools and greater school autonomy in choosing curriculum and a pedagogical approach.<sup>11</sup> But as my colleague Patrick McGuinn and I pointed out two years ago, “parent power” is now a prominent part of what is known as the “education reform movement”—a loose collection of organizations pushing for expanded school choice, standards and accountability, and changes to teacher evaluation.<sup>12</sup> Over the last two decades, education reformers have successfully advocated for preferred policies, benefiting from influential political champions and deep-pocketed donors.

For a long time, though, parents from the urban communities that reformers are trying to help seemed to be missing from that constituency. Indeed, reform skeptics have scored political points by arguing that “education reform” has only limited grassroots support and that the token support that does exist is akin to AstroTurf—manufactured by moneyed interests. Instead of being advanced by the democratic process, critics argue, the reform agenda has been forced on schools by corporations, prominent foundations, and allied elites through a manifestly antidemocratic process.

Parent-centered ERAOs are partly a response to this criticism, but they are also the result of a realization that lasting policy reform requires more than just campaign contributions, slick public relations, and lobbying in state capitals and mayors’ offices. Politicians pay attention to vocal constituents and to votes. Therefore, policy change often requires a broad-based political movement that can generate grassroots pressure and sustain it over time. This is what groups like Stand for Children, Parent Revolution, FES, BAEO, Democracy Builders, StudentsFirst, the New York City Parents Union, and others are working to create: a constituency of parents that supports, strengthens, and eventually drives school reform efforts.

Despite their increasing prominence, though, fundamental questions remain as to how these groups actually go about organizing and mobilizing parents, how they choose their structure and size, and what they have learned about the correlates of effective organizing. Although education scholars have studied community organizing in education, this line of research has often focused on the effect of such organizing on policy, engagement, and student outcomes. This work has tended to highlight the positive effects of parent and community engagement on schools and citizens themselves. But it has paid less attention to thorny questions about collective action and political participation, namely, why would low-income parents join an education organization if one exists? Are groups able to reverse the consistent correlation between socioeconomic status and political participation? If so, how?

Scholars of politics tend to take a different view of group membership and political participation, highlighting the challenges inherent in organizing and mobilizing large numbers of people. Indeed, classic

explorations of collective action and political participation ask why rational citizens would choose to join groups or participate in politics at all.<sup>13</sup> More recent work has shown that while many citizens do choose to join groups and participate in politics, these behaviors are both tightly correlated with socioeconomic status and have actually declined overall since the middle of the last century.<sup>14</sup> This research suggests that an important question for education reformers is not only “what effect does parent organizing have on schools” but also “how do you organize parents in the first place?”

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From there, a number of important questions flow. How have different organizations chosen to structure their organizing model, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches? How do groups recruit parents, and whom do they target? How many members do these organizing groups have, and how large do organizers want them to be? Do groups train parents prior to tossing them into the rough-and-tumble world of politics? And what strategies do groups employ when it comes to mobilizing parents for action and sustaining that engagement over time?

To provide some early answers to these basic questions, I went to the source: parent power groups themselves. Through interviews, site visits, and participation in events, I asked organizers and group leaders about their craft, their theory of change, and their lessons learned. Where possible, I also analyzed primary source data and documents to provide a fuller picture of ERAOs’ work. This report focuses on how these organizations have chosen to structure their advocacy efforts, build a grassroots membership, mobilize that membership, and sustain it over time.

Note that this is admittedly not a representative sample of education advocacy groups. There are thousands of such groups across the country and no single, comprehensive directory of each of them. Moreover, not every group would be willing to allow researchers a

glimpse into the internal workings of their organization. Instead, like other researchers on this topic, I examine what scholars call an “opportunity sample,” limited to a set of organizations that reserved a prominent and permanent role for parents in their work, had statewide or multistate reach, and—most important—were willing to share their time and insights with researchers.<sup>15</sup> Some ERAOs have mobilized parents in the past as a complement to their advocacy work but lack a lasting parent membership; I did not include those groups.<sup>16</sup> Other groups I approached were not interested in sharing information on the grounds that it might advantage political opponents or competing groups. Among the groups included, most are supportive of “education reform” writ large, though not all of them are.<sup>17</sup> In the future, scholars should test and refine the insights discussed here via broader, survey-based research with a random sample of groups.

The picture that emerges is of a diverse set of organizations that often have very different goals, structures, and organizing strategies. Some groups organize at the school level with the blessing and cooperation of the principal; others organize in legislative districts in order to push for state policy change. Some groups charge parents membership dues, run volunteers through a rigorous training process, and have regular chapter meetings; others mobilize parents when particular policies are on the agenda but are less active in the interim. And while some groups have a top-down, centralized issue agenda, others devolve considerable decision-making power to parents themselves.

Still, some common themes jump out. First, recruiting parents typically takes place via a time-consuming process of repeated face-to-face meetings and conversations between organizer and potential member. In other words, parent organizing looks little like the mass marketing approach seen in political campaigns or mail-order advocacy groups such as the Sierra Club. The process of recruiting parents requires direct personal contact with potential volunteers. The same goes for mobilization. Echoing many field experiments in political science, organizers have found that the best way to mobilize parents is to contact them personally (through phone calls or face-to-face appeals) and to do so multiple times. Robocalls or mass email blasts are far less effective.

Second, organizers tend to seek out parents who are already active in schools and in the community to serve as grassroots leaders and then use those parents’ networks to reach less engaged parents. Some groups even ask principals to provide a list of the parents who are most active in the parent-teacher association and other school activities. Thus groups do not spend much time trying to recruit the most disconnected, disaffected parents directly; instead, they identify active parents, bring them together and use their social ties to build the organization.

Third, most of the organizations we interviewed prioritize quality over quantity—they have learned that a few strategically placed voices may be enough to shape policy. As such, parent power groups are rarely out to build as large a membership network as possible, but focus instead on selecting the right parents to build a manageable and engaged membership. Recruitment is not a one-way affair, with organizers trying to persuade parents to join. Instead, organizers work to assess the “fit” between a potential leader and the group. Selectivity on the front end generates a core of dedicated activists, and groups tend to rely heavily on that core when it comes time to mobilize. Numbers are clearly important in politics, but there are only so many parents with the time and inclination to engage, and large numbers may not be necessary to affect policy.

Fourth, organizers have found that standard education reform arguments focused on test score data and abstract policy ideas often fail to resonate with parents. What’s more, harping on the poor performance of local public schools can discourage potential activists. Instead, organizers have found that personal stories about the experience of other parent activists, combined with a clear explanation of the concrete steps parents can take to get involved, make for the most persuasive recruitment pitches.

Last, groups have started to focus on the need to sustain parent engagement over time. Though education reformers have rattled off a string of policy victories over the past decade, policymaking does not stop when a new law is enacted. Before policies can impact classrooms, they have to be implemented: state officials have to tell local officials what to do, who in turn have to compel educators to change their practices. At each juncture, opponents of the law can roll back,

water down, or otherwise hamper the process. Parent organizers recognize the need for sustained activism throughout this process, but parent retention over time looms as a significant challenge.

Subsequent chapters will explore these lessons in depth. The remainder of this monograph proceeds as follows: The second chapter explains why parent power is important to the politics of school reform, examines existing data on parent engagement, and explores the obstacles to parent power. The third chapter looks at a set of strategic decisions that groups must make before they begin organizing: where to organize (schools, neighborhoods, legislative districts), whether to partner with schools or work outside of them, and how to set

the issue agenda.

The fourth chapter looks at what organizers call “the build”: the process of recruiting parent leaders and parent members into the organization. Here, my coauthor, Taryn Hochleitner, and I lay out some key insights about how groups go about convincing parents to join up, which parents they target, and how organizations think about optimal group size. The fifth chapter examines what happens after parents have decided to join a group: training and mobilization. The sixth chapter explores the sustainability of parent engagement over time and why it is important to policy reform. The final chapter provides some concluding thoughts and lessons for future research.

## Why Parents, Why Politics?

Families are the primary clients of public schools, but they are one of many groups that have a say in how schools actually operate. In all the technocratic fervor around school reform, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that public schools are democratically controlled. School boards, mayors, local referenda, and even public opinion shape the way schools operate. Democratic control means that what happens in schools is as much a product of politics as it is of technical policy expertise. And because schools are publicly funded, employ millions of people, and sit at the center of community and civic life, the political competition for control is fierce. No matter how strong and elegant their reform ideas, or how closely connected to key lawmakers, advocacy groups who are unable to compete politically will find it difficult to make their voice heard.

Unfortunately for parents, they are not the most powerful constituency when it comes to school politics. As John Chubb and Terry Moe argued in the early 1990s:

The fundamental point to be made about parents and students is not that they are politically weak, but that, even in a perfectly functioning democratic system, the public schools are *not meant* to be theirs to control and are literally *not supposed* to provide them with the kind of education they might want. The schools are agencies of society as a whole, and everyone has a right to participate in their governance. Parents and students have a right to participate too. But they have no right to win. In the end, they have to take what society gives them.<sup>18</sup>

Surely these political dynamics would change if individual parents were better organized and could coordinate their political activity? Chubb and Moe disagree, arguing that even if parents were able to “gain ‘appropriate’ clout” relative to other interests, the combination of democratic control and bureaucratic

organization would prevent them from getting the schools they want.<sup>19</sup> In the authors’ view, school choice and the market forces that result when parents vote with their feet are the only way that parents can exert meaningful control over schools.

Policy reforms and grassroots organizing efforts have provided a test of Chubb and Moe’s conclusions. In the late 1980s in Chicago, for example, state legislation empowered “local school councils,” made up of parents, community members, and educators, to hire and dismiss principals and to develop budgets and school improvement plans. Georgia passed a similar law in 2000. More recently, parent trigger laws in California, Texas, Mississippi, Indiana, and Louisiana have created a formal mechanism for parents to exert control over the staffing and management of their public schools. And in a growing number of school districts, grassroots community-organizing groups have won victories on education funding, school governance, and curricular reforms.<sup>20</sup>

A sizable body of education research has examined the effect of these empowerment efforts on schools, participants, and politics. Numerous studies have examined the effects of local school councils on student achievement and parent engagement, generally finding positive effects.<sup>21</sup> Other studies, however, have found that a significant number of councils fail to govern effectively and that many schools are unable to fill the council seats reserved for parents.<sup>22</sup> (As I will discuss, low rates of participation are not particularly surprising in light of the obstacles to participation.)

Another body of work has examined the effect of community organizing on schools and communities. A large-scale study of seven community-organizing efforts by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University found that organizing had positive effects on student achievement, district capacity, and the engagement of parents and students. Parents who participated were more

involved in their children's education, more civically engaged, and more informed about education policy.<sup>23</sup>

A more recent multisite study looked in detail at how such community-organizing efforts work—the political strategies and coalition-building techniques these groups use in pursuing school reforms. In their volume *A Match on Dry Grass*, editors Mark Warren and Karen Mapp distill a couple of key lessons apropos of the current study. First, they find that “social capital provides the key source of power for community organizing groups”; by leveraging “preexisting connections” in the community, organizers are able to activate more advocates than if they were organizing each person individually.<sup>24</sup> Second, the editors argue that “unilateral” political power—mobilizing members to push demands on the school system—will not be effective in changing schools on its own. According to Warren and Mapp, “Groups will need to find some way to collaborate with educators if they want to transform the operations of educational institutions.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, organizing efforts that work in opposition to existing educators will have a difficult time improving what goes on in classrooms.

Political scientists have also examined community involvement in school reform. A study of 11 urban school districts found that cities varied in their level of “civic capacity,” or the extent to which different stakeholders in a community were able to work together on public problems such as school reform.<sup>26</sup> While Atlanta struggled to develop a reform agenda because it was low in civic capacity, cities such as El Paso and Boston were more successful in mobilizing stakeholders around common goals. Archon Fung's study of Chicago's local school councils argues that these new institutions encouraged low-income parents to get involved in school governance. He found that participation in the councils was not highly correlated with socioeconomic status, but admits that overall participation was much lower than in other areas of politics. In Fung's view, though, the councils were able to “overcome quite substantial barriers to [participation]” because they “credibly promise to reward . . . activity with concrete improvements to the public goods upon which citizens rely.”<sup>27</sup>

In short, these studies provide an alternative perspective to Chubb and Moe's skepticism about parent engagement, finding that parents and allied community members can wield political power that affects schools.

But for every successful example of parent organizing and school improvement, there are hundreds of failing school districts where parents have not come together to push for reform. By focusing on successful movements, researchers risk obscuring the basic obstacles that parent power groups face. First and foremost among them is that few parents participate in school politics.

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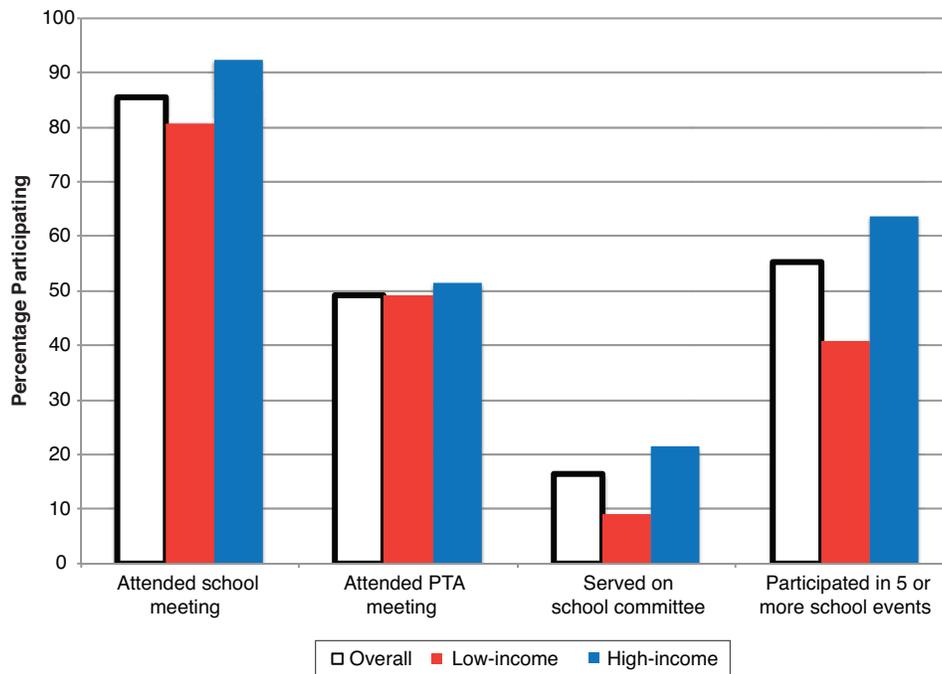
### **The Status Quo in Parent Engagement and Participation**

To provide a sense of the challenge, I examined data on the rate at which parents engage in the kinds of voluntary and political activities that are central to parent power. I looked at data from three different surveys: the 2007 National Household Education Survey administered by the National Center for Education Statistics; the 2012 American National Election Study; and the 2013 *Education Next* survey. Together, these measures provide a baseline for where parent power groups start.

The first analysis looks at the National Household Education Survey, administered to a representative sample of families with school-age children in 2007. This survey has a special battery of questions on “parent and family involvement” that focus on school-level activity: membership in the PTA, service on school committees, and attendance at school meetings. Although these activities are not political per se, they are likely correlated with other forms of participation examined in this paper, and they may help parent power groups identify potential parent leaders.

In this analysis, I calculate the percentage of families who answered yes to whether a parent had, since the beginning of the school year, attended a school meeting, attended a parent-teacher association meeting, or served

FIGURE 1  
 PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO REPORTED PARTICIPATING IN SCHOOL-LEVEL EVENTS



Source: Author's calculations using the 2007 National Household Education Survey (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

on a school committee. I also looked at the percentage of parents who reported participating in school events more than five times. The results are displayed in figure 1. To look at differences across income groups, I disaggregate those results according to whether a household earned more or less than \$50,000 per year (roughly the median household income for the period 2005–2013).

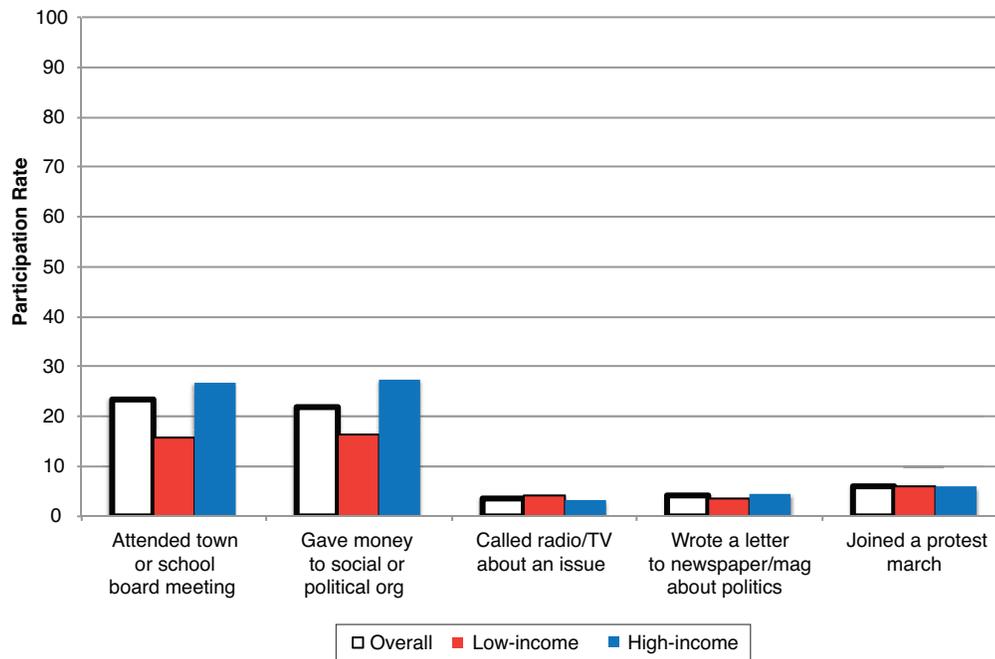
Overall, most parents attended a school meeting of some kind. Given the variety of things that qualify—parent-teacher conferences, a commencement ceremony, a concert—this high rate of participation is not surprising. But as you move to other activities, participation declines precipitously: just under 50 percent of parents attended a PTA meeting, and about 16 percent served on a school committee. In terms of differences across income groups, they are most evident when it comes to serving on a school committee and the percentage of parents who participated in five or more school activities in a given year. Just 40 percent of the parents in the lower-income group participated five or

more times, whereas 63 percent of those in the higher-income group did so. Less than 10 percent of lower-income parents served on a school committee.

What about participation in political activities beyond the schoolhouse? The second analysis looks at the 2012 American National Election Study, which asked a representative sample of nearly 6,000 Americans about various acts of political participation. The analysis is limited to respondents who reported having children under the age of 17 living in their home. Unfortunately, it was not possible to eliminate families with children under 5. I then calculated the percentage who reported engaging in the following activities over the following time periods:

- In the past four years, has the parent
  - Attended a town or a school board meeting?
  - Given money to a social or political organization?
  - Called radio or television about an issue?

FIGURE 2  
 PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO ENGAGED IN ACTIVITY IN THE LAST FOUR YEARS



Note: Statistics are unweighted percentages for all parents who answered the item.

Source: Author's calculations based on American National Election Studies 2012 Time Series Study, Stanford University and the University of Michigan, [www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org).

- Written a letter to a newspaper or magazine about an issue?
- Joined a protest or a march?
- In the past 12 months, has the parent
  - Been involved in community work?
  - Contacted an official to express his or her views?
  - Attended a meeting on school or community issues?
  - Done any volunteer work?

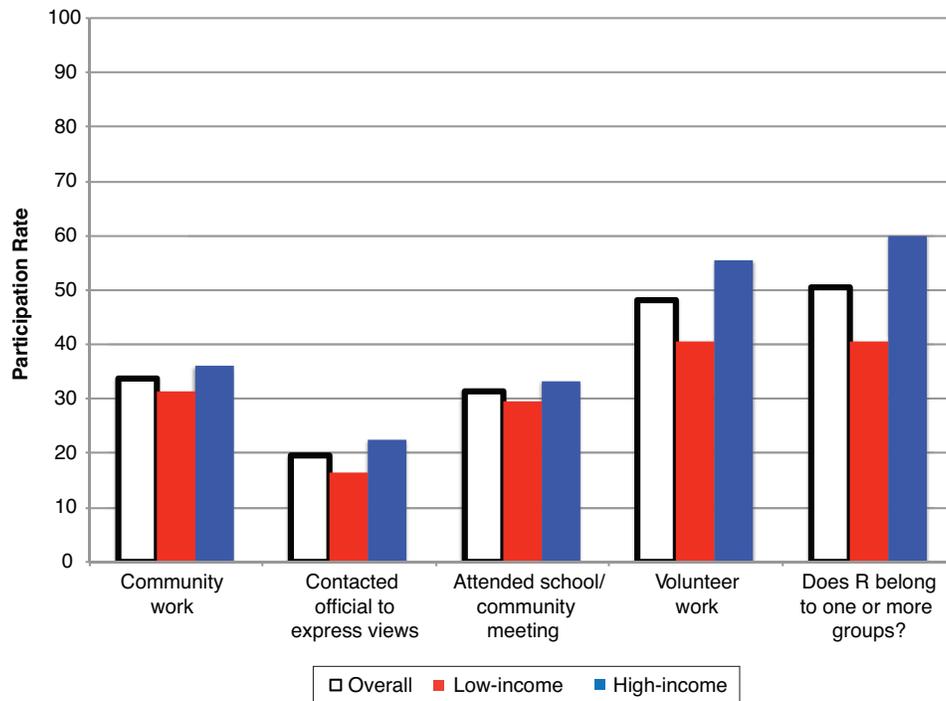
I also present the percentage of respondents who reported being a member of one or more political or community organizations. Again, I disaggregate the results by two income groups, using \$50,000 as the dividing line. The results are displayed in figures 2 and 3.

A couple of patterns are immediately apparent. First,

overall participation in any of the activities never rises above 50 percent. Almost no parents participate in some activities—protesting, writing letters, or calling radio or TV to express views. When it comes to school-related participation—such as attending a school board meeting or attending a school or community meeting—the rates are marginally higher, but still low. Less than a quarter of respondents reported attending a school board meeting *over the past four years*, and just under one-third said they had attended a school or community meeting over the past year. We need to keep these facts in mind when analyzing parent power groups because they illustrate how *most* parents—regardless of background—sit on the sidelines when it comes to school politics.

Equally interesting is the fact that, with the exception of group membership and volunteer work, the gaps between income groups are typically not that large. Where there are gaps, they are in the expected

FIGURE 3  
**PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO ENGAGED IN ACTIVITY IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS  
 OR BELONGED TO ONE OR MORE GROUPS**



Note: Statistics are unweighted percentages for all parents who answered the item.

Source: Author's calculations based on American National Election Studies 2012 Time Series Study, Stanford University and the University of Michigan, [www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org).

direction: 27 percent of high-income parents reported attending a school board meeting versus just under 16 percent of low-income parents. The largest gap was evident in group membership: whereas just 40.5 percent of low-income parents belonged to one or more groups, 60 percent of high-income parents could say the same. The gap was somewhat smaller, but still substantial, on volunteering (40.5 percent versus 55 percent).

Finally, the 2013 *Education Next* survey largely confirms these patterns. Researchers found that just 30 percent of parents reported voting in the most recent school board election. In contrast, 51 percent of teachers reported voting. Parents were more optimistic that they would vote in the future, but even here just 43 percent said they were extremely or very likely to vote. When it came to attending school board meetings, just 15 percent said that they were extremely or very likely to attend a school board meeting in the future.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, although rosy tales of civic engagement and school reform are encouraging, they are clearly not the norm. These patterns—low rates of participation overall, especially among lower-income parents on critical measures—describe the world in which parent-organizing groups operate. What explains these patterns?

### The Challenge of Parent Organizing

Despite the optimistic literature on community organizing and education reform, a large body of social science research predicts that organizing and mobilizing low-income parents around state and local education issues will be quite difficult. It is not a given that rank-and-file parents will join grassroots school reform efforts simply because they share common concerns

about the quality of the public schools. In light of the obstacles I explore here, it is amazing it happens at all.

**Collective Action Problems.** Any discussion of effective parent organizing must start with an assessment of the incentives that all individuals face in choosing whether to get involved in collective political action. Mancur Olson's landmark theory of collective action challenged the assumption that "participation in voluntary associations is virtually universal," arguing that rational individuals acting out of their self-interest actually have little incentive to join collective action to secure public goods.<sup>29</sup> The issue, Olson explained, was that some goods—quality schools, clean water, and safe streets, for example—were "non-excludable," meaning everybody benefits from them whether or not they pay the cost:

Though all of the members of the group therefore have a common interest in obtaining this collective benefit, they have no common interest in paying the cost of providing that collective good. Each would prefer that the others pay the entire cost, and ordinarily would get any benefit provided whether he had borne part of the cost or not.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, rational actors would have incentive to "free-ride" on the participatory efforts of others; if everyone free-rides, however, collective action falls apart.

Olson provides important lessons that collective action is possible under certain conditions. Broadly speaking, "selective incentives"—benefits or sanctions that apply to individuals rather than the group as a whole—can encourage participation. Selective incentives can be economic (special rewards for joining the group, such as access to special services) or social (interpersonal pressures that encourage individuals to behave in a certain way). Olson argues that small groups will be more successful at encouraging participation than big groups, in part because small groups feature the kind of "social incentives" that result from "face-to-face contact" among participants.<sup>31</sup> In small groups, group members more readily recognize individual contributions (or the lack thereof), and those who do not contribute will suffer socially. In contrast, these "selective social incentives" are largely absent in large groups, where participants are less likely to know one another,

unless the large group is made up of smaller affiliates (as many ERAOs are).

After Olson, scholars of collective action have emphasized how these social incentives and interpersonal ties are key to explaining participation in group activity. In explaining participation in the civil rights movement, Dennis Chong argues that rational concerns about one's reputation in the community drove participation in the movement.<sup>32</sup> Groups themselves recognize the power of these social incentives; research suggests that grassroots groups are more likely to recruit members through social networks than through direct mail or mass media.<sup>33</sup> Advocacy groups without a grassroots presence rely more on mass marketing, compiling large membership lists of individuals who almost never meet with one another.<sup>34</sup>

**Overall Decline in Civic Participation.** Groups may also have trouble attracting members because fewer and fewer Americans are joining political groups overall. Robert Putnam has compellingly argued that the golden age of political participation and associational life in America is largely a thing of the past; participation in community and political groups—and in collective political activity—has been on the decline since the middle of last century.<sup>35</sup> Americans today are less likely to belong to political or community-based organizations and participate in politics at all levels.

Putnam shows that community-based participation—a central goal of parent power groups—has suffered most dramatically. In the years between 1973 and 1994, the proportion of Americans who reported attending any meeting on town or school affairs was cut by 40 percent. According to Putnam, "The verbs describing these modes of involvement . . . reflect action in cooperation with others: 'serve,' 'work,' 'attend.' Each of these activities can be undertaken only if others in the community are also active."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Putnam points out how membership in parent-teacher associations declined precipitously after 1960; the national PTA lost 500,000 members between 1990 and 1997, despite an increase in the number of families with school-age children.

The number and size of voluntary associations actually grew during this period. But the growth was not among grassroots groups where members meet face

to face. Instead, the growth occurred among so-called mailing list organizations, that is, advocacy groups that individuals “join” by donating money or signing up for emails, not by attending chapter meetings. “What matters from the point of view of social capital and civic engagement,” Putnam warns, “it is not merely nominal, but active and involved membership.”<sup>37</sup>

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*Most parents are not paragons of civic participation, and this is especially true of parents from lower-income groups.*

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**Low Levels of Engagement and Efficacy in Disadvantaged Communities.** The secular decline in civic engagement has further lowered already-low political participation rates among voters with less education. As Putnam points out, the percentage of high school graduates who reported attending at least one local government meeting dropped from 20 percent to 8 percent between the 1970s and the 1990s. Research has consistently found a strong relationship between political participation and socioeconomic status, and these data echo those findings.<sup>38</sup>

Disadvantaged communities often lack one particularly important prerequisite—political efficacy, or the faith that political participation can influence government policy. Not surprisingly, individuals with a high sense of efficacy and trust in government are more civically active; they believe they can change things through political activity. Research suggests that low-income and African American citizens have lower levels of efficacy and trust in government than others.<sup>39</sup> Even Saul Alinsky, the father of community organizing in low-income communities, admitted, “Many times, contact with low-income groups does not fire one with enthusiasm for the political gospel of democracy.”<sup>40</sup>

**Mistrust.** Faith in your own political efficacy is one necessary ingredient for collective political action; so is trust in other people. Social trust is a primary component of what James Coleman called “social capital”: the social ties and shared values and norms that make

cooperation and collective action possible.<sup>41</sup> Political scientist Eric Uslaner distinguishes between particularized trust (“I only trust people I know or who look like me”) and generalized trust (“I generally trust people”), arguing that the latter is critical to collective action.<sup>42</sup> “Particularized trusters keep to themselves,” he explains, whereas generalized trust makes people more likely to engage in collective political action.<sup>43</sup> Similar to research on political efficacy, Uslaner argues that optimists—people who “have confidence in their own capacity to shape the world”—tend to have high levels of interpersonal trust.<sup>44</sup>

Are public school parents in urban districts likely to rank high in social trust? Research suggests otherwise. In a study across seven countries, political scientists found that individuals who had been successful in their own life—those with higher incomes, more education, and higher social status—had higher levels of social trust than others.<sup>45</sup> In the United States, research has shown that recipients of means-tested benefits (welfare, nutrition assistance, Medicaid) are far less trusting of others than citizens higher up on the economic ladder.<sup>46</sup> As such, outsiders who come into urban communities with the goal of organizing parents will be hard-pressed to build trust.

**Divisive Politics and Misinformation.** Finally, the politics of education reform are often divisive, pitting families against one another. Reforms to teacher tenure and evaluation policies, a cornerstone of many education reform organizations, wind up threatening jobs of friends and family members. Meanwhile, the politics of choice and charter schooling have led advocates on both sides to draw sharp divides between “us” and “them.” All of this contentiousness is often topped off with a withering barrage of ad hominem attacks, talking points, and misinformation. This divisiveness may drive some parents to become even more engaged and dedicated to the cause. But research on deliberation has found that crosscutting, conflictual messages can demobilize voters who are “conflict avoidant.”<sup>47</sup> Contentious politics may turn off potential parent activists and make them even more distrustful of organizing efforts than they were in the first place.

## Overcoming Obstacles to Parent Power

As the data suggest, most parents are not paragons of civic participation, and this is especially true of parents from lower-income groups. In this, existing research argues, they are not unlike most Americans, who often lack the time, interest, and civic skills that drive volunteering and political participation. These obstacles help explain why so few parents are likely to participate in the politics of urban school reform or volunteer for a group that provides such opportunities.

But this evidence has less to say about how to get around these obstacles. Here, existing parent power groups can help. By sharing some of their early lessons, they can improve our understanding of what it takes to build a grassroots political organization, recruit parents, mobilize them, and sustain that engagement over time.

A critical question is whether these groups seek to reverse the relationship between income and participation—to bring much larger numbers of

parents into the corps of political activists—or work to identify and coordinate the small number of parent activists who are already out there. Clearly, these goals are not mutually exclusive; in fact, accomplishing the latter can enable the former, as already-engaged parents with strong social networks can go forth and organize other parents. Relying on key members of the community who are already active and engaged can be far more efficient than trying to cold-call all the potential members who may be out there. As we will see, parent-organizing groups have learned this lesson well.

Accomplishing these goals is challenging work, and, as we will discuss, it is more art than science. There are few hard and fast rules—as Warren and Mapp point out, it is difficult to boil organizing down to some sort of “how-to” list of strategies. But organizers, parent leaders, and other staff members were willing to share many insights about their work. In the chapters that follow, I will distill some of the common themes that emerged.

## Getting Organized

Given the litany of obstacles to parent organizing outlined in the previous chapter, the real mystery is not why public school parents *don't* organize for political action but why some actually *do*. The answer is usually professional advocacy groups—groups whose full-time job is to organize parents for action. The examples of parent power on display across the country are rarely spontaneous. People participate in politics *because somebody asks them to*.<sup>48</sup>

But who asks parent activists, and how do they do it? Before education reform groups can even begin to build a grassroots organization, they have to make some strategic decisions about how to structure that organization to best support their goals. These decisions, in turn, have implications for different groups' comparative advantage in overcoming the various obstacles discussed in the previous chapter.

### Varieties of Parent Engagement and Organizing Models

In his 2012 study of parent organizing by ERAOs, Drew University political scientist Patrick McGuinn described a parent engagement continuum with three levels: voluntarism, advocacy, and empowerment.

- *Voluntarism* refers to the traditional role that parents play in supporting school-level activities: joining the parent-teacher organization, fundraising, and volunteering in classrooms. In keeping with the focus on political activism, I exclude voluntarism here.
- *Advocacy* is overtly political; parent activists help to push a particular reform agenda set by political and policy professionals who run the organization. Advocacy efforts tend to enlist parents as

a grassroots complement, rather than as a substitute, to larger issue campaigns.

- *Empowerment* occurs when parents generate their own reform agenda and plan of action, with professionals taking a behind-the-scenes role in providing technical assistance.<sup>49</sup>

This continuum of parent engagement dovetails nicely with a typology of education organizations that Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform has identified.<sup>50</sup> I focus on three of those models here: issue advocacy, community organizing, and service providers.

- *Issue advocacy*: Advocacy groups run political campaigns to promote particular policies or candidates who further their mission. Political professionals set the issue agenda and orchestrate the campaigns, and grassroots mobilization serves as a complement to elite-level policy work and electioneering. Advocacy groups often have membership lists, and those members may pay dues to “belong.” But these members are only sometimes organized in local chapters that meet regularly or develop their own agenda. Advocacy group activity tends to follow political timelines—elections, legislative sessions, and so on. Examples include StudentsFirst, BAEO, and Parents United for Public Schools.
- *Community organizing*: This model emerged from the work of Saul Alinsky, who got his start in the 1930s organizing disgruntled meatpacking workers in the “Back of the Yards” area of Chicago. He would go on to found the Industrial Areas Foundation, which still exists today. Community organizing focuses on empowerment—hence the Industrial Areas Foundation's “iron rule of

TABLE 1  
PARENT POWER GROUPS

Group	Year Founded	Where Active	Locus of Organizing	Relationship to Public Schools
Stand for Children	1996	11 states	Schools	Works with schools
Families for Excellent Schools	2011	New York; New Jersey; Connecticut; Massachusetts	Neighborhoods	Works with charter schools
Parent Revolution	2009	California	Schools	Works outside
Students First	2010	10 states	Legislative districts	Works outside
Parents United for Public Schools	2002	Minnesota	Legislative districts	Works with schools
Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)	1999	5 states	States	Works outside
Democracy Builders	2005	New York City; Camden, NJ; schools in 7 other states	Schools	Works with charter schools
New York City Parents Union	2011	New York	Boroughs	Outside

organizing”: “Never do for others what they can do for themselves.”<sup>51</sup> Working through churches and civic organizations, professional organizers recruit and train citizens who are well connected in the community, and these leaders in turn recruit and organize other community members. The group then builds an issue agenda and strategy internally, and community members (rather than professionals) serve as the group’s public face. In practice, organizers will exert influence by providing training and technical support to help groups carry out campaigns.<sup>52</sup> Community organizing is continuous and less tied to political or legislative timelines. Examples include Stand for Children and Parent Revolution.

- *Service providers*: Other organizations bring rank-and-file citizens together by offering a service such as education, health care, or child care or by providing information and help in navigating public programs. These organizations are not always overtly political. Still, these services act as a “selective

incentive” that can provide access to a large group of citizens who could then be organized and mobilized around particular policy goals. Examples include the New York City Parents Union and Stand University for Parents (Stand UP).

Groups do not necessarily adhere to just one model, and most are a blend between community organizing and issue advocacy. Table 1 also contains information about key decisions that groups must make about how to structure their grassroots work. I discuss each briefly here.

### Locus of Organizing: Schools, Neighborhoods, or Legislative Districts?

Political organizations break down their grassroots efforts into particular units depending on the end goal. These smaller units serve as the building blocks of the larger movement, and choosing the appropriate locus of organizing is an important first step. If the unit is too large, the activists may not have enough in common

to solve the collective action problem. If the unit is too small, it will lack political power on its own.

ERAOs have chosen units that reflect their policy goals, with some organizing at the school level, some working in neighborhoods, and some working at the level of the legislative district. For instance, Stand for Children and Parent Revolution organize school-level parent chapters. In each case, professional organizers first identify schools that are a good fit for their model, and the organizers then recruit prominent parents in those schools to serve as parent leaders, who in turn recruit parent members. These school-level organizations can then come together to form a districtwide organization.

Other groups organize on a much broader scale. Those that are focused on state policy organize at the state or legislative district level. Parents United for Public Schools coordinates a statewide network of activists in Minnesota, working to cultivate parent supporters in each state legislative district in the state. Students-First also organizes by legislative district, creating small “transformation teams” made up of key parents and community members in strategic districts, which then recruit other members in the community.

Families for Excellent Schools has transitioned from organizing charter school parents to focusing on building neighborhood chapters. According to FES cofounder Sharhonda Bossier, the shift has allowed the group to “broaden our base” beyond those parents whose children are enrolled in charter schools to include parents whose children are in failing schools and on waiting lists. FES now operates more like a traditional community-based organization, hosting meetings in public community spaces instead of schools. The shift to neighborhoods is also meant to help translate the organization’s membership into political power. Whereas charter school parents may be scattered across multiple neighborhoods, a core of parents from the same neighborhood can wield political voice. FES has now divided New York City into eight organizing zones that match state assembly or state senate districts and is building a parent chapter in each zone.

As noted earlier, these decisions entail trade-offs, however. Organizing at the state or legislative district level obviously lends itself to state-level advocacy, but it can be difficult to convince parents that state-level

activism will lead to improvement in their local schools. Organizing in schools ties the work to parents’ immediate interest, but it may also lead them to focus inward at the expense of systemic reforms.

### **Collaborate with Schools or Work Outside of Them?**

Choosing to organize at the school level raises another important decision: should organizations work in collaboration with schools and educators or outside of them? Mark Warren has argued that collaboration is necessary if the goal is to change what goes on in classrooms: “It cannot be the job of community organizers and parents directly to transform instruction—that remains the province of professional educators.”<sup>53</sup> Relying on cooperation from educators may constrain the issues a group can work on, however. If the goal is to effect systemic reforms that might threaten educators’ jobs, it will be impossible to gain the support of school leaders. At that point groups must organize parents without the blessings of school leaders and teachers. This approach has its own trade-offs, the first of which is the logistical challenge of reaching parents without a list of contact information. Working outside of the schools can also pit organizers against teachers and principals, who are often parents’ most trusted source of education information.

Some groups work in collaboration with educators to set up chapters and recruit parents. Groups that focus on the protection and expansion of charter schools—Families for Excellent Schools and Democracy Builders, for example—work closely with charter school educators to identify and organize parents. Stand for Children works with sympathetic school leaders at both public and charter schools. As one Stand organizer described: “[The city director] and the organizer meet with the school leader, get a list of parent referrals, get an event calendar, and then see how we can meet those parents.” When school leaders are skeptical of Stand’s work, the organizer’s job is much more difficult; the group lacks the contact list and must meet with parents off school grounds.

In contrast, the New York City Parents Union operates outside of public or charter schools, serving primarily

as an advocate for parents who have a grievance in their current school. Mona Davids, the group's president, distinguished her group's work from charter advocates such as Families for Excellent Schools, on the one hand, and public school advocates, on the other: "In New York City, whether you're a charter school parent or a public school parent, if you have a problem in your school, you cannot go to the teachers union groups, you can't go to a [charter school] organization, so you come to us. We truly are the only independent voice advocating for parents' rights in schools." Representatives from the Parents Union will attend school meetings on behalf of individual parents who are union members. The union then mobilizes those members when it comes time to advocate for city- or state-level policy change.

A parent trigger campaign is a direct challenge to a school's educators, meaning Parent Revolution also does most of its work outside of the schools. As senior strategist Pat DeTemple put it, the group is "literally going door to door to door canvassing the neighborhoods, finding parents, and asking them how they feel about school." Working outside the system can set the stage for a parent-versus-educator conflict, which can be difficult for parents to weather. "It's a great thing to crank out 100 people for an event," says DeTemple, "but it's a whole different thing for those people to withstand a teacher berating their child for their parent's activism" Not surprisingly, there are fewer Parent Revolution parent unions than Stand for Children school-level chapters.

### **Agenda Setting: Top-Down or Bottom-Up?**

One of the most common criticisms leveled at ERAOs is that their grassroots members actually have little influence over the issue agenda, which is instead reserved for the professional policy advocates on staff. However, groups themselves often highlight the role that parents play in shaping the agenda and political strategy. Which is it? Do professionals or the parents themselves call the shots?

The reality is, most education advocacy groups exert some control over the issue agenda, though the degree of control varies. StudentsFirst and BAEO define their issue agenda at the top of the organization.

StudentsFirst, for instance, focuses on teacher effectiveness and evaluation, transparency and choice, and cost-effective school funding, and that agenda varies little across state-level affiliates. BAEO works mainly on expanding and protecting existing parental choice programs, though they do advocate for other policies (like the Common Core) on occasion.

In contrast, Parent Revolution and Stand for Children devolve considerable agenda-setting power to parents. In Parent Revolution's case, it organizes parents into school-level unions, and unions are free to choose the remedy they would like to pursue as part of a parent trigger campaign. According to DeTemple, the organization has a distinctly "bottom-up" approach to policy change. The hope is that empowered parents in school-level chapters will eventually come together to push also for district-level change.

Stand's affiliates have some discretion in setting their own issue agenda within general parameters. Before 2012, there was more local control. That year, the organization laid out a set of "essentials" that now serve as "guidelines" for local affiliates. In "What We Stand For," the statement of priorities, Stand's national organization wrote, "The specific solutions Stand works on at the state and local level align with the point of view outlined above. . . . Stand's state staff and leaders decide which specific solutions to pursue."<sup>54</sup> The agendas of local Stand affiliates often differ considerably, sometimes within the same state. For instance, while the New Orleans affiliate was pushing for pre-kindergarten and seeking to shape the city's superintendent search, Baton Rouge was working to attract high-quality charter networks to the city and elect education champions to the school board.

Mona Davids of the New York City Parents Union argued that most ERAOs qualify as "AstroTurf" because they are not entirely parent led, but reflect the views of professionals and funders. Nor, in Davids's opinion, are union-funded community groups independent; she labeled these groups "Afro-turf," meaning they have African Americans "speaking as the face of the organization" but are actually directed by union interests. In her view, because the Parents Union does not receive funding from either the teachers unions or pro-reform funders, it is one of the few truly independent grassroots groups in education.

In truth, no political organization perfectly represents each individual member's preferences. Even the most democratic organization needs a way to aggregate preferences and unite members around a common cause, and those jobs usually fall to leaders. Whether those leaders are professional organizers and advocates or home-grown leaders, the agenda-setting process will closely reflect their ideas.

Nevertheless, the various approaches to agenda setting, ranging from advocacy to empowerment, have implications for both perceptions of authenticity and coherence. As Davids implied, advocacy groups that have a clear policy agenda are vulnerable to charges that their grassroots support does not bubble up organically,

but is manufactured. From a policymaker's perspective, AstroTurf organizing is likely to be far less threatening than a movement that can plausibly claim to have majority support. But empowering parents to come up with whatever issue agenda they choose may lead them to focus on particularistic rather than systemic issues. After all, parents care first and foremost about their children, and the temptation to focus on school-level rather than system-level issues can be great.

Each of these choices—who sets the agenda, whether to collaborate with schools, and what unit to organize—has implications for the strategies that ERAOs pursue to build their membership. It is to that topic that I turn now.

# The Build: Recruiting Parent Volunteers

*With Taryn Hochleitner*

Decisions about organizational structure and agenda setting are prologue; identifying and recruiting parent activists are the main event. Organizers call this process “the build,” and they shared various lessons about how to convince parents to join their organization. How do groups do it? How many parents are they able to attract, and what have they learned about what strategies are most effective? This chapter deals with each of these questions in turn, distilling key lessons from our interviews.

We start with a common theme: finding the right people to serve as organizers and parent leaders is a critical first step. Those with deep roots in the community tend to be the most effective. We then describe the time-intensive and selective recruiting process, where organizers cultivate, court and evaluate potential parent activists over multiple face-to-face meetings. When it comes to group size, organizers tend to prioritize quality over quantity, and the core of active parents is smaller than the overall membership list.

## Finding the Right People

Most of the organizations we interviewed build their membership through a two-stage process. First, they identify potential parent *leaders* using referrals from principals and school staff, attendance at PTA meetings, or good old-fashioned canvassing outside of the school. The organizers then cultivate, evaluate, and train these potential parent leaders through face-to-face meetings, choosing those whom they believe are capable of building and leading a chapter. In the second stage, these parent leaders go forth and recruit parent *members*, hosting house meetings and one-on-one discussions designed to convince other parents to join the chapter.

In other words, as Warren and Mapp found, parent-organizing groups rely on the social capital of already-engaged parents to build the membership. Depending on engaged and well-connected parent leaders extends the reach of the organization beyond the direct contacts of the organizers. Parents are simply more likely to be receptive to a familiar face from their community, especially in neighborhoods where residents are wary of outsiders. As Raymond Allmon, former city director of Baton Rouge’s Stand for Children affiliate, put it, effective parent leaders “are not going to talk the way we talk as reformers. What makes the best parent leader is somebody that is able to communicate clearly, that has a network of people that they’re connected to, and that has the time.”

Typically, Stand for Children’s affiliates ask each of their parent leaders to recruit 10 parent members. In a given school, they usually aim to have three parent leaders (or more), which translates to 33 total members if parent leaders meet their recruitment goals. In Philadelphia, the BAEO affiliate recruits and trains “ambassadors” who are then asked to bring at least five additional parents from their community together for a “Parents with Power Workshop.” BAEO’s professional staff members support these workshops, providing food, child care, and policy expertise. StudentsFirst recruits, trains, and assesses “core volunteers” to make up small “transformation teams” of four to five people. These teams then take ownership of the grassroots activity.

Organizers with Families for Excellent Schools assess parents’ leadership potential from the moment of first contact and invite those who score highly to train as parent leaders. These parents are then taught how to build a chapter, mount a campaign, and canvas the neighborhood for potential members. The most engaged parents are invited to join the citywide organizing committee,

a group of about 50 “champions” that informs the group’s issue campaigns across the city.

The result is a core of very engaged parent leaders surrounded by somewhat less engaged parent members (and, often, a long list of parents who have been contacted but never took action). This structure also allows the professionals to take a back seat at events such as chapter meetings, town halls, or rallies, which are often run by parents themselves.

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*Finding the right people to serve as organizers and parent leaders is a critical first step.*

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**Lesson: The Most Effective Organizers and Parent Leaders Are from the Community.** The communities these groups are attempting to organize often harbor deep mistrust of outsiders. Many organizers attributed this mistrust to the insularity of urban neighborhoods. Darlene Callands of the Philadelphia BAEO described “pockets of communities in Philadelphia that individuals never come out of. Everything they need is located right in their community, and they never have gone downtown. They’ve never gone uptown. They’ve never come out.” In New Orleans, Stand’s former city director Westley Bayas echoed Callands: “This is a city that is extremely insular. Recently we had a parent say, ‘Well, you know, in New Orleans we don’t deal with people from other places.’ So if you live in Treme, you may not want to deal with someone from another neighborhood. That’s just how it is around here.”

How do groups get around this? They hire organizers and recruit parent leaders who are from these communities and can relate to the parents there. Raymond Allmon, Stand’s first ever organizer in Baton Rouge who eventually rose to managing city director, was born and raised in the city, one of 12 children in the family of a local pastor. Allmon’s wife is an eighth-grade teacher at a school rated “F” on Louisiana’s school report card. Allmon ran for the Baton Rouge school board in 2010 against a Republican incumbent and received 46 percent of the vote. He carries around his yearbook from Prescott Middle School, “the worst school in the state,”

and uses it as a way to connect with parents. “Not a lot of people have a picture in this yearbook and go on to matriculate in college,” he said. Allmon began building the Stand chapter in Baton Rouge and has since hired Khadijah Thompson, another native of the city, to build on his direct ties to the community.

Kellen Arno, who oversees StudentsFirst’s grassroots efforts as vice president of membership, described how his organization’s thinking had changed on this front:

Before I came here, there was an emphasis on finding, say, five people who are reform minded who can speak well about this issue and hiring them to do the organizing. I’ve tried to emphasize finding people who are of the community, who are organizers at heart. Let’s start from a frame of reference where the people we’re hiring understand the community they’re going to be working in. That helps you.

The same rules apply to parent leaders. StudentsFirst organizes in rural communities, where they have found that orthodontists can be especially effective parent leaders. They are connected to hundreds of parents, have good standing in their community, and are often parents themselves. More generally, Arno told us, “it’s far more powerful to talk to volunteers than it is to talk to a staff member.”

**Lesson: Organizers Are Selective in Choosing Parent Leaders.** In the same way that parents must choose to get involved with ERAOs, ERAOs also choose which parents they want to serve as leaders. Organizers do not simply cast about for whatever parents they can catch and then ask them to be leaders. Instead, they are quite selective on the front end, choosing parents on the basis of an assessment of their potential. Khadijah Thompson described herself as “the HR manager who asks, ‘Are you really a good fit?’” She provided an example:

For instance, I had been talking to this person for quite some time, and I realized that she was so passionate, but she was so random. And it was disheartening to realize she may not be a good fit, and she may be more of a member than she is a leader. Because we don’t want leaders leading everyone off a cliff, we want people who are structured and organized around a purpose.

In Stand's case, this evaluation often takes five or more face-to-face meetings. But the result of this sorting is a corps of reliable, engaged, and well-connected parent leaders.

Others described how parents are "assessed" or "tested" early on in the process: can they organize a meeting, and can they attract a sufficient number of parent members? As one organizer put it bluntly, "I'm a big believer in tests. My organizing style is big on testing. Testing them to present, public speak, or galvanize others." To be fully initiated, BAEO Philadelphia ambassadors must put on a successful "Parents with Power" workshop with the organization's help. StudentsFirst asks potential leaders to host an event to see whether they will follow through. Once they succeed, they are asked to join a transformation team.

The organizers at Families for Excellent Schools have systematized this evaluation process. The group assesses every parent they come into contact with on a scale of one to five, with one being top leadership potential and five being uninterested in activism. According to organizer Jesus Sanchez, direct assessment by the organization is the most effective way to "weed out individuals on the front end" who are not a good fit for a leadership or membership role. The assessment process is ongoing, with parents reassessed after each activity they take part in. FES then uses these parent-level data to target their mobilization efforts to particular parents.

Parent Revolution cannot be as selective as the others because it draws from the parents within a single school. Parent trigger campaigns require a majority of parents in a school to sign onto the petition. As such, Parent Revolution cannot "take a butterfly net to a community and pick up the ones that are most interested in the issue," in the words of Pat DeTemple. Instead, the organizers have to turn the parents at a given school into a "self-aware, organized, and active base that in turn has at least passive support of the vast majority of people in that population."

But even here, Parent Revolution is careful to identify groups of parents who are likely to be successful. Chief Strategy Officer Gabe Rose told us: "You're panning for gold a little bit with the stuff. You're really looking for the few really excellent, preagitated people who can really catalyze some more latent frustration amongst their peers." Not surprisingly, not every parent

who Parent Revolution comes in contact with goes on to form a chapter. Before officially incorporating as a parent union, parents at a particular school must sign a formal "memorandum of understanding" with Parent Revolution. The memorandum of understanding sets up a partnership between the parents and the group: in exchange for technical assistance in organizing, parents promise to sign onto a "kids-first agenda." According to DeTemple, the organizing team's criteria "have gotten tighter . . . about who they approve and how they count what a parent union chapter is." DeTemple estimated that about three-quarters of the schools that Parent Revolution comes into contact with do not make it to the memorandum of understanding phase.

Thus, ERAOs behave a lot like political campaigns, which target their mobilization efforts to habitual voters and those who are high in social capital.<sup>55</sup> Organizers maximize the return on their recruiting efforts by selecting parents who are predisposed to participate in the first place. Being selective in this way saves time and energy on the back end: "You can't fire volunteers," Stand's Khadijah Thompson told us, "so you have to be specific about who you have on the front lines, and those leaders are the ones who spearhead what we do." Though less engaged parents are brought into the group through the recruitment efforts of leaders, organizers spend less time and energy trying to turn previously apathetic parents into activists.

### **There Are No Shortcuts in Recruiting Parents**

Political sociologists Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol have each written about the trend toward mail-order advocacy: national interest groups such as the National Rifle Association and the Sierra Club now rely on direct mail to recruit dues-paying members.<sup>56</sup> Though they often boast large membership lists, these groups have a membership in name only. As Putnam and Skocpol have pointed out, members are not socially connected in any meaningful sense, and they hardly ever engage in collective political action.

Parent organizers argue that recruitment via mass marketing will not work for parent power efforts, which require a much larger commitment on the part of members than simply writing a check. Recruiting

parents to join a group that demands regular participation in meetings and political activities requires a more time-intensive, interpersonal model of recruitment. As Lee Staples wrote about community organizing, “The bulk of an organizer’s time is spent working either with individuals—in their kitchens, on their front door stoops, and over the phone—or with small groups in an endless array of meetings.”<sup>57</sup> The development of these interpersonal ties with leaders and members is a key determinant of an organizer’s success.

Almost every organizer we spoke with talked about how successful recruitment often requires multiple “face-to-face, one-on-one meetings” with prospective parent leaders. These meetings provide parents an opportunity to share their story with the organizer and give the organizer a chance to assess their level of engagement. Julieta Cruz, of Stand for Children in Arizona, stated plainly: “Leadership recruitment is a lot more effective and it’s higher than it’s ever been doing it the old-school way, which is meeting parents and presenting to them face to face.” Pat DeTemple described the “deeper, one-on-one, structured, long meetings with [contacts] that essentially establish a contract between the organizer and the individual. ‘I’ll help you do this if you help me do that’ sort of thing.” It often takes multiple face-to-face meetings to bring a parent on board, and organizers’ days are spent running from one “face to face” to another. According to Westley Bayas, a good organizer has 15 meetings with individual parents each week.

These personal connections create the kind of social incentives and obligations that can facilitate collective action. In contrast, groups suggested that placing too much hope in electronic efforts to recruit is not worthwhile. In Chicago, Juan Jose Gonzalez noted that online petitions have provided Stand with a lot of new contacts but that the conversion rate from contact to active advocacy is “very low—like 1 percent.” “It’s better to have a targeted, narrowed approach,” he told us.

**Lesson: Providing Services and Benefits Can Bring Parents In.** For some parents, meeting with an organizer a handful of times will entice them to join the organization. But participation in these initial meetings—and the many subsequent activities that membership requires—takes a lot of time.

Rational parents with competing work and family commitments will rarely choose to spend time out of a busy day to meet with organizers or engage in training. Many will ask, quite sensibly, “What’s in it for me?” How do groups encourage busy parents to give them time in the first place?

Some provide what Olson would call, as noted earlier, “selective incentives” (or “side payments”): free services or benefits to any parent who shows up for a workshop or training session. These sessions are designed to appeal to parents’ own self-interest in improving *their children’s* education. Workshops might provide advice on effective reading strategies to use at home, offer information about different school options in the area, or coach parents on the right questions to ask educators about their children’s performance. There is no obligation or quid pro quo here; instead of starting with an explanation of what parents can do for the organization, these services show parents what the organization is willing to do for them. Some parents will hear more about the groups’ work and choose to become politically active, and others will not. Providing these services helps bring potential leaders and members into the groups’ orbit, if only temporarily.

Providing direct services accomplishes three goals. First, it builds trust between organizer and volunteer, laying the groundwork for future engagement. Second, it gives parents an opportunity to learn basic lessons in how schools and the school system work. Third, it provides organizers with a chance to identify and target parents with leadership potential.

The clearest example is Stand for Children’s “Stand University for Parents” (or Stand UP), a 10-week course offered by a handful of Stand affiliates across the country (first piloted in Illinois, Arizona, and Tennessee, it has now expanded). Stand UP’s curriculum is designed to help parents be better advocates for their own children, and participants are under no obligation to become Stand members. Parents learn how to create a good learning environment at home, how to conduct an effective parent-teacher conference, and how to interpret performance data. According to organizers, the Stand UP program is also attractive to principals, who often want higher levels of parental engagement. As Juan Jose Gonzales explained:

There's an immediate connection to the principal's need here, which is more parental involvement for my school. The average principal isn't focused on legislation and policy and new visionary stuff, but on what he or she has to deal with in the school building. [Stand UP] is a hybrid. It gets people into the building to understand the language of the school: how to have parent-teacher conferences, how to talk to you and understand the data about the school. From that, these people will become advocates for larger policies. If principals have systems or structures they want us to funnel parents into for volunteering, and the parents are up for it, we'll of course help.

In other words, Stand UP provides parents with a service that creates an incentive to participate. As a result, the organization gets access to a reservoir of potential parent members and leaders and exposes those parents to Stand's work.

The New York City Parents Union provides help to parent members in navigating the school bureaucracy. The union sends leaders to represent individual parent members in important meetings with school officials, similar to how organized labor sends negotiators to represent employee interests in meetings with management. These parents are then part of the membership that the union can mobilize for policy advocacy at the city and state level.

Education-related services are one way to draw parents in. But parents still have children at home who need to be fed and cared for in the evening, making it difficult to get out of the house at that time. As such, many groups offer child care and food to parents who attend workshops and meetings. Jacqui Dortch, who helped start the Stand UP program in Chicago and now is a coach for other Stand states rolling out the program, told us how important such "small things" are in getting parents to show up: "When you're talking about coming to a class at 5:00 in the evening and being able to have something to eat when they're just getting off work, it's important to parents. So I would say food and child care are two huge components of what's extremely necessary for success." "We always bring food, and we always bring child care," BAEO's Darlene Callands told us.

**Lesson: Framing Reform in Personal Terms Is More Effective Than Using Data and Abstract Policy Ideas.** Political scientists and sociologists have documented how the way an issue is "framed" can affect people's beliefs and behavior. For instance, social movements try to frame problems in a community as injustices rather than misfortune.<sup>58</sup> Framing the decision to vote as a public rather than private choice—by reminding voters that their voting record is public information, for instance—has been shown to boost turnout.<sup>59</sup>

Part of an organizer's job is to reframe the way people see the public schools and their role within them. What frames tend to work? In 2012, Stand for Children's Louisiana affiliate partnered with a market research firm to test different messages with parents in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. The researchers found that the typical, statistics-laden arguments about the need for school reform (for example, standardized test results) were less compelling than other approaches. According to the research firm, parents were "split" on whether statistics were compelling, and many were "numb to the doom-and-gloom arguments about the education system they have been hearing for years."<sup>60</sup> Local statistics that provided a sense of how these parents' children were falling behind were somewhat more effective than national ones.

As the organizers might have predicted, messages that featured personal stories from parents were most effective. Parents found a test message featuring a story about one parent's experience with Stand most compelling. The researchers found, "[Parents] could relate to the parent depicted in the materials and said she inspired them to take action."<sup>61</sup> Jon Valant's research on informing parents about schooling options finds a similar pattern: simply providing a pamphlet full of statistics was not as effective as hearing a personal story.<sup>62</sup>

The researchers also found that it was critical to frame the state of education as something parents could change. Message testing in the focus groups indicated that the most effective messages "highlight parents' fears while providing hope. Statistics are useful only if coupled with a plan to change them."<sup>63</sup> Providing concrete action steps was particularly important: "What parents seem hungry for is a clear action plan and tangible steps they can take to contribute to the cause."<sup>64</sup> One parent warned the focus group researchers, "If you want my

support, you can't just throw out statistics. You have to tell me this is what we are going to do, specifically. Detailed plans." To read more about framing and the issues parents are most concerned about, see the sidebar "What Issues Do Parents Care About?"

### Thinking about Optimal Group Size

In his *Logic of Collective Action*, Olson argued that small groups are better able to engage in collective action than larger ones, where the free-rider problem is likely to be more acute. When groups are small, he posited, any one person's failure to participate is more likely to be noticed, and "the recalcitrant individual can be ostracized, and the cooperative individual can be invited into the center of the charmed circle."<sup>65</sup>

Optimal group size is, in part, a function of group goals. If groups want to turn out enough supportive voters on Election Day, it may be in their interest to recruit large numbers of members to accomplish this short-term goal. Likewise, groups that are trying to push a state-level policy change may need a wide array of voices from around the state active during a given legislative session. But groups that wish to sustain political pressure on policymakers over time—to maintain a drumbeat for reform—may be better served by a smaller core of volunteers who are more likely to stay engaged and easier to reach.<sup>66</sup> When larger numbers are needed, groups can rely on core members' social networks to reach a broader group of supporters.

Table 2 displays some data on group size drawn from our interviews. Note that the figures for each group were current as of the date we last spoke with the organizers, and groups were given an opportunity to update their numbers before this report went to press. But membership is fluid, changing from week to week. The point here is to provide a general sense of how different groups vary in size, not to rank them according to their size (as we will describe, size may not be a particularly good measure of effectiveness anyway). Where organizers mentioned it, we also noted the membership goals that groups had established for their particular district or region.

Two patterns stand out from table 2. First, most groups categorize parent members on the basis of how

active and engaged the parents are. Some simply distinguish between leaders and members (for example, Stand for Children), whereas others have multiple tiers—champions, activists, "core members," or steering committee members (FES, Students First, and Parent Revolution). In general, the number of active members is significantly smaller than the larger number of people considered part of the membership.

Second, and related to the first point, although the groups vary in size, they rarely boast more than 500 active members. Again, some have larger membership lists—people who have at some point taken action on the group's behalf—but the core of active volunteers is often much smaller.

### Lesson: Understand That Size Is Not Everything.

The large majority of organizers argued that group size is not everything in education politics. Echoing Olson, many suggested that a very large group would be difficult to manage and to keep engaged. In addition, they said, growing much larger might dilute the quality of the activism. Stand's Raymond Allmon put it plainly: "Once you get to 500 members and 45 leaders, it's really all you can manage. What would I need 2,000 people for? What could I possibly need that many people to do?" "Quality over quantity" was a consistent theme among organizers. In Philadelphia, BAEO's Darlene Callands argued, "I would rather have 10 folks that get it, understand it, are passionate about it, and leave that room ready to go than to have 100 people in the room just so I could say I empowered 100 people. I need more quality out of them than quantity."

The emphasis on quality over quantity grows from a sense that policy change does not necessarily require an army of parent activists, but can result from timely participation by a small number of informed parents. While electoral politics, petitioning, and political protest are numbers games, policy activism can also consist of key testimony at a public hearing or a parent gaining the ear of a key lawmaker. As such, Kellen Arno from StudentsFirst thinks it is a mistake to conclude that policy change requires a grassroots army:

I think there is a false notion that you actually need [huge numbers] to be successful. Five parents can completely change a bill if it's the right five parents

TABLE 2  
GROUP SIZE

Group	Locus	Current Size	Goals
Stand for Children Louisiana (New Orleans chapter)	School district	34 parent leaders, 200 members (12 schools)	
Stand for Children Louisiana (Baton Rouge chapter)	School district	44 leaders, 370 members (16 schools)	45 leaders, 500 members
Stand for Children Illinois (Chicago chapter)	School district	50 leaders, 270 members (13 schools)	65 leaders, 400 members (13 schools)
Stand for Children Arizona (Phoenix chapter)	School district	17 leaders, 200 members	
Stand for Children, District X <sup>a</sup>	School district	16 leaders, 277 parent members (15 schools)	
StudentsFirst, State X <sup>b</sup>	State	117 core members, 32 of which serve on a transformation team, and 11,900 community members	
Families for Excellent Schools, New York City	City	578 leaders and champions, 4,084 activists, 8,524 members	
Families for Excellent Schools, Connecticut	State (CT)	181 leaders and champions, 200 activists, 2,000 members	
BAEO Philadelphia	City/state	90 ambassadors, 300 parents who have gone through training	
Democracy Builders	City/state	1,000 “very engaged” parents, 5,000 “moderately engaged” parents, 50,000 parents on membership list	
Parent Revolution	State (CA)	12 parent union chapters, 63 elected members of steering committee, 390 total members	
New York City Parents Union	City/state	23 parent leaders, 8,000 members	
Parents United for Public Schools	State (MN)	200 graduates of parent boot camp, 5,000 people in their database	

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Stand for Children shared more detailed data on one anonymous school district where they operate. <sup>b</sup> StudentsFirst shared more detailed data on one anonymous state where they operate.

Source: Author interviews.

who have a good message and who you can get in front of legislators or local school board members, who can actually tell a compelling story that’s grounded in some facts but also some emotion. You don’t need an army necessarily.

In Minnesota, while Parents United for Public Schools has thousands of people in its database, Mary Cecconi believes in the “power of five”: “Get five people

around the table, get them to understand this relationship between what happens in the capital and Lake Wobegone Elementary, and keep those five together for a session. If you give me five people in 50 districts, I can change a vote.”

Optimal group size obviously depends on the policy objective in question. In New Orleans, Stand’s effort to provide parents with a mechanism to shape the search for a new superintendent lent itself to a

## What Issues Do Parents Care About?

Stand for Children asked its parent contacts about what education issues were of the greatest interest to them, and the group shared some of the results with us. On this item, parents were given 15 different issues to choose from and could choose more than one option. The issues that were most popular with parents have the highest total tally. Figure A shows the top five and bottom five most-cited issues.

For the most part, the top five most popular are concrete issues that have a direct impact on day-to-day schooling. In contrast, more esoteric, abstract issues were less popular. “Accountability,” “data,” and “assessment” all fell in the bottom half of the ranking.” Interestingly, broader choices like “local issues” or “school funding issues” were the least popular.

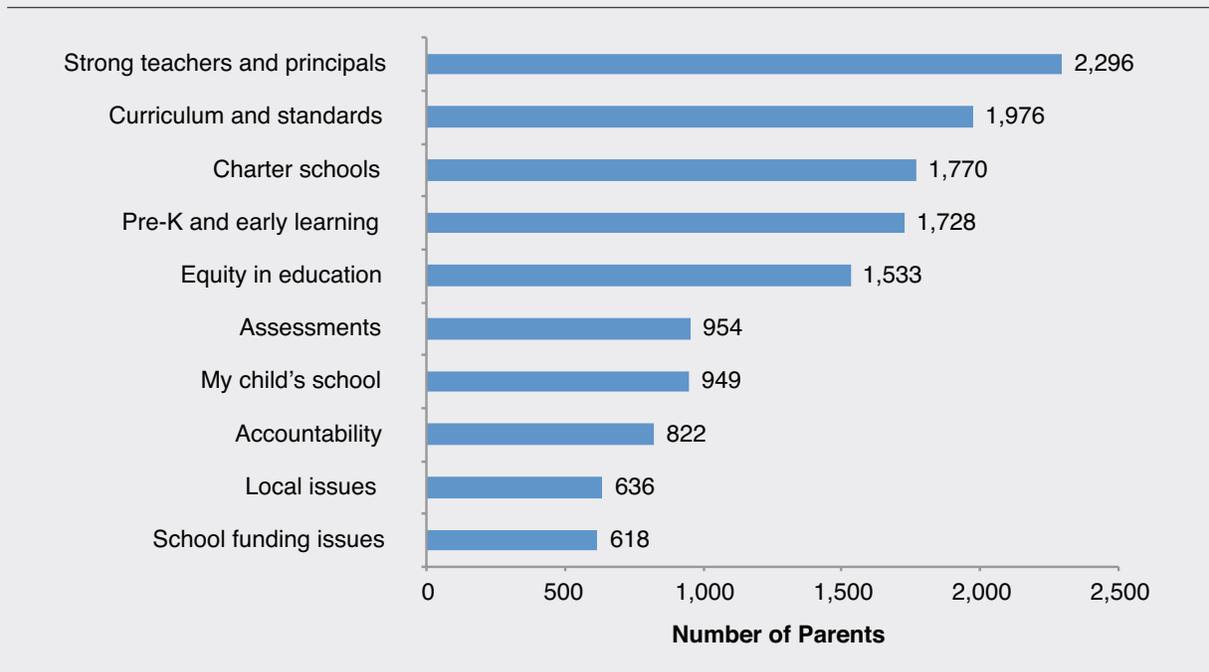
Framing likely explains some of these patterns. For instance, “strong teachers and principals” interested twice as many parents as “improving school administration.” Likewise, parents evidently saw a distinction between “adequate school funding” and “school

funding issues”; twice as many chose the former as the latter. These patterns suggest that parents are interested in concrete issues over conceptual ideas, especially issues that they may have heard a lot about.

One interesting finding was that “my child’s school” ranked near the bottom four on the list, receiving far fewer mentions than broader items such as “great schools for all children.” This finding could reflect survey research, which consistently finds that most parents believe in the quality of their child’s school even though they see problems with the entire K–12 system. It may also reflect Stand’s mission, which consciously tries to expand parents’ interests beyond the schoolhouse door.

The point is, many of the issues that preoccupy education reformers—data, assessment, and accountability, for instance—register with fewer parents than more concrete issues such as better teachers, curriculum, and pre-K.

FIGURE A  
MOST FREQUENTLY CITED EDUCATION ISSUES



Source: Stand for Children internal data shared with the authors.

smaller group of parents. “We focus on quality over quantity because of the issues we are focused on,” organizer Ashley Vernon told us. “We don’t need 100 people there talking [about the superintendent search].” Stand’s Baton Rouge affiliate was somewhat larger and active in more schools, in part because it had different priorities: electing education champions to the school board and building public support for high-quality charter school networks.

Similarly, although a parent trigger campaign requires a certain number of parent signatures to be successful, a strong parent chapter may not need a majority to agitate. Gabe Rose of Parent Revolution suggested that at a school of 600 students, 30 “good, active members that are coming out on a regular basis” constitute a “strong, healthy chapter.” In “full-blown campaign mode,” that number would likely expand to 100 members on paper and 50 activists, but those numbers still only constitute about 15 to 20 percent of the student body.

**Lesson: Success Metrics Should Measure Active Members, Not the Membership List.** The numbers game raises a related question: who counts as a member? Is it anybody who joins an email list or makes a donation, as is the case in the direct mail advocacy groups? Or are members those who actively participate and take action on behalf of the group? Membership is perhaps best thought of as a pyramid (the “pyramid” or “ladder” of engagement” was a common metaphor in conversations with organizers). At the top of the pyramid are the most engaged parents—Stand’s leaders, FES’s champions, BAEO’s ambassadors, StudentsFirst’s core members, and so on. The next level is somewhat larger and corresponds to parent activists who take action regularly on behalf of the group. Finally, the base of the pyramid is made up of thousands of contacts—parents who have signed up for emails, provided their signature for a petition, or attended a meeting.

Though some groups call any contact in their database a “member,” most readily admitted that the number of active members was much smaller. According to Sharhonda Bossier, “Some groups have a very low bar for what it means to be a member. [FES] thinks that unless you have actually taken part in something, we cannot call you a member.” In New York, FES has a

large contact list (more than 30,000 parents), but at last count only 8,524 of them are considered members because they have taken at least one action. Most chapters of Stand for Children charge membership dues and consider only dues-paying parents to be members.

For StudentsFirst, any constituent who signs up to be part of the database is considered a member. But Kellen Arno estimates that about 8–10 percent of those members actually move up from the base of the pyramid to take action on behalf of the group. Overall, he estimated, 2 percent of the members in the database make it to the top of the pyramid and engage in consistent action.

ERAOs have to be cautious about equating their database of contacts to their membership, as this may leave them vulnerable to charges of “AstroTurf” organizing. Parents United’s Mary Cecconi, for one, was skeptical about some ERAO claims about their membership:

I know lots of groups who simply go around and collect emails and throw people on and then say they’ve got [thousands of members]. You come into a state, you really don’t have connections, but what you do have is a lot of money. It’s easy then to set up a website and really nice brochures and sponsor events and have click-throughs so that you can count everyone who clicks through as a member.

As we discuss in the conclusion, ERAOs have had to respond to these criticisms by building organizations that are more than mail-order advocacy groups. Even still, though, the group of consistently engaged parents tends to be small.

### Measuring Effectiveness with Conversion Rates

The size of the membership is one measure of success. For political organizations that operate within budget constraints, though, the rate at which they successfully recruit prospects (often called the “conversion rate”) is also an important measure of effectiveness. In election campaigns, conversion rates are often the bottom line: how much money did we spend per vote we won? As

such, campaigns have invested millions in evaluating the cost-effectiveness of different approaches.

What do conversion rates look like across parent-organizing efforts? It is worth pointing out that many organizers were reticent to simplify their work down to a single metric, and they reminded us that, as was the case with group size, the goal is not to recruit all those you come in contact with. This was particularly true of those organizers with a background in community organizing, where the number of successes (the numerator) tends to be more important than the rate (successes out of all contacts). Those with a background in campaigns and elections were somewhat more willing to speak in terms of “conversion rates.” Regardless, most were willing to discuss their recruitment success.

The picture that emerged was one where most conversion rates were in the 15–30 percent range. At the highest end of the spectrum, one group said they convert about one in every two parents they recruit; at the other end, we heard rates of 5 to 8 percent. Part of the difference is likely the result of the different ways in which groups calculate both the number of members (numerator) and who “counts” in the denominator (is it all contacts or just those whom an organizer has approached for a face-to-face meeting?). Regardless, organizers acknowledged a need for realistic expectations about recruiting success.

**Lesson: Set Reasonable Expectations for Recruiting Success.** The targets of parent organizers are busy people with complicated lives. Organizers talked of how mobile many low-income families are, often moving from one address to another in a short span of time. Cell phone numbers change from one month to the next. “It’s like the problems with nonvoters,” Stand’s Juan Jose Gonzalez told us in Chicago. “They move, and they don’t have phones, and you can’t call them, and you can’t convince them, you can’t even access them.”

Parents are also self-interested, meaning they may have less incentive to participate once they find a school they are happy with.<sup>67</sup> Colleen Dippel of Families Empowered, a nonprofit group that helps parents on charter school waiting lists find an option that suits their needs, summed it up as follows: “My gut is that when people find the school that they need, I don’t think there’s huge interest in changing the system.

Once they find a school that works, they’re moving on to other things. There are a lot of competing interests.” In markets with a lot of school choice—New Orleans, Chicago, and New York—parents’ ability to “exit” the traditional public school system via a school choice may reduce their incentive to use their “voice” in advocating for system reforms.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, recruiting even a fraction of the parents a group contacts is, in the words of one organizer, “a grind.” Parent organizers schedule a lot of one-on-one meetings, workshops, and training sessions that may only net one or two engaged parents out of every 10. But this is how lasting grassroots organizations are built. As Sharhonda Bossier pointed out, “conversion rates” can be useful metrics, but “we’re talking about people who we hope are committed to a long-term social movement in a way that I don’t think you can always capture with these rates.”

## Conclusion

The emphasis on quality over quantity sounds good, but these groups often face off against teachers unions that boast much larger memberships. Is it wishful thinking to believe that small numbers can compete? We would say not exactly, for two reasons. First, we need to remember that political power is not only a function of numbers but also of information and optics. Lawmakers are beset by professional lobbyists day and night, but they might not hear from actual constituents that often. Rayne Martin, the director of Stand’s Louisiana chapter, argued that some of her group’s influence results from its ability to connect lawmakers to “real people”:

We’re finding that sometimes it may be that having 30 consistent voices active during a legislative session on a particular bill is enough because those voices are authentic. Those voices have a real story associated with them, and the legislators are not used to hearing from real people, so those voices mean more to them than a lot of the other voices they typically hear from.

Moreover, even if parents cannot change the preferences of an official, just their presence in the public eye can provide political cover to sympathetic lawmakers or

make it politically costly for those who vote against their interests. No elected official wants to have constituents interviewed on the local news about a disagreeable vote or decision. In Louisiana, Governor Bobby Jindal will likely go ahead with his effort to drop out of the Common Core, but having parents protest the move on the 6:00 news has cost him politically. Political power is not only about the laws you can push officials to pass but also about the ones you can *keep* them from passing.

Second, mobilization and political learning operate through social networks, meaning that each parent member might touch 5 or 10 additional people. By targeting parents who are already engaged and

deeply connected in the community, groups can leverage those existing networks. Mobilizing key members of a network can catalyze what political scientists Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague call a “cascading mobilization process,” in which individuals persuade others in their circle to vote in a particular direction.<sup>69</sup> ERAOs do not need 1,000 parent members to turn out 1,000 votes.

ERAOs will have difficulty matching the kind of grassroots groundswell that election campaigns manufacture with more money and more people. Nevertheless, as the organizers have argued, they may not have to in order to influence policy debates.

## Taking Action

Building a membership of active parents is a first step toward generating grassroots pressure for education reform. Ensuring that this membership base is effectively deployed is a distinct challenge. Political organizations are built for political action that results in policy change. Such action can take many different forms; examples include voter mobilization and candidate recruitment to shape elections, key testimony at public hearings to influence elite decision making, and large-scale rallies on the steps of the state capitol to signal support for a particular policy. In theory, mobilizing people who share a common goal to take action that furthers that goal should be simple enough. In practice, however, parents are busy people, and competing demands may provide every excuse *not* to participate, even when asked.

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*Before groups can take action, they need to help volunteers build the skills and knowledge necessary to do so.*

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It is also true that effective political action requires some basic political know-how: how government works, what levers can influence decision makers, and how to pull those levers. Organizers know better than to assume that parent volunteers are already equipped to do this work. Rather, as I will outline, research suggests that many citizens, including lower-income ones, lack both the political knowledge and the “civic skills” that are prerequisites to political participation. Before groups can take action, then, they need to help volunteers build the skills and knowledge necessary to do so.

How do organizers prepare parent volunteers for the rough and tumble of political activism? And how do

they then ensure that their activists show up when it is time to take action? Efforts to answer these questions are ongoing, but organizers have uncovered important lessons, many of which mirror findings from existing political behavior research.

### Training and Mobilization: What the Research Tells Us

Political scientists have studied civic knowledge and skills, voter turnout, and habits of political participation for more than a half-century. In this section, I discuss some key ideas from political behavior research that have implications for parent power.

**Civic Skills, Political Engagement, and Group Identity.** In their book-length study of political participation, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady pose a typical question in reverse: why *don't* people participate in politics? They explore three possible responses: “Because they can't; because they don't want to; or because nobody asked.”<sup>70</sup> People “can't” because they lack the “resources”: the time and skills necessary to engage in politics effectively. The authors place “civic skills” at the center of their civic voluntarism model:

Citizens who can speak or write well or who are comfortable organizing and taking part in meetings are likely to be more effective when they get involved in politics. Those who possess civic skills should find political activity less daunting and costly and, therefore, should be more likely to take part. . . . Presumably, someone who routinely writes letters, gives speeches, or organizes meetings will be more likely to feel confident about undertaking these activities in politics.<sup>71</sup>

The authors find that citizens acquire these civic skills through the workplace, at church, or via membership in voluntary associations. They also find that these civic skills are important predictors of political participation and are, indeed, even more important predictors than membership in voluntary associations. They conclude, “What matters for participation is what happens in the institution—the acquisition of civic skills.”<sup>72</sup>

The second reason citizens do not get involved—that is, “they don’t want to”—relates to levels of political engagement, an amalgam of efficacy, information, and interest. As I discussed in chapter 2, political efficacy measures whether citizens think they have the power to affect politics and policy. Those who believe they can get the attention of elected leaders, who know more about politics, and who care about who wins elections are more likely to participate. In their study, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady find that each of these measures exerts an independent influence on participation but that lower income and minority citizens score lower than others on all three measures.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to skills, knowledge, and efficacy, attachment to a group—or “group identity”—can also drive participation. Psychologists have shown that individuals develop social identities on the basis of their group memberships and that such social identities lead them to feel solidarity with members of their own group.<sup>74</sup> Seeing politics as an “us-versus-them” competition can encourage political participation. Group membership also creates social ties, facilitating the flow of political information and creating social pressure to behave in ways that serve the group.

**Mobilization of Parents.** Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s third answer as to why people do not participate—“because nobody asked”—refers to the fact that citizens who are mobilized by a political party or interest group are much more likely to engage in political activity. In their landmark study of participation, Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen argue that much of the variation in political participation is explained by party mobilization efforts (or the lack thereof).<sup>75</sup> Of course, parties and groups target scarce resources toward voters who are likely to take action, meaning some of the mobilization effect

reflects self-selection. Nonetheless, carefully designed randomized field experiments have shown that being asked to participate increases the chances that the average citizen turns out to vote.<sup>76</sup>

What strategies work to mobilize people? Verba, Schlozman, and Brady find that most citizens report being mobilized by people they know personally. Moreover, this personal outreach is most common for the more demanding forms of political participation, such as volunteering and protesting. Likewise, Rosenstone and Hansen chalk up some of the decline in voter turnout to the decline in face-to-face campaigning and the rise of direct mail and phone calls as the mobilization tools of choice.

A series of field experiments have shown that personal contact and implicit or explicit social pressures motivate people to participate.<sup>77</sup> In one of the first field experiments of its kind, Yale political scientists Alan Gerber and Don Green randomly assigned households to receive a visit from canvassers, a piece of direct mail, a robocall, or nothing at all in the run-up to a local election.<sup>78</sup> The face-to-face visit from canvassers had a significant effect on voter turnout, whereas the direct mail and phone calls had small and no effect, respectively.<sup>79</sup> In later studies, Gerber, Green, and assorted coauthors found that mailers designed to generate social pressure raised turnout levels. For instance, telling voters how many people were likely to turn out, and thereby highlighting the social norm of political participation, raised treated subjects’ probability of voting.<sup>80</sup> In another study, researchers found that less subtle measures, such as reminding voters that voting records were public information and threatening to disclose their behavior to their neighbors, also raised participation rates.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, while economists have puzzled for decades over why some people would pay the cost of voting when they are unlikely to decide the outcome, it turns out that social incentives are the ones that matter most in choosing to participate or not. Citizens turn out to vote when the social cost of not doing so is high—letting down a friend or a canvasser or appearing lazy to fellow community members. As I will discuss, the most effective parent power groups have figured this out and use their parent training to develop social ties among members.

## Stand University for Parents (Stand UP)

Stand University for Parents (Stand UP) is a 10-week training course designed to help parents learn how to support their children's education. The course is provided through schools and with the blessing of the principal. Whereas some school leaders are reluctant to involve their schools in Stand's advocacy efforts, Stand UP helps them accomplish one of their goals: to increase parent involvement in their children's education. It also provides Stand with another avenue for recruiting parent activists.

Stand UP's main goals are as follows:

1. To increase parents' knowledge so they can help their children succeed academically
2. To enable families to be more involved in schools and with education advocacy efforts
3. To increase student achievement overall (by encouraging informed, involved parents)

To accomplish these goals, Stand has developed a customizable curriculum taught by a local community member (what they call the "train-the-trainer" model). Classes typically comprise 20 to 25 parents; some are already Stand for Children members and some—though not all—will become members after graduating from Stand UP.

The course is organized around the following units:<sup>a</sup>

- **Session 1: Introduction to Stand UP.**
- **Session 2: Why Stand UP?** This first substantive session aims to impress on parents that they are their children's first and most influential teacher. This session is designed to convince parents that they must take a leadership role when it comes to their children's education, a proposition that can be intimidating for parents who are not highly educated themselves.
- **Session 3: Lead your child to academic success.** This session helps parents interpret grades and curriculum and provides pointers on how parents can create a productive learning environment at home (checking book bags every day after school, scheduling time for homework, and so on).
- **Session 4: Develop a successful student.** Here parents learn the importance of building up their children's sense of self-esteem, responsibility and self-discipline.
- **Session 5: Your child's academic profile.** The goal of session 5 is to help parents understand student data, academic performance and standards. In this class, parents bring in an assessment or a report card and learn how to interpret the data and where they can find more performance information. This session is often run with help from teachers in the school who can explain to parents what steps they are taking to improve performance.
- **Session 6: Build partnerships within your child's school.** This session focuses on how families can set up productive collaboration between family and school. Instructors provide advice on how to communicate effectively with teachers and school leaders at parent-teacher conferences and in other settings and to communicate on a regular basis, not only when there is a problem.
- **Session 7: Your school's academic profile.** This session helps parents understand school-level data and puts school-level performance in context. The school principal cofacilitates this lesson, providing a snapshot of where the school stands as well as his/her plans for improvement.
- **Session 8: Getting your child on track to college.** This session is designed to convey to

parents that the path to college starts early. The lesson ties each of the previous sessions on the parents' primary role in schooling to the concrete goal of college attendance.

- **Session 9: Creating learning communities of action.** In this session, instructors discuss Stand for Children's advocacy work and the campaigns and issues they are currently working on. Aspiring parent leaders from the Stand UP cohort help to cofacilitate this session, running an exercise in which parents develop a strategy to address a problem in the community.
- **Session 10: Graduation.** The graduation ceremony brings parent cohorts from different schools together and features leaders from the school and, often, district or state officials as guest speakers. Parent graduates are called up and handed a diploma in front of teachers, family, and friends.

In 2012, Stand UP was launched as a pilot program in five schools in Phoenix, Chicago, and Memphis and attracted 153 participants. By fall 2013, Stand UP reached roughly 900 participants in 19 schools in four cities. Stand UP works to partner with schools that are "student-centered" and are closely

connected to the community. Among the partnership requirements is what Stand UP calls "targeted attendance"—the school principal must attend certain training sessions, including graduation, to demonstrate to parents that the school is committed to working with them. Teachers are also trained to help encourage family engagement.

The goal is for Stand UP to convert more than 50 percent of each class to dues-paying Stand for Children members and develop roughly 20 percent into leaders. After the first three pilots (spring/fall 2012 and spring 2013), Stand UP had graduated 888 parents, 68 percent of whom became Stand for Children members. The data were not yet available for the fall 2013 cohort, but a Stand for Children official expected that 665 would graduate, more than 80 percent would become Stand for Children members, and a handful (roughly 10–12 percent) of those members would become parent leaders.

### Note

a. Jacqui Dortch, Stand for Children's national parent engagement coach and lead designer of Stand UP, shared insights via an interview and primary source documents. Kelly also attended a Stand UP graduation ceremony in Chicago in April 2013.

## Parent Training: Building Skills, Efficacy, and Identity

Many of the parent-organizing groups we interviewed had developed some form of training for parent volunteers, be it a brief orientation meeting or a full-fledged, multisession "boot camp" on civic activism and education reform. What do groups actually teach in these training sessions, and how is the material delivered? As always, approaches vary. Here we highlight three of the efforts that stood out from our research.

**Stand for Children.** Stand for Children has developed two varieties of parent training: a four-part training program for aspiring parent leaders on policy, politics,

and grassroots organizing, and the more involved 10-week Stand University for Parents already discussed. (See "Stand University for Parents [Stand UP]" sidebar.) I focus here on the parent leader training program, which is explicitly designed to train parents as Stand activists.

Stand's leader training program is designed to take six hours in total (nonconsecutive), a manageable but not negligible amount of time.

- The first session focuses on Stand's story and mission as an organization and the current work it is doing in the community and reconfirms what the expectations are for a parent leader.

- The second training session encourages parents to develop and share their own story as it relates to education reform and Stand’s work. Why are they interested in school reform? What motivated each parent to join Stand for Children? This process fosters a personal connection to Stand’s work and exposes parents to each other’s stories (thus building a sense of common cause). More practically, the storytelling process also helps parents to develop the narrative they will use to persuade other parents to join.
- The third training session focuses on current education policy issues and on helping parents to understand the dynamics of political power. A primary goal of this session is to convey to parents why collective political action is critical to education reform and to discuss the levers organized parents have at their disposal.
- The fourth training session focuses on building the organization: how to go about planning an event and getting other parents to turn out. In this session the organizers make the formal request of parents to become dues-paying members.

Once the standard training is complete, parent leaders are expected to host a recruitment event for other parents—their first big test as leaders. Stand organizers help leaders with the logistics for the event, such as how to pull together an invitation list and how to measure turnout. They also help the leaders write out a script and fine-tune their pitch.

**Families for Excellent Schools.** Families for Excellent Schools has developed four training “pathways” that parents can choose from. Each of the training modules is designed to be self-contained, and each is six-and-one-half hours long, meaning parents spend essentially a whole day with the organization.

- The “Core Pathway” is an introductory training session focused on education reform issues and the roles and responsibilities of the parents who choose to volunteer with FES. The session provides a basic overview of how education policy

is made in New York City, how policy affects schools, and what the key education issues on FES’s agenda are. Organizers also prepare parents to speak publicly about how these issues affect them and their children and how to have a conversation about education reform with other parents.

- The “Chapter Building” pathway teaches parents who wish to lead neighborhood chapters how to recruit, mobilize, and encourage other members of the community to support FES. This pathway walks parents through the process of building issue-based campaigns and rallying supportive community members.
- The “Public Speaking and Community Engagement” pathway prepares parents to set up meetings and speak with public officials about education reform. One of FES’s most consistent actions is the lobby visit, where parents pay a call at a state legislator’s district office. This session is designed to teach parents why those visits are important, how to schedule them, and how to prepare for them.
- The “Field Canvassing” pathway trains parents how to canvass a neighborhood effectively and provides an opportunity for parents to participate in a canvassing campaign under the guidance of an organizer. According to Jesus Sanchez, this session is focused explicitly on “electoral politics and how to literally get out the vote.”

In addition to the four pathways, FES has developed an invitation-only “advanced training” program for select parents who have gone through the other pathways and proved themselves ready and willing for more responsibility. The advanced training program essentially teaches parents how to be organizers for FES. The parents who go through the advanced training program are a “very select” group, Sanchez reported.

**Parents United for Public Schools.** Parents United for Public Schools has developed parent activist “boot camps” in 15 different regions around Minnesota. The

boot camps are focused on the basics of school governance, funding, and politics—“how are schools in Minnesota funded, who makes those decisions, [and] what is the federal relationship,” according to the group’s executive director, Mary Cecconi. They are typically run with the blessing or endorsement of a principal or superintendent, whom parents tend to listen to when it comes to questions about education.

Cecconi pointed out that most parents are not familiar with the internal workings of the policymaking process. For instance, the instructors at the boot camp explain why holding a majority in the state legislature is important: the majority gets to appoint the committee chairs, who decide what bills make it to the floor, which in turn gives them control over what laws will get passed. Illustrating the stakes of who winds up in the majority helps impress on parents “why the fight happens in every legislative district,” Cecconi said. The boot camp training also teaches parents about the legislative calendar and timeline, highlighting the times of the year when parent voices are most likely to be effective.

The boot camps also help to create ties among parents who are interested in activism but are scattered across a given region. Cecconi described how engaged parents with an interest in policy advocacy might live in the same area but not know one another. Bringing together three or four parents each from five or six legislative districts in a region creates new ties among parents—building social capital in the process. After the boot camp, parents are added to Parents United’s contact list. The hope is to extend the group’s reach to others in the legislative district through those newly trained parents.

**Lesson: Effective Training Builds Efficacy and Collective Identity as Well as Skills and Knowledge.** The training programs profiled here go beyond simply transferring civic knowledge and skills to parents. These are not your standard high school civics classes. In addition to providing knowledge, they are also designed to build up parents’ sense of common cause and political efficacy. Indeed, parents spend considerable time sharing their own stories with their fellow volunteers and their organizers. Juan Jose Gonzalez, Chicago city director with Stand Illinois, pointed out how important this networking process can be for charter school parents in

particular. In contrast to middle-class parents in neighborhood schools, who often interact with one another on school issues, urban charter school parents often live all over the area and may not relate to one another outside of school. Programs such as Stand UP give these parents a chance to “identify with their community and with each other,” Gonzalez said, which builds a sense of attachment to the cause.

Organizers also use the training to highlight how collective political action can change things for the better, thus building efficacy and optimism about the future. As Westley Bayas, former Stand New Orleans city director, told us, Stand’s third training session is designed “to get parents to understand that when they are connected to other people and working towards the same goal, how they can influence decision makers.” In this way, these training sessions lay the groundwork for political action not only in the near term but also for sustained engagement.

**Lesson: Training Identifies Committed Parents.**

Because training demands parent time and energy, it provides another mechanism that sorts parents according to their level of commitment. Organizers admitted that despite considerable time spent assessing “fit” on the front end, some potential parent leaders never show up, and others make it through a training session or two, only to drop out because other commitments get in the way. As Stand’s Bayas explained, “There is a bunch of excitement and adrenaline when you sign that membership card, but training gives them a sense of what leadership really looks like.” He went on to argue that if parents “understand what they are getting into at the beginning, then they will either self-select out and say they’d rather be a member than a leader, or they’ll say ‘Yeah, I can take this on.’” Although this attrition may represent a lost opportunity, it also ensures that those parents who do make it through are likely to be active, engaged members.

For those who do show up, training also provides yet another chance for organizers to evaluate parents’ skills and interests with an eye toward deciding which individuals are well suited for what roles and activities. Training often involves role playing with parents to prepare them for activities such as recruiting, testifying, and canvassing. This practice allows parents an

opportunity to think about what activities they want to participate in and gives organizers a sense of parents' strengths. (See "How Do Parents Want to Participate?" sidebar.)

### Taking Action: Mobilizing Parents for Reform

After all the strategic decisions about structure have been made and the lengthy process of recruiting members has occurred, the real question is whether an ERAO can turn out its members when it is time to take political action. The parent power groups we interviewed mobilize parents for activities of all shapes and sizes—large rallies, get-out-the-vote efforts, petition drives, public testimony at hearings, lobby visits, phone banks, letter-writing campaigns, and on and on. The mix and frequency of activities have everything to do with a group's goals; those trying to influence state policy may find rallies and legislator visits to be particularly effective and structure their schedule to correspond to the legislative calendar. (When the legislature is out of session, mobilization may be less frequent.) Meanwhile, groups focused on school- or district-level policies are regularly active throughout the school year, mobilizing parents to attend important school board meetings and committee hearings and to canvass in anticipation of local elections.

Like recruitment, mobilization is often a two-stage process, with organizers contacting parent leaders, and parent leaders mobilizing parent members and others in their network to participate. Having a handful of well-networked parent leaders who are ready to mobilize others enables groups to manage large numbers of constituents without having to contact each of them personally.

Organizers also explained how different types of action require different levels of quality and quantity. For instance, although a large political rally needs large numbers to be successful, it is not particularly demanding in terms of civic skills. Meanwhile, a couple of parents can testify in front of a policymaking body, but they had better be well prepared to speak and take questions.

Instead of focusing on raw turnout rates, organizers often tailored measures and expectations to the job at hand (for example, the quality of the testimony at

a school board meeting rather than the number who testified). Nonetheless, in an effort to get a sense of the rhythm of mobilization and the rate at which parents show up, we asked each interviewee about the types of events they mobilize parents for, how often they mobilize their members, and their success rate in turning out parents. Of course, some months may be much busier than others, and some events may draw more than expected. But some organizers were willing to describe the typical rhythm (while others explained that their answer depended on what was going on in the world). Table 3 provides information for groups that were able to provide a concrete estimate.

The table reveals a couple of patterns. First, some organizations provide regular, near-constant opportunities for action. For instance, Stand's Chicago affiliate mobilizes parents for some kind of action once a week. The same goes for Families for Excellent Schools; according to Jesus Sanchez, the most engaged parents may be mobilized twice a week. Other groups are tied to the legislative calendar, and their activities reflect that. BAEO's Philadelphia chapter, for instance, rallies at the capital twice a year, once to support the tax credit scholarship and once to support charter schooling.

Second, many organizers referred a "one-third" rule of thumb: you must contact and get commitments from three times as many parents as you need to turn out enough parents. Indeed, Juan Jose Gonzalez from Stand's Chicago chapter said the group's success rates of 33 to 40 percent were somewhat lower than he experienced in the immigrant rights movement, where turnout rates of 50 percent were common. He attributed that difference to the demands on low-income parents: small children who need attention and care, job demands, unreliable transportation, and more. In Phoenix, Stand organizers also described how undocumented parents often lack reliable transportation, which can depress turnout rates.

**Lesson: Groups Mobilize People Early and Often and with a Sense of Urgency.** In our conversations with organizers, a "holy trinity" of mobilization emerged. First, get parents involved in political action as soon as possible. Second, provide opportunities for political action regularly so that parents stay engaged. Third, develop a sense of urgency about the work at hand.

## How Do Parents Want to Participate?

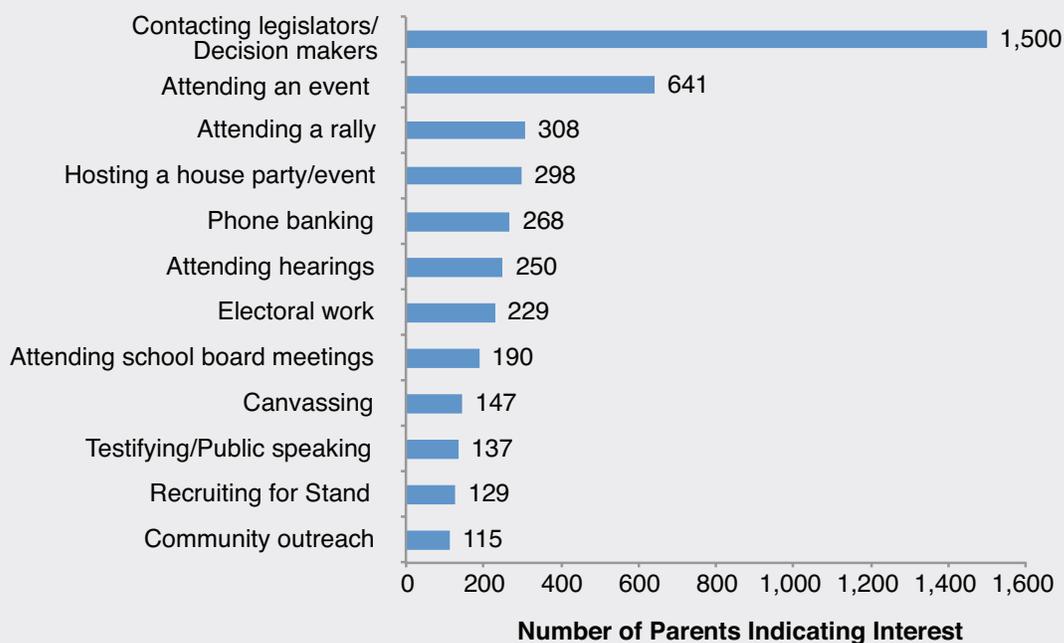
In the same data base discussed in the “What Issues Do Parents Care About?” sidebar, Stand for Children also asked respondents what kind of political activities they would like to participate in. Recall that the data analyzed in the second chapter of this report also showed that parents rarely attend school board meetings, join protest marches, or contact radio or TV. Robert Putnam’s research has found that local, community-based participation—the kind of activity that requires interaction with others in the community—had declined most dramatically during the last half of the 20th century.<sup>82</sup> Figure B, which illustrates the participation preferences of parents, helps explain why.

Contacting legislators and decision makers, an activity that is not time-consuming and can be done on one’s own, was by far the most popular option. Attending an event was a distant second. In contrast, forms of participation that demand more in terms of

time or civic skills were chosen far less often; canvassing, testifying, recruiting, and community outreach were the least preferred activities. Ten times as many parents chose contacting legislators as canvassing or testifying and public speaking.

These patterns also echo what organizers told us about targeting mobilization appeals to particular parents who have proved themselves willing and capable of particularly demanding activities—testifying or interacting with the media. On the basis of the distribution preferences uncovered by this survey, this finding makes sense; mobilizing a broad swath of the membership to testify, for instance, would likely result in few takers anyway. When it comes to bigger events that require less training and commitment—attending rallies, or sending a postcard to an elected representative, for example—the reservoir of willing activists is a lot deeper.

FIGURE B  
PARENTS’ PARTICIPATION PREFERENCES



Source: Stand for Children internal data shared with the author.

TABLE 3  
MOBILIZATION AND TURNOUT

Group	Activities	Frequency (How Often?)	Turnout Rates
Stand for Children Illinois (Chicago chapter)	Testimony at hearings, visits with elected officials, press events, canvassing, rallies	Weekly	33 to 40 percent
Stand for Children Arizona (Phoenix chapter)	Chapter meetings, community forums, canvassing, school board elections	Every two weeks	33 percent
Families for Excellent Schools	Visits with elected officials, petition drives, canvassing, press conferences, public forums, rallies	Weekly	33 percent
BAEO Philadelphia	Two capital rallies a year (one for tax credit scholarship, one for charter schools); four canvassing events in Philadelphia per year	Varies	50 percent of those who commit actually show up

Recall that Stand’s Louisiana focus groups found that prospective parent volunteers were hungry for concrete plans. Not surprisingly, most parent power groups find ways to put new parent volunteers into action right away, often before they have officially become members at all. Families for Excellent Schools stands out in this regard. FES does not consider a parent a member until after that individual has taken an action on FES’s behalf. After parents first come into contact with the group and indicate interest in joining, they are put into action immediately. The first action can entail any number of things—attending a meeting, accompanying an organizer on a neighborhood canvass, participating in a phone bank or a petition drive, or some other event (training also counts). Those who participate are assessed again on the one-to-five scale, and interested parents are invited to train as leaders.

FES also provides regular opportunities for parents to take action. Organizer Sanchez remarked on how “at any given time, there are probably three, four, five, or six actions that are going on in different parts of the city. So a volunteer will always have something to do that’s engaging and exciting and keeps that level of engagement throughout the process.”

Similarly, Parent Revolution does not encourage parents to go for a parent trigger campaign immediately.

Instead, the organization often works with parents on a series of smaller campaigns to tackle school-level issues first. Under California law, public school parents can register what is called a “Williams Complaint,” which allows them to call for an inspection of a particular school-level issue—cleanliness, safety, a teacher vacancy, and so on.<sup>83</sup> Parent Revolution helps organize groups of parents to register such complaints. Submitting these small complaints gives parents an immediate goal to work on, an opportunity to hone their leadership skills, and, they hope, a couple of wins under their belt. After a series of successful complaints, some parent chapters will have the organizational capacity to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with Parent Revolution and mount a full trigger campaign.

Finally, many organizers reported that building a sense of urgency encourages parents to turn out. For instance, Kellen Arno of StudentsFirst argued that shorter legislative sessions are easier to work with than yearlong ones “because there’s this sense of urgency that comes with [shorter sessions].” In Connecticut, when the legislature threatened to cut charter school funding in 2013, Families for Excellent Schools rallied 800 parents to the state capital to protest. “When people are fighting for survival,” cofounder Sharhonda Bossier argued, “more and more folks are willing to do that

work.” In Philadelphia, Darlene Callands of BAEO has had a more difficult time mobilizing charter school parents because “they are very comfortable and complacent around charter schools. And I don’t know why because we’re always under attack, but I find myself doing more educating and reaching out to parents around charter school issues than anything else.”

Granted, taking “early, often, and urgent” to the extreme can backfire. Thrusting novice parents into the political fray too quickly may jeopardize the organization’s reputation for well-prepared parent activists. And organizers admitted that there is such a thing as “overmobilizing” parents to the point of fatigue. Similarly, projecting a false sense of urgency all the time can desensitize parents, leading them to ignore calls to action when it really is time to mobilize.

**Lesson: Human Touch Is Key.** While Obama for America was applauded for its use of the Internet in 2008 and 2012, parent organizers highlighted the importance of direct, personal contact with parents (phone calls and face-to-face meetings, for example). Few organizations cited email or robocalls as effective mobilization tools, and traditional mail was only mentioned a couple of times. Such impersonal appeals are less likely to generate the kind of social pressure that drives turnout.

Instead, every organizer we spoke with cited direct phone calls—and a lot of them—as the most effective way to get parents to commit to showing up. Organizers also use phone trees, where they call a parent leader and ask that person to call all the parents in that network, to maximize their reach. Organizers noted the following:

- Jesus Sanchez (FES): “Phone calls and direct contact, one-on-one direct contact, has been the most effective for us, the tried-and-true multiple touch method. At least four touches is going to raise our ability to turn somebody out, and that’s four different touches from different people.”
- Julieta Cruz (Stand Phoenix): “You need to call them, personally, and sometimes it can be a lot, but that’s why you have leaders connected to the members. I can just give a call to Lydia and be like, ‘Lydia, we’re really going to have this important

meeting tomorrow. Can you please reach out to the parents in your school?”

- Kellen Arno (StudentsFirst): “There’s something

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*Parent organizers highlighted  
the importance of direct, personal  
contact with parents.*

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impersonal about social media and text messages that makes it easier to say no. So I think our model is more like ‘Do you have the five people you’re going to call and ask to come today?’ A personal plea like that is far more effective than a call to action via text message, we’ve found.”

- Mona Davids (New York City Parents Union): “You get more parents out if you get them on the phone. When you get them on the phone, there’s a minute or two of chit-chat, asking about how their kids are doing, and then you tell them why [the activity] is important. It’s that personal touch.”

Although direct phone contact has proved most effective, there is plenty of room for experimentation on this front, and some organizers have learned from trying new things. For example, Juan Jose Gonzalez from Stand’s Chicago chapter argued that an experiment with direct mail seemed to boost his turnout rates. His logic was that, to parents, “Something that comes in snail mail is important, their bills, their taxes, or something medical.” Julieta Cruz reported being surprised by the success Stand’s Phoenix chapter had with text messaging: “Lots of moms are texters these days, so sending text messages is another effective way.”

## Conclusion

Thus, the key insight from cutting-edge research on voter turnout is this: mobilization efforts will be most effective when they trigger the kind of social pressure that nudges people to participate. Most often, those

## TURNING LIGHTNING INTO ELECTRICITY

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pressures result from being asked to participate by someone you know. Social pressure can only operate, however, if parent volunteers know organizers and one another well, feel bound together by a common cause, and believe they are capable, as a unit, of affecting

politics and policy. This is where parent training programs come in. They build these prerequisites, laying the groundwork for organizers and leaders to lean on volunteers when it is time to mobilize.

## Sustaining Engagement

Whichever side of the debate you are on, it is difficult to disagree that education reformers have made considerable progress over the past decade. Cornerstones of their agenda that were once quite controversial—the expansion of charter schooling and other forms of choice, teacher evaluation and tenure reform, transparency and accountability for student achievement, and high standards—have become a central part of the policy debate in states and districts across the country.

But as ERAOs know well, new policies must be implemented before they affect schools and classrooms. Regulations must be written, decision makers must follow those regulations, and the policy must survive through court challenges and subsequent political turnover. In other words, how policies play out on the ground depends on thousands of small decisions by state and local bureaucrats, judges, and educators themselves, some of whom may be less keen on the new policy than the legislative coalition that passed it. Even *after* a policy victory, then, opportunities abound for opponents to slow, scuttle, or completely undo the change before it ever touches a child's classroom.

Unlike legislation, implementation decisions are also a step or two removed from electoral politics and public opinion, the dimensions most readily affected by grassroots parent power. Instead, influencing implementation requires consistent vigilance and activity in multiple policymaking venues over time. So, for example, although supporters of the Common Core were quite successful in convincing states to join the consortium, they have had a tougher time ensuring that the assessments, accountability, and teacher evaluations will be implemented as designed. Meanwhile, few of the lofty promises states made during the Race to the Top competition have come to fruition once they reached the implementation phase.

Simply put, it is one thing to get voters to turn out or even join a political group for a particular event

or activity. But the long time horizon for meaningful policy change means parent power groups must also sustain their activism after policy victories and policy defeats alike. Retaining parent volunteers throughout this process can help ensure that someone is keeping a watchful eye over implementation.

There are also practical reasons to focus on retention of parent volunteers. If ERAOs had to recruit a whole new slate of parents every year, they would spend most of their time trying to find people, leaving fewer resources for taking action. Moreover, veteran parent volunteers can help to expand budget constraints by taking on more responsibility for recruiting and training. The “train the trainer” model can give organizers much broader reach.

But how do political organizations sustain activism and engagement over time, and are parent power groups rising to this challenge? In truth, most organizers recognized the importance of sustainability and retention to their success but admitted that these questions represent a looming challenge. In this chapter, I outline some of their early lessons on this front, but I start with a brief discussion of existing research that informs my analysis.

### Retention and Sustainability: What Research Tells Us

With respect to the first question posed here—how organizations sustain volunteers over time—two bodies of research from political science and social psychology might provide some insight. First, evidence indicates that political participation is habit forming. For example, longitudinal studies show that voting once makes citizens more likely to vote again.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, field experiments have found that the effect of mobilizing someone in one election can persist, leading

that individual to be more likely to participate in elections in the future.<sup>85</sup> For some citizens who participate regularly early on in their life, civic activity can become almost automatic over time.<sup>86</sup>

Second, there is compelling evidence that social identities endure over time. In particular, political scientists have cast party identification as a social identity that is both powerful and “sticky”: it stays quite stable over the course of a voter’s life and has a significant influence on subsequent political behaviors.<sup>87</sup> Identifying with particular religious, racial and ethnic, or neighborhood groups exerts a similarly long-lasting influence on people’s beliefs and participatory behaviors. Political groups whose members adopt a social identity—as, say, an education reformer—will likely have an easier time retaining those members over time.

### Parent Power Meets Policy Implementation

Many ERAOs described the challenge of monitoring policy implementation and protecting legislative gains from future challenges. The shift from *mobilization* organizations—groups that can marshal hundreds of parents in t-shirts at the state capital—to *organizing* ones—those that can get a core of parent members testifying at every school board meeting—reflects this new imperative. But it is not easy. Advocacy campaigns have natural ups and downs. Parent activism peaks when a law is passed or an election is won, and it can be difficult to maintain parent engagement on the downslope of that peak. But activism may be just as important in that aftermath as it is in the run-up.

Rayne Martin, Stand’s executive director in Louisiana, described this issue eloquently:

A state law passes, and that’s all well and good. But it actually doesn’t go anywhere unless it happens in the classroom. So we’re trying to figure out how you take a big lever like a state law and then use it to help mobilize and organize at the field level, at the local district, because that to me is a key movement toward sustainability.

As an example, she cited the implementation of the Common Core, specifically the need for teacher

professional development and common planning time. Whether district policy sets aside time for such common planning time is a key implementation issue; without it, standards may not influence teaching practice as planned. “Our challenge for ourselves,” Martin went on, is

letting parents be the driver of that local policy, having them go to the school board and say, “We want you to establish common planning time for teachers.” Part of what we want to do in terms of sustaining these organizations is develop a culture where people are paying attention to laws, they know what gets passed, and they understand the five things that have to happen to change the world for their kids.

Creating such a culture is a distinctly different task from simply mobilizing parents around legislative policy change. The former implies a set of parent volunteers who remain active and engaged over the course of a policy’s lifespan, through the inevitable obstacles and divisiveness. Parent Revolution, whose petition campaigns require perseverance over a school year or more, has had to focus on this goal from the start. Parent Revolution’s Pat DeTemple summarized the group’s view as follows:

We actually are very keenly aware of the organizing versus mobilizing distinction. . . . Getting people to show up for events and do specific actions is one thing. But having the horizontal relationships within the community and the levels of awareness that are strong enough to withstand real, hard pressure requires a level of organization that goes well beyond the usual mobilization category.

Parent Revolution’s need for sustained engagement is especially acute now that a handful of trigger campaigns have reached the implementation stage. After the euphoria of a successful petition drive, parent activists must transition to oversee the implementation of their chosen solution, an entirely different exercise. DeTemple told us that this new challenge is at the top of Parent Revolution’s list of priorities: “Three years ago, I think that some folks might have thought you just do this parent trigger thing, and you win, and

that’s just it; fantastic job, great education result. Now I think we understand that transformation takes time and engagement.”

The group’s broader theory of change also relies on sustainable parent engagement beyond their schools. According to California director Gabe Rose, Parent Revolution hopes to draw some of the most engaged parents from their school-level chapters into district-level committees that can then push for district-level reforms. The goal is to build relationships across chapters and capitalize on the school-level leadership development to “develop the nucleus for a districtwide or statewide movement to put pressure on the system writ large, not just one school at a time.”

Understanding that sustainability is important and figuring out how to promote it are two different things. Measuring parent involvement over time and parent retention from year over year is a start. What does parent retention look like among ERAOs? The short answer: most groups recognized the importance of this dimension but were in the early stages of measuring and evaluating it within their organization. To be sure, most organizers have a short list of the small subset of parent members—somewhere between 5 and 10 percent of the overall membership—who always show up. Outside of these short lists, however, it was not clear how most groups were measuring parent retention, let alone identifying the strategies that can improve it.

### **An Empirical Snapshot of Sustainability**

Important exceptions did exist. Families for Excellent Schools and Stand for Children were willing to share some of their internal analyses of parent retention. Caveats apply: these data were backward looking and may not reflect each organization’s current status. Still, their analysis is useful to provide some context.

As a goal, FES aims to retain 60 percent of its parents—meaning parents engage in multiple actions over time. According to Jesus Sanchez, retention means parents who showed up for more than one event in a certain amount of time (often measured quarterly). FES shared data from an analysis of parent retention they had recently conducted. They sorted members into various “leadership tiers” on the basis of how often

they participated, and then they linked those tiers to the first action a volunteer had ever taken with FES. The definitions are as follows:

- FES member: any community member whom FES spoke to at some point, signed a postcard pledging to “stay involved,” or registered to vote.
- Activists: attended between one and three events.
- Champions/leaders: attended more than three events.

At the time these data were analyzed, FES had 8,524 parents whom they had contacted in some fashion and 4,084 activists who had taken between one and three actions on behalf of the group. When it comes to parents with sustained engagement over time—participation in more than three events—the numbers are smaller. About 4 percent of the entire membership (578 of the 13,186 total parents) fell into the champion/leader category. Among “active” members (activists or above), the subset of especially active parents is more like 12 percent. Not surprisingly, the parents who habitually show up represent a small subset of the overall membership.

The group also shared an earlier analysis (completed in May 2013) that cataloged how parents in the various leadership tiers got their start with FES. An interesting pattern emerged. Analysts broke down events into four categories: training, chapter meeting, one-on-one, or “other event” (canvassing, public meeting, and so forth). Most of the active parents (activists or above) started with either training or a chapter meeting. At the top tiers, training was the most common event; for instance, 47 percent of champions started with a training session, as opposed to 8 percent who started with some “other event.”

This kind of analysis can help FES improve its parent retention rates. As Jesus Sanchez argued, their training pathways are a major part of their retention strategy—an intuition that these observational data seem to confirm. Though these patterns need further research, it seems plausible that channeling prospective volunteers into training sessions could improve the rate at which parents remain engaged over time.

Stand for Children also shared some descriptive membership data for one of their district-level chapters that was founded in 2011. (The district name was kept anonymous.) Unlike the FES data, the Stand analysis did not break parents down according to how much they participate. But Stand members are required to pay dues, and they are expected to renew their membership each year. Therefore, membership renewals are one measure of parent retention. The district affiliate had 360 active members as of 2013, 85 of whom were current or former educators. According to the data, 308 of the members were recruited during 2012, the year after the chapter was formally founded. By the fall of 2013, 102 of those members had renewed their membership. In other words, about one-third of dues-paying members recruited in 2012 had renewed their membership as of fall 2013.

We should not infer much from just two snapshots, but the data suggest that sustained parent engagement over time is far from a given. Groups do not need 100 percent retention to be successful, and it is completely unrealistic to expect all parents to participate in all events. But most groups agreed that sustained engagement was a top priority. What have they learned?

**Lesson: Regular Opportunities Sustain Parent Engagement.** If political participation is actually habit forming, as researchers have argued, it makes sense that regular opportunities for participation can help build a sustainable membership. Multiple ERAO organizers agreed, arguing that creating routine opportunities to take action was key to sustained parental engagement. For instance, FES parents “continuously have a vehicle to jump on, so every zone has something going on, and then the organization also has vehicles,” according to Jesus Sanchez. Stand’s Juan Jose Gonzalez echoed Sanchez: “My style is to consistently generate as many encompassing campaigns as I can to get people involved and allows me to do leadership development.” Of course, organizers should be careful to avoid “over-mobilizing,” where constant appeals can burn parents out and lead them to ignore calls to action. Organizers must therefore recognize what Gonzalez called a “natural rhythm” in an issue campaign.

Nevertheless, the anecdotal evidence suggests that sporadic, infrequent opportunities will make it harder

to keep parents engaged. Creating regular opportunities for action may not increase the number of highly active parents, but it will give those with the interest and the time an avenue to further their civic skills and abilities. Thus, groups that mobilize once or twice a year in response to the legislative calendar will likely struggle to create a core of engaged members.

**Lesson: Groups Can Start Small and Notch Wins.** There is an important corollary to the first lesson about regular opportunities: groups that experience policy wins will have an easier time attracting and retaining parents. The flip side is also true: raising parent expectations too high can lead to disappointment and disillusionment if they are not successful. How do groups help parent volunteers establish a record of success? After all, politics is uncertain.

One key is to start small, that is, start with issues that are more immediate and tractable and work on a few of them in a given year. Parent Revolution’s Gabe Rose explained, “Our big bet was that recruiting people to work on school-level stuff, stuff that was right in front of their face, would be a more effective tactic than recruiting people to issues that are broader in scope but less immediately relevant to everyday life.” Using “Williams Complaints” to push school-level changes is a case in point. Other groups also worked on more immediate issues to develop parent leaders. In Chicago, Stand for Children will work with charter schools that need a stoplight or a crossing guard, with the intention of then wrapping these parents into larger citywide campaigns. In Harlem, Democracy Builders parents, concerned about the bullying of Democracy Prep students after school, attended the local police precinct’s public meeting to share their complaints and get the issue resolved. Such small wins give parents tangible evidence that, collectively, they can make their voices heard.

**Lesson: “Us versus Them” Can Cut Both Ways.** The divisiveness of school reform politics can cut both ways when it comes to sustained parent engagement. On the one hand, name calling and countermobilizing can galvanize a sense of shared identity among more seasoned parent activists. On the other hand, attack politics and misinformation can dissuade novice parents from

staying involved and handicap a nascent organization out of the gate.

One group found that these dynamics can help or hurt depending on the maturity of the parent chapter. Chapters that have attracted a solid core of parents and had a chance to formally incorporate were able to withstand the resulting countermobilization, and, in one organizer's view, the maturity helped to "further radicalize" them and "make the battle lines clearer." But the opposite was true of nascent chapters that lacked veteran activists; efforts by the union to discredit the group were much more effective in that context. Thus, although "us versus them" may motivate veteran parent activists, organizers should bear in mind that divisiveness might scare off novices.

**Lesson: Treating Parents as Co-owners Rather Than Volunteers Can Keep Them Engaged.** Though it seems simple, giving parents a clear stake in the fate of the organization is possibly the most effective way to sustain engagement over time. It seems plausible that parents who think of themselves as partners in the organization and its agenda are more likely to stay involved than those who see themselves as volunteers in the service of professionals. This lesson gets back to one of the distinctions we started with, between parent advocacy and parent empowerment. True empowerment requires devolving significant autonomy to parent chapters, which can be risky from the perspective of an advocacy group with a clear issue agenda.

How do groups provide parents with a stake in the group? Three strategies stand out. The first is relatively simple: ask parents to pay modest dues to join the group. Stand for Children is unique in this regard: they ask parent members to contribute \$5 to become formal members, and parents can contribute more if they wish. Charging dues may seem counterintuitive at first: low-income parents face enough barriers to participation already, so will asking them to pay depress activism even further? But when some chapters moved to complimentary memberships, they found that membership rates did not increase markedly and that parents may have been less engaged.

Why might charging dues lead to more engaged parents? Psychological research on "sunken costs" suggests that once people invest in something, they are

more likely to engage in it. So, for instance, researchers have found that when theater patrons were randomly assigned to either pay full price for season tickets or receive a discount, those who paid full price attended more shows.<sup>88</sup> Though often cited as an example of individual irrationality, the psychology of sunken cost can actually work in a group's favor. Even modest dues provide parents with a level of investment in the organization that may compel them to participate at higher rates. Khadijah Thompson, a Stand organizer in Baton Rouge, argued that dues provide a sense of ownership: "I explain to parents that if we are to move toward really owning this movement, at some point we need to financially support ourselves."

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*Creating routine opportunities to take action was key to sustained parental engagement.*

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A second strategy is to provide opportunities to take on new responsibilities within the organization. Many of the organizers described how they would recruit top parents to serve on leadership committees and participate in special events in an effort to retain and develop them. Families for Excellent Schools has a central "organizing committee" that sets the issue agenda for the city's chapters. The New York City Parents Union has two agenda-setting committees, one working on teacher dismissal issues ("last in, first out" policy) and the other, a legislative committee, tasked with putting together policy recommendations for the next state legislative session. Serving in these positions rewards engaged activists with more responsibility and a seat at the table, thereby encouraging them to continue the work.

Perhaps the most effective way to retain parents is to hand them the keys to the organization and let them run the show. It is simply much harder to walk away from something that you own and control than something where you volunteer under others. This idea came up most often among Stand for Children organizers, many of whom aspired to a future where parents would no longer need their help to do this work. Westley Bayas put it succinctly: "We stick by the Golden

Rule: don't do something for parents that they could do themselves. It operates to that extent because we try to make sure our parents are the ones guiding things. . . . And then if they are, that is what will retain them." Once the core parents in a given chapter get enough experience, Rayne Martin argued, Stand may get to the point where "[parents] don't actually need us around anymore."

For Parent Revolution, while the professionals provide a kind of technical assistance and help guide new chapters, "all decisions are ultimately up to [the chapters]," Gabe Rose told us. The group's organizers have found that engendering this sense of ownership makes parents better able to withstand the ugliness of school politics. As Rose told us, "Once it's theirs, and they own it, they're much more likely to be protective over it." If things turn ugly before that sense of ownership sets in, activists may retreat from the conflict.

As was discussed earlier, this kind of empowerment can pose some risks for advocacy organizations with narrowly defined policy agendas. If parents are truly empowered to pursue the policies and advocacy campaigns they wish, sometimes their decisions may run counter to the group's overall mission. That raises the importance of assessing "fit" at the front end of the recruitment process. Obviously, whether somebody is a good "fit" for a voluntary association depends, in part, on whether that person supports the group's

overarching goals. By recruiting parents who are a good fit in terms of time, skills, and policy alignment, parent power groups can more comfortably devolve decision-making power to their members.

### **Postscript: Some Turnover May Be a Good Thing**

With all of this emphasis on member retention, it is easy to ignore one final point: some turnover in the parent ranks is likely a good thing. Pat DeTemple argued that the kind of systematic turnover that occurs when classes graduate from a given school can be "a blessing." In his view, "One of the toughest problems to deal with in a successful situation is the ossification of the organization and entrenchment of leadership." Without sufficient turnover, groups can suffer from inertia and a lack of mobility within the organization, precluding new members from moving up and exerting any influence on decision making. This, in turn, can depress recruitment. In contrast, for school-based groups, the school calendar creates a built-in requirement to refresh the leadership that, according to DeTemple, "a lot of organizations would kill for." Such leadership churn ensures that new blood will have an opportunity to take the reins.

## Conclusion: The Ongoing Evolution of Parent Power

Throughout the course of this study, it became clear that ERAOs' grassroots activity has evolved over the past decade. Early efforts to mobilize parents tended to be highly visible but inherently temporary affairs—"lightning strikes," such as large-scale rallies or get-out-the vote efforts designed to push a specific policy at a specific time. This approach may have appeared to work when political stars were aligned for policy change. But groups are learning that politics and policy change are marathons, not sprints; once a policy is passed, the action has only begun. As such, the lightning strategy has started to give way to more sustained efforts to organize parents into lasting organizations (to create "electricity"). Advocacy groups that have traditionally focused on mobilization but lacked a formal membership or a network of chapters are now building such institutions.

In Louisiana, for instance, BAEO's former state director Eric Lewis described how a pattern of endless mobilization can distract from the need to actually organize parents. In Louisiana, BAEO has worked to protect the state's private school choice programs by mobilizing scholarship families when political circumstances demanded it. But the group has otherwise lacked a sustainable grassroots organization to rely on between mobilizations. Lewis identified organizing as one of his goals: "In order for us to mobilize effectively, we have to organize. But that has been a challenge in the cycle of continuously trying to mobilize parents to show up. With the work that we do there's always something that comes up. [We are] always setting the organizing aside because we have to get back to mobilizing."

Like other groups in our study, the Louisiana BAEO has set about building a base in select schools and recruiting parent leaders in those schools. The next steps are familiar ones: one-on-one meetings with potential activists and group meetings hosted at the homes of existing parent leaders. Eventually, the Louisiana BAEO

hopes to be able to mobilize large numbers of supporters through this growing network instead of having to contact each potential participant individually. Building the grassroots organization also fundamentally changes the role of parents. As Lewis put it:

It's not about just getting them to show up when you call. Parents shouldn't feel like they're showpieces. Parents should be engaged at a level that the structures should be in place so that they can move some of this on their own. The reality is, parents have been disengaged and disenfranchised for so long, we want to set it up so that they know how to articulate the issues so they can actually affect change.

Efforts to build grassroots organizations will probably not placate reform critics such as Mona Davids and their "AstroTurf" charges. But organizing networks of volunteers into formal grassroots organizations facilitates the steps that come later: mobilization when the time is right and sustained activism through the natural ebb and flow of politics.

### Education Reform Lacks a Standing Grassroots Army

Although every parent is interested in better schooling for their children, there is not a latent grassroots army ready to man the barricades to promote standards and accountability, teacher evaluation and tenure reform, and charter schooling. School choice certainly tends to poll well among urban residents,<sup>89</sup> but wonky issues such as standards and tenure reform are often either too esoteric to generate a groundswell of support *or* manifestly unpopular because they threaten public sector jobs. The truth is, parents generally like the schools their children attend, and when they are

dissatisfied, they try to get out of that school (exit) rather than embark on a long and uncertain political effort to “fix” it via policy change (voice). As Kellen Arno admitted, “There is no army to support education reform. . . . There are armies of people that support various issues within education reform. But this notion that there are these parents that are just wanting to do whatever they can to help education, I’m just skeptical it exists.”

Thus groups have primarily focused on organizing the subset of parents who are sympathetic to these ideas *and* are already active in their communities and in their schools. The notion that professional parent organizers are out cold-calling any parent who will pick up the phone or answer the door to build their numbers is not accurate. Instead, like other community organizers before them, they borrow strength from the networks of key parents in the community. Typically, this means that parent power groups are not out to reverse completely the relationship between poverty and political participation in a community—a “no excuses” model of parent activism. Instead, the goal is often much more modest: to harness potential reform energy that is already present among engaged but atomized parents. These parents can then work to activate others in their community.

In this way, even though parent power may have only a small effect on the probability that a given parent in the community will take action in favor of education reform, it can still have a significant effect on politics. By giving select parents some additional training, technical assistance, and a new way to channel their energy, and then uniting those activists under the same banner, groups can turn lightning into electricity.

Finally, to reiterate a point from earlier in this report, size is not everything in school politics. It is easy to misunderstand parent power as an effort to recruit and train huge armies of parent activists. After all, when we think of social movements, we often think of *mass* political action—the civil rights marches and the antiwar demonstrations, for example. Contemporary parent power efforts may wind up there, but it would be a mistake to assume that is where all groups want to go. Grassroots need not mean “everybody in the community.” Small, engaged, and focused grassroots groups can wield considerable political power.

### Organizing Is More Art Than Science, but More Science Could Help

In his book *The Victory Lab*, Sasha Issenberg describes the growing emphasis on rigorous research and development in political campaigns. Political strategists have invested time and energy to develop a “science of campaigning.” Through randomized field experiments and large amounts of data, political professionals have fine-tuned the substance of their appeals and their targeting strategy. The emphasis on scientific research has markedly changed an industry that traditionally prized instincts and folk wisdom.<sup>90</sup>

Many of the organizers working for parent power groups came from this campaign world, and from Obama for America in particular. Still, most interviewees shared the view that parent organizing is much more an art than it is a science. StudentsFirst’s Kellen Arno, a political consultant by trade, put it succinctly:

I wish I could tell you that like we’re super-scientific and we’ve got the equation or the formula figured out. We don’t. We find trends and we double down on those trends. . . . We’ll see something happening and go, “Oh, okay, this is great, let’s really roll this out everywhere.” And then in the next state over, it blows up in our face and doesn’t work at all. There’s a randomness to it when you’re looking to apply this to the national ends. The bottom line is every community is very different.

Juan Jose Gonzalez, Stand’s city director in Chicago, shared that view, arguing, “This is not a science; this is all art. . . . We kind of have an acquired instinct of pace and flow and escalation.” And Stand organizer Khadijah Thompson from Baton Rouge told us, “My key takeaway for you would be that a lot of this stuff happens organically. You can give people a framework, but it doesn’t always happen that way.”

Nevertheless, most groups are working to develop the analytical capability that will help them test new strategies and get better at what they do. Families for Excellent Schools stands out for its sophisticated data collection and back-end analytics. They track conversion rates from initial contact to eventual action and examine the life span of parent volunteers, keeping an

eye on which parents stay involved and which fall off. Parent volunteers are constantly assessed, and the data from those assessments are linked to both prior training (was a particular training successful?) and future mobilizations (whom should we mobilize for a particular event?).

Those who fund parent power should continue to help groups build up their analytical capabilities and encourage them to engage in the kind of research and development that has served political campaigns so well. There is plenty of room for low-cost randomized experimentation with different kinds of appeals and methods of outreach. Groups could then partner with academic researchers (particularly eager graduate students) to assess the effects of their work. Organizing would still be an “art,” but a dose of social science would not hurt.

### **Transforming Education Reform from Something Done “To Parents” to Something Done “Through Parents”**

Some organizers shared a sense that, up to now, education reform is something that has been done “to” urban parents rather than done “through” them. In this view, well-intentioned advocacy groups have worked to implement chosen reforms on behalf of parents without actually ever consulting with them. This dynamic helps explain why education reform often lacks a standing grassroots army. It was especially palpable in New Orleans, where the post-Katrina influx of reformers had made some longtime residents feel as though control over the city’s schools had been taken from them.

It is naïve to believe that education policy will reflect the will of each individual parent; after all, each parent is just one voice among many other stakeholders. But parent power groups are taking seriously the challenge that education reform must become more than a movement of mostly white, well-educated policy professionals. As I explained at the start of this report, even the best policy ideas tend to fall on deaf ears if they lack authentic support from the community.

In that spirit, it is worth returning briefly to an issue we started with: the political institutions that govern schools tilt the playing field against parent power.

Through hard work and serendipity, ERAOs have made some inroads into the existing system. But the vagaries of democratic control not only make it difficult for parents to make an impact but also may depress their enthusiasm to become politically active. Without some assurance that their activism counts for something, parents on the margin may just stay home.

Reforms to the political institutions that govern schools could amplify parent power and encourage more parents to get involved. Parent trigger laws are just one example. Other changes, such as shifting school board elections to Election Day, reserving slots for parents on important governing committees, and making it easier for candidates to get on the ballot, should be priorities on ERAO agendas. Continuing to push chosen policy reforms through the same old inside-baseball tactics is all fine and good, but it will do little to broaden the base. Reforms to the democratic process could help to crack open education politics even further and give the grassroots a greater say in policymaking.

In the end, we need to remember that it is difficult to estimate the effect that parent power is having on education policy. The same is generally true of almost any grassroots political effort, and scholars still debate what influence, if any, grassroots lobbying has on politics and policy.<sup>91</sup> In a recent paper in this series, Michael Hartney reminds us that grassroots power can affect politics and policy in various ways and that many of them are difficult to measure.<sup>92</sup> And as I have argued, the number of favored policies enacted or the number of supportive votes cast may not be the only—or best—way to measure influence.

Nevertheless, scholars who study social capital would likely argue that parent power is a good in and of itself.<sup>93</sup> Civic activism at the local level has been waning for a half-century, with consequences for democracy, trust in government, and the fabric of local communities. Efforts to bring parents together, raise their sense of political efficacy, and engage them in the political process can help to slow or even reverse these trends, and that will pay dividends for representation in the long run. To be sure, it is all for the better if parent activism leads to policies that result in better education for kids in the near term. But policy reform is a long and often tortuous process. The citizens who are organized

## TURNING LIGHTNING INTO ELECTRICITY

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enough to stick it out will have a bigger say over what goes on in schools than those who start strong but fade

away. Lightning is quick and powerful, but electricity makes things work.

## Notes

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17. By “supportive of education reform,” I mean groups that favor the ideas at the core of the reform movement: standards and test-based accountability, teacher evaluation and tenure reform, and charter schooling. Of course, most groups work on other education issues as well, such as equitable funding,

pre-kindergarten, and school safety. I also interviewed representatives from Parents United for Public Schools, a Minnesota nonprofit, and the New York City Parents Union, both of which are deeply skeptical of the reform movement. These groups provided a view from other grassroots organizations that do not share reformers' views.

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48. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*.

49. See Patrick J. McGuinn, "Mobilizing Mom and Dad," in Kelly and McGuinn, *Parent Power*.

50. Michelle Renee and Sara McAlister, "The Strengths and Challenges of Community Organizing: What the Research

Says,” Annenberg Institute for School Reform, January 2011, [http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/nmef\\_report.pdf](http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/nmef_report.pdf).

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52. In Alinsky’s words, organizers “will not ever seem to tell the community what to do” but will “ask loaded questions” that lead them in a particular direction. See Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 84. Alinsky goes on to explain, “As time goes on and education proceeds, the leadership becomes increasingly sophisticated. The organizer recedes from the local circle of decision-makers. His response to questions about what he thinks becomes a non-directive counterquestion, ‘What do you think?’ His job becomes one of weaning the group away from any dependency upon him. Then his job is done.” (Ibid., 91.)

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62. Jon Valant, “Information and School Choice: Considerations for the Design and Dissemination of School Reports” American Enterprise Institute, November 2014.

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66. As Alinsky notes, unlike labor, which tends to be “anchored to contract dates, . . . mass organization is a different animal; it is not housebroken. There are no fixed chronological points or definite issues.” See Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 66.

67. See Andrew P. Kelly, “Parent Voice, School Choice,

and the New Politics of Education Reform,” in Kelly and McGuinn, *Parent Power*.

68. In his classic study *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Albert Hirschman argues that when consumers are able to vote with their feet by selecting another provider of a good (what he calls “exit”), they will have less incentive to voice their displeasure to the existing provider. In markets with school choice, this dynamic has implications for the incentive to participate in systemic reform efforts that choosers face. See Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970); see also Kelly, “Parent Voice, School Choice, and the New Politics of Education Reform.”

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