

Education

ORGANIZING

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Issue No 19 • Spring 2005

Frustrated by 80 Years of Neglect, Students and Parents Ignite a Fight for a New High School in East L.A.

By Maria Brenes

*One! We are the students!
Two! A little bit louder!
Three! We need a high school!
For the East side!*

The chant was shouted by hundreds of members of United Students (US) in March 2004 at a rally of over 400 youth, parent and community members in front of district offices to demand that the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) build a new high school in East L.A. Three months later, the L.A. School Board voted to invest over \$100 million in building not only a new high school in East L.A., but an elementary school and an adult education center as well. This vote was a direct result of the organizing efforts of United Students and InnerCity Struggle (ICS).

InnerCity Struggle is a community organizing institution staffed by community members who attended the high schools they work to improve. For over ten years, ICS has worked to build the capacity of youth and families to lead efforts for improving economic and social conditions in the

communities of East Los Angeles. United Students is the youth component of ICS and works to build student power for educational justice and to expose inequities in the four East L.A. high schools.

In November 2003, United Students launched a campaign to ensure that a new school be built to relieve overcrowding at Garfield High School. Built in 1925, and serving more than 5,000 students, Garfield High School remains the only high school in the unincorporated area of East Los Angeles. In the late 1990s, LAUSD received bond money to build a new high school in East L.A. But five years later, an official site had still not been determined, and if not identified by August 2005, the L.A. School District would lose millions of dollars in state matching funds to build the school.

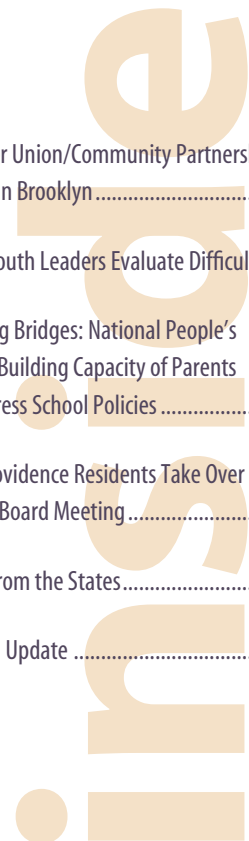
Demanding a School

Overcrowding in the district led LAUSD 12 years ago to create a year-round 3-track system, which causes students to lose 17 days of schooling

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Center staff members Adam Levner and Sean Thomas-Breitfeld also assisted.

Education Organizing shares the efforts of grassroots organizations around the country to engage low-income people—especially parents—in efforts to improve public schools. We will include news about strategies, actions and tactics, wins, losses and significant policy opportunities. If you would like to comment on, or provide materials for future issues, contact Leigh Dingerson at the Center, or email her at: ldingerson@communitychange.org

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80 Years of Neglect

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each year. Alarming, this adds up to nearly an entire lost semester over each student’s high school career. In addition, 66% of entering Garfield freshmen students do not graduate and only 1 out of 16 students attend a four-year California public university.

United Students at Garfield recognized that, in order to solve the educational crisis in East Los Angeles, more high schools needed to be built to guarantee that every student is provided

were gathered from Garfield High School, the feeder middle school, and from members and leaders of local Catholic churches. Out of the youth-led campaign, parent supporters also emerged as leaders in demanding a new high school, leading to the formation of Familias Unidas (United Families), the family organizing component of InnerCity Struggle to work toward educational justice.

The club members identified a site adjacent to a park in the community as an ideal location for a high school of 600-800 students. Building the

“Our school is so overcrowded that last year I was forced to sit on the edge of a science laboratory counter because there were just not enough desks for all the 63 students in my physiology class.”

a quality educational opportunity. As Maria Salcedo, a junior at Garfield and member of United Students explains, “Our school is so overcrowded that last year I was forced to sit on the edge of a science laboratory counter because there were just not enough desks for all the 63 students in my physiology class.” The conditions described by Ms. Salcedo do not lend to a learning environment that prepares all students for higher education.

In light of the delayed construction, United Students started a campaign to ensure that a high school be built in East Los Angeles. They launched the campaign by circulating a petition demanding that the district build a school accessible to students and that it provide sufficient resources for a quality education. Within four months, United Students gathered over 4,000 petition signatures from students, parents, community members, and teachers. The signatures

school next to the park would avoid displacing residents or local businesses. The school district also had funds to invest \$22.5 million to refurbish the park. However, the proposed site was opposed by a few local residents who feared that building the school would bring a rise to violence and crime. Nancy Meza, a youth member of InnerCity Struggle and lifetime resident of East L.A. echoed the sentiment of other Garfield students by stating, “We can’t allow fear of youth to keep us from providing a better future to youth.”

The proposal for a school next to the community park was also vehemently opposed by County Supervisor Gloria Molina who was in charge of the land. In response, the district proposed to build the high school onto an existing elementary school and relocate the elementary school students to surrounding schools.

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Another Union/Community Partnership Grows in Brooklyn

Brooklyn Education Collaborative (BEC)

In response to low test scores, high staff turnover, and overall concerns with the quality of education being provided by their public schools, a collaborative of unusual allies has begun pushing for reform. The Brooklyn Education Collaborative (BEC) features two historically antagonistic constituencies, parents and teachers, working side-by-side to improve schools in New York City's Districts 18, 19, and 23.

If this story line seems familiar, it should. This emerging coalition is an effort to build on the success of a similar collaborative in the South Bronx, the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools, or CC9. Both BEC and CC9 are facilitated by staff members from New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP); both focus on the importance of relationships between parent organizing groups, such as ACORN, and the teachers union (in both cases, the United Federation of Teachers, the UFT); and both seek to work cooperatively with officials from the Department of Education (DOE). [For more information on CC9, see *Education Organizing*, Issue #16, Summer 2004, as well as a case study commissioned by Grantmakers for Education. Both of these resources are available at www.communitychange.org/issues/education/.]

One difference between the two collaboratives is that while CC9 has developed a strong relationship with UFT leaders and the two institutions work extremely closely together, UFT is not an official member of CC9. The inclusion and

participation of UFT as a founding member of BEC demonstrates the increased confidence on behalf of parents and teachers in both their ability to collaborate and the potential for tremendous success when they do.

In addition to ACORN, IESP, and UFT, the Brooklyn Education Collaborative includes two other organizations: another community group, Cypress Hills Advocates for Education (CHAFE), and part of another labor union, the 1199/SEIU Child Care Fund. With more than 237,000 workers, 1199/SEIU is the largest union of healthcare employees in New York. The Child Care Fund provides childcare-related services for 1199 members—afterschool programs, day-care, summer camps, teen programs, college prep support, etc.—who are greatly concerned about the schools their children attend and have been looking for a long time for a way to get involved in reform efforts.

The groundwork for the collaborative was laid in Fall 2003 when staff and leaders from the five organizations came together to discuss the idea of working together to improve the local schools, prompted in part by some dismal statistics:

- The graduation rate in Districts 18, 19, and 23 is approximately 45%.
- In two of the districts, only 33% of 8th graders read at or above grade level.
- The majority of teachers have less than five years of teaching experience.

- Close to 90% of the schools have had two or more principals during the last five years.

In response, the groups formed an Organizing Committee, composed of five people from each of the four membership organizations and staff from IESP.

On February 7, 2004, BEC officially kicked off its organizing with an event at Brookdale Hospital. The 120 parents and teachers in attendance heard speakers from the different organizations and then broke into small groups, in which parents and teachers together shared their visions for what they wanted their schools to look like. According to IESP staff member Barbara Gross, “I’d never seen that done with parents and teachers at the same time. There were predictable tensions but it was okay. There was excitement and commitment to working through the tensions together for the sake of the kids.”

Out of that event a set of committees was formed to focus on various topics: middle and high school reform, school culture, teacher and principal issues, and academic support.

Each committee consisted of parents and teachers and over the next 4-5 months, each met several times, brought in outside experts on their topic, and developed a set of proposed strategies for reform. The Organizing Committee was then charged with

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the difficult task of whittling down the list.

The result was a first draft of BEC's "K-12 Platform for Change," which the collaborative approved early last summer. (The platform continues to be revised—there have been at least 8 drafts.) The current version has 8 points, divided into sub-goals:

- 1 Rigorous, engaging, and nurturing elementary education;
- 2 6th-8th grade education that is built upon the specific academic, social, and emotional needs of early adolescence;
- 3 High schools that are nurturing, academically challenging, and have high expectations for students;
- 4 A strong system of support services to meet student needs at all levels of schooling;
- 5 Supports for special-needs students and their families;
- 6 Strong and effective instruction and support for English language learners;
- 7 Supports for teachers; and
- 8 Mentoring and other supports for principals and other school administrators.

Last August, at a leadership retreat, BEC's Organizing Committee decided, after some debate, to focus its organizing around the middle grades. Committee members felt that the middle grades are critical to determining whether students graduate, as it is easier for them to slip through the cracks and more difficult for parents to stay involved in their children's

education. BEC also looked at data that showed that in the 3 priority school districts, low performance was nearly universal in the middle grades, as opposed to the elementary and high school grades which had varying success across the districts. One additional reason that BEC chose to focus initially on middle grades was that the Department of Education had already established initiatives in elementary and high schools, which might make it harder for outsiders to influence the agenda. The middle grades presented an opportunity for BEC to be proactive, rather than reacting to initiatives already in place.

Once the initial focus area was decided, BEC held a meeting in which a panel of experts on middle schools discussed the most critical elements involved in reform. The panel consisted of Edwina Branch, a former principal who works at IESP; Bernadette Anand, a former principal and current professor at Bank Street College of Education, and Richard Farkas, UFT Vice President for Middle Grades. Among the elements discussed were a focus on instructional improvement and school climate; making sure young people have genuine connections to adults in the building; strong leadership; access to hands-on courses; interdisciplinary curriculum; literacy across the curriculum; and for one of the panelists, an end to tracking. With this input in mind, the collaborative finalized its middle grades platform. The platform includes recommendations for principals, extended day/afterschool programs, professional development, curricula, student support, class size, school environment, and community/school connections.

The group also selected its first specific ask: the creation of the "BEC Learning Zone to encompass all schools in Districts 18, 19, and 23."

The creation of a "learning zone" would begin with the formation of a committee focusing on advancing the "Platform for Middle Grade Reform." The committee would include DOE and BEC representatives and would be charged with the task of developing a plan and a timeline for implementing the platform. BEC organizers felt that this structure would allow them to hold DOE accountable for implementing the platform. This accountability is particularly important given the complicated structure of the New York City school system. In addition to city-wide administration officials, school reform advocates must interact with the heads of their local community school districts (in this case, districts 18, 19, and 23) and regional superintendents (the three districts fall into two regions, V and VI).

Given all of the players involved, BEC leaders immediately began trying to meet and work with school officials, including the two regional superintendents and the deputy chancellor for instruction. They also started building relationships with non-school officials to get their support.

In early November, BEC held a kick-off rally for the middle grade reform campaign with 300 people. The rally was particularly significant because both UFT President Randi Weingarten and 1199/SEIU Secretary-Treasurer George Gresham were there to pledge their support. After the rally, BEC formed an Action Committee, which decided to circulate a petition calling for the creation of the learning zone. They set a goal of 10,000 signatures, which they plan to present soon to the Department of Education. At an upcoming press conference BEC hopes to publicly

80 Years of Neglect

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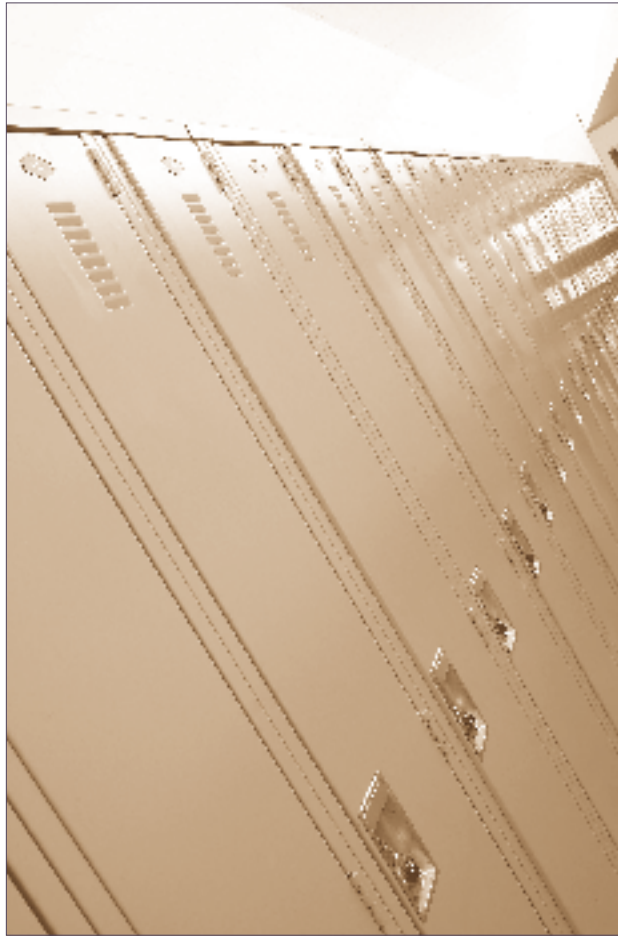
This plan would have resulted in overcrowding of the elementary schools and forced *them* into a four-track schedule, where four groupings of students would alternate using the schools. InnerCity Struggle members recognized that this plan would not bring anything new to the community and demanded that a new elementary school be built to replace the old one.

United Students along with parent supporters realized that both county and district officials were not prioritizing the need to improve education in East L.A. and that both needed to be held accountable. On March 30, 2004, InnerCity Struggle student and parent leaders mobilized over 400 youth and community members to march and rally in front of county and district offices in downtown Los Angeles. Lourdes Rojas, a long-time parent activist and mother of two, testified that education in East L.A. needed to be made a priority by the district and asked school board member David Tokofsky, “If we have the money to build schools, why is it not happening?”

An Intentional Media Strategy

In developing an organizing plan to build power to win the campaign, InnerCity Struggle also developed a media plan to bring attention to the issue and create a public debate. In the early stages of the campaign, ICS established a link with a reporter

from the local East L.A. newspaper. The *Eastside Sun* began to write about the efforts of United Students to demand that the new high school be built. Prior to the March rally



and march, ICS organizers worked diligently to train youth and parent spokespeople, elected by the organization, to talk to the media with a disciplined message. A press release was sent out to the major print, radio and television media announcing the march and exposing the negligence of the district. Before the action, ICS organizers developed relationships with reporters to ensure that they were aware of the issue. As a result of these efforts, every major media outlet covered the action, framing the issue from the student and community perspective. The media's

exposure of the district led district officials to take the demands of the students more seriously.

Due to the pressure that US had created, on June 22, 2004 the Los Angeles Unified School District voted in favor of the first new high school in East L.A. in 80 years. In addition to the 2,300-student high school, the community won a new 1,000-student elementary school and a new adult education center. The new elementary school will be built on the grounds of what is currently an adult school. The adult school, which provides programming to earn a high school diploma, and other vocational trainings will be built in another site in the community. The new high school will open in the fall of 2010 and Garfield High School will no longer have a year-round school schedule.

InnerCity Struggle plans to continue monitoring the construction process and build youth and community power for transforming public education in East Los Angeles to be accountable to community needs and to provide equity, justice, respect, and dignity for all young people in our community. InnerCity Struggle is currently working on a campaign to make college course requirements a part of the high school graduation requirement in the Los Angeles School District. ●

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FACE Youth Leaders Evaluate Difficult Action

Waimanalo, Hawaii

By Drew Astolfi

Faith Action for Community Equity (FACE) is a ten-year-old, faith-based organizing effort on the islands of Oahu and Maui. FACE has made dramatic reforms on healthcare, transportation, and work issues. We recently won the creation of a prescription drug benefit program, “RX+,” that allows all Hawaii residents at or below 350% of the poverty rate to purchase prescription drugs using the same discount as a Medicaid recipient. Currently we are working on strengthening First Source Hiring Rules we put in place three years ago, as well as on the introduction of a living wage ordinance in the city/county of Honolulu. County and city government is merged on Oahu, so the City of Honolulu administers programs for the island of Oahu, as well as the outer islands all the way to Midway. FACE works at a regional level by necessity since the table of power in Honolulu is regional.

Over the last year we have built a youth organizing effort inside seven of our institutional members. This effort began with a youth *listening process* last fall when high school youth leaders conducted over 300 one-on-ones in their churches and schools. The process identified several problems with safety, including harassment by security guards, and the sudden prevalence of ICE (crystal meth) in one school. It also identified a real feeling among students that they were not getting the teachers they wanted. When organizers and youth met to probe this feeling it came out that several students had strong preferences for specific teachers.



Youth had hoped to get the Department to sign a memorandum of understanding with them on a range of safety issues, as well as on a repair schedule for the bathrooms at Kamahi high school.

The listening process led to an action in November. The young people requested and won a meeting with officials from the State Department of Education (in Hawaii there is only one school district), and with staff for the Attorney General. Youth had hoped to get the Department to sign a memorandum of understanding with them on a range of safety issues, as well as on a repair schedule for the bathrooms at Kamahi high school. However, the FACE youth team met with unexpected resistance from both the DOE and the Attorney General. They met to evaluate the event in January.

Reflecting on what went wrong

They met in Waimanalo, a sleepy rural community of mostly native

Hawaiians and new Tongan immigrants. There were twenty of them, and they were mad, and more than a little frustrated. But they were also determined to learn everything they could from the experience.

Though the evaluation was planned as a brief conversation to open the meeting, it took up a good portion of the evening and left the students determined, and resolved. The Department of Education had declined to build a relationship with the youth group, and in fact had demoralized them somewhat. In their evaluation, the youth talked through what they felt was their failure to connect the DOE and Attorney General’s representatives to FACE. Youth chair Alfred Guerro started the meeting, “We

got pushed around, and then slapped down, and I am still mad about it.” Pauline Taumulolo added “they basically attacked us. My dad even heard about it from a friend of his, he heard *we* were being disrespectful.” Ms. Taumulolo, the student body president of Kaimuki high school had had the temerity to describe a situation where she was inappropriately touched by a security guard, and then refused to give the name of the guard at the meeting since she was afraid he would lose his job. “I am never going to another meeting like that, and I’m never talking to those people again unless I can make them listen to me.”

Ms. Taumulolo continued, “things got worse after they broke us into separate groups. They dealt with us as separate high schools, not as a youth organization, just as a bunch of kids from different schools.”

The officials had indeed moved from one issue to another listening only to the youth who actually attended that school. “In each case, they asked if we had talked to our principal, and when we hadn’t they dismissed our case. And what that did was it allowed them to make each thing an individual complaint, as opposed to each thing being an illustration of the general policy problems,” said Emily Militoni, FACE’s youth organizer. (Since the purpose of the action was to connect schools at the policy level youth had decided to bypass the local level, and go straight to the DOE).

Another lesson the youth learned was that when you have two targets in the room it is hard to predict the outcome. “At first the Department of Ed seemed like they were afraid to talk with the Attorney General’s

people in the room, but once they realized that the Attorney General’s people didn’t want to deal with us either, they were more (scolding) with us,” said George Salakielu.

Langi Fine, now a senior at the University of Hawaii, but the past president of FACE’s youth group, summed up the evaluation—“we didn’t get anywhere because they got us off balance, and separated us from each other. They did it on purpose, and they thought they could do it because we’re young and we’re Tongan. And they got away with it because there were only a few of us, and we didn’t have clear enough adult back up. And it isn’t going to happen again.”

Getting Past It... Moving Forward

The youth went on to discuss the launch of a series of house meetings where they plan to identify good teachers, and then interview them. Youth are conducting the interviews as well as the house meetings to delve into *what makes a good teacher good*. Hawaii faces an intense teacher shortage and the youth are working to develop criteria for what constitutes teacher quality. “We are going to create our own job description for teachers, and we are going to make the district adopt it,” Emily said, opening the next section of the meeting. ●

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“Things got worse after they broke us into separate groups. They dealt with us as separate high schools, not as a youth organization, just as a bunch of kids from different schools.” — Pauline Taumulolo, Student Body President, Kaimuki High School

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call on the Department of Education to create this learning zone, and to enlist the support they have already secured from numerous elected officials, including representatives from all of BEC’s neighborhoods.

Once the learning zone is in existence, BEC leaders intend to work with the newly formed committee to determine the strategies and timing for implementing their middle grades reform platform. Subcommittees will be created for each part of the platform in order to look at the needs of each school to determine how best to proceed.

The organization recognizes that it can’t simply create a list of new programs without deeper analysis of the programs already in place and the agendas of district officials.

Regardless of what steps BEC decides to take down the road, they have already succeeded in taking the nearly unprecedented step of bringing parents and teachers together and establishing a common vision for school reform. It’s difficult to imagine that they won’t find a way to make some much-needed improvements. ●

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Building Bridges: National People's Action Building Capacity of Parents to Address School Policies

By Melissa Townsend

The American public and policy makers recognize that parent engagement in their children's education is a major factor in student achievement.

But parent engagement is too often approached from a school-centered perspective. The rhetoric is that families should support the school agenda, parents should support teachers, and familiarize themselves with and be supportive of school policy. When parents are perceived as *not* serving the school agenda, they are considered negligent or overbearing (see recent Time magazine article "What Teaches Hate About Parents," 2/21/05 issue.)

Affiliates of National People's Action (NPA) are working from the perspective that the home-school relationship actually needs to be approached from *both* sides of the equation. The onus of creating a home-school relationship cannot rest solely on the shoulders of parents. School policy must call for the school to employ proven strategies to engage parents.

The NPA network

NPA is a 33 year-old national network of grassroots organizing groups working to develop community leaders who improve the vitality of their communities. The National Training and Information Center (NTIC) provides policy analysis, organizing strategy and organizational capacity building assistance to groups in the NPA network.

Through organizing and leadership development efforts, NTIC is assist-

ing NPA affiliated organizations to create communities of parents and youth leaders around the country who are confident when approaching decision makers in their schools, and savvy about local education policy.



What do organizing strategies have to offer?

Most schools use surveys and parent nights/open houses to invite parents to talk to school staff—and call that “parent involvement.” These methods tend to elicit the “involvement” of predominantly non-immigrant, middle and upper class parents.

Many low-income and working families, and new immigrant families are fearful of interacting with school staff and administration. They may not speak the same language, they may have had negative experiences in their own schooling and/or the school system in their country of origin.

Few schools connect well with these families.

POWER, Los Angeles

Parents United for Westside Renewal (POWER), in the west side of Los Angeles is one group that does. At a recent meeting, a mother of a third grader told the group of 40 parents and teachers her story. Her son was being bullied in the lunch line. She visited the principal three times but was unable to rectify the situation for her son. She talked about how she was frightened by the idea of talking with the principal. At the time, she didn't have a model to follow or support from other parents to help her address her concerns. Each time she went to the principal's office, she was unable to advocate for a solution to the problem.

POWER parents have organized an Education Task Force that has negotiated with teachers in two schools to host parent meetings monthly to engage parents in what is happening in their children's classrooms. Through these advances, leaders in POWER have built themselves a place in the school.

Marta Escobar, mother of two, says, “POWER's goal of building stronger relationships between parents and teachers is based on our belief that schools and our children's education improves when parents are active leaders in the schools and have a voice in the decisions that affect our children's education.”

This work is typical of NPA affiliates that are building parent and youth

driven organizations to forge inroads into schools to bridge the gap between school and home. In the process, community leaders are changing school policy so that there can be greater home-school synergy and in the long run, higher student achievement.

At a January 2005 National Leadership Meeting in Chicago, over one hundred leaders from NPA affiliates around the country shared other successful strategies, and made decisions about local issues that NPA will address at the regional and national levels over the next year. Several of these groups are focused on parent involvement in schools.

Some parent coordinators—albeit a minority—work after school hours to accommodate parents. They call and visit homes to reach out to parents. These are the coordinators SEOC parents and students want to use as role models for a policy that standardizes the job description across the state.

The second piece of a structure for real parent engagement in schools and school policy is to host relevant programs for parents. The vast majority of the SEOC parents' schools receive Title I money to fund Parent Advisory Committees (PACs) in each school. There is, however, no line item in school, district or state school budgets

parents have been concerned and frustrated as they witness neighborhood schools closing and educational programs being slashed in the interest of saving money. They needed a way to get the district to pay attention to their priorities.

Leaders researched solutions and decided the best option was the district-wide adoption of a site-based management system. Site-based management creates school-based policy teams of staff and parents that are given the authority and budget to make policy decisions for their individual school.

Throughout 2004, CNA organized around this issue. CNA parents and community residents held press conferences, hosted public meetings and testified before the Grand Rapids School Board. Late in the year, leaders won an agreement from the School Board President to explore a site-based management model in Grand Rapids. With the School Board President on board, the superintendent quickly agreed to work with CNA leaders.

After the initial agreement, CNA leaders met with the School Board President, the Superintendent, and the Title I Director to talk about a mechanism for parent involvement in schools. "When we started talking about site-based management, we faced resistance. Now people are much more open to the idea. We've noticed a large cultural shift in their openness to parent involvement," said Rebecca Morgan, Parent Leader.

As the campaign continues, NTIC is helping CNA leaders understand the components of the federal Title I policy to inform their policy proposals.

Through organizing and leadership development efforts, NTIC is assisting NPA affiliated organizations to create communities of parents and youth leaders around the country who are confident approaching decision makers in their schools and savvy about local education policy.

Statewide Education Organizing Committee (SEOC), New Jersey

The New Jersey Statewide Education Organizing Committee (SEOC) held their third annual statewide conference with over 200 adult and youth community leaders from Newark, Irvington, Plainfield, Jersey City and other towns in New Jersey. Adults and youth attended workshops facilitated by NTIC staff, and expressed their frustration and a desire among families to have more of a place in their children's schools. "We have parent coordinators in our schools, but principals put them to work as lunch room monitors and security guards—they aren't there for parents," said one parent at the conference.

that accounts for this money. SEOC parents want these funds better monitored so they can hold school officials accountable for how much money they receive, and how it is spent.

SEOC leaders have held two meetings with staff in the state Department of Education to discuss their policy proposals for parent advocates and PAC programming. They are in the midst of negotiating for a third meeting to work out the details of the proposals.

Creston Neighborhood Association, Grand Rapids, Michigan

The Creston Neighborhood Association (CNA) is an NPA affiliate in Grand Rapids, Michigan. There,

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300 Providence Residents Take Over School Board Meeting

On February 14, more than 300 Providence, RI, ACORN members, Providence Teachers Union members, and other community members took over a School Board meeting where the board was scheduled to vote on a proposal to lay off 102 school district employees. Slated to go, in the district superintendent's newest round of layoffs—which followed an earlier layoff of more than 300 employees—were teachers, athletic coaches, school nurses, social workers and guidance counselors.

The Board's meeting was originally scheduled to be held in the Public Safety Complex auditorium located in the same building as the main police station with a capacity of only 100 people. ACORN members quickly filled the room and chanted until the School Board agreed to move the meeting to a larger venue. Relocated to a nearby high school auditorium, ACORN members testified for an hour about the harmful impact the proposed layoffs would have in their children's already struggling schools. After two and a half hours of debate, the School Board tabled the issue until their next meeting at the end of February.

In the interim, ACORN members met with 5 out of 9 school board members and the Mayor (the Mayor called a special meeting with every community organization in Providence 2 days before the vote on the cuts).



On February 24th, 100 parents and students turned out to the special school board meeting. ACORN held a funeral procession with a coffin labeled with "Our Future." Children chained together followed the pallbearers. After the casket was set down on the stage in front of the auditorium and the school board, a cap and gown was draped on the casket and parents stepped up one by one and set flowers on the casket, all to the sound of a beating drum.

The school board proceeded with the cuts—101 positions including athletic coaches, elementary teachers and guidance counselors

were cut. But 31 nursing and social worker positions were taken off the list. ACORN members met with the Mayor's staff early in March, and scheduled another meeting. They are hoping to win a recommendation from the Mayor's office on a state legislative policy to alleviate the dire fiscal straits that the city's schools continue to be in. ACORN is already planning two big actions at the state-house and will work with union allies to pick key districts to organize in, and to bring 2-4 additional municipalities outside of Providence into this fight immediately. ●

Providence ACORN: 401-780-0500

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Building Bridges

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Albany Park Neighborhood Council, Chicago, IL

Chicago, Illinois already has a well-known site-based management structure like the one being sought in Grand Rapids. In every Chicago Public School there is a Local School Council (LSC) made up of elected parents, teachers, community members and sometimes students. They have decision-making power over many school policies, including parts of the budget, and firing and hiring of the principal.

The Albany Park Neighborhood Council (APNC) has been working with LSCs for the past four years—providing trainings and organizing leaders around issues in their neighborhood schools. Through their work, APNC leaders found they needed more ways to have their voices heard—more opportunities to engage decision makers in solving problems together.

To meet this need, APNC leaders are building local school Parent Advisory Councils (PAC); parent groups mandated by Federal Title I funds in every school that receives these funds (including roughly 520 of the 600 Chicago Public Schools). APNC leaders focused on the PACs because the Title I law gives these bodies great flexibility, empowering parents to find the structure that works for them, and dedicated federal funds for programs to recruit and train parents on topics *they* choose. Though these parent groups are federally mandated, APNC is the first to organize PAC meetings in several of the schools in their area.

Joann Cihak-Thoma, APNC leader and LSC member from Cleveland

Elementary, helped pull parents to a planning meeting. “We were thrilled with the attendance at the meeting, and the opportunity to hear everyone’s interests. We are excited to be moving in the right direction. In my 6 years working with the school, this was the best turnout we’ve ever experienced at Cleveland!”

This Spring APNC will have established an area-wide parent task force of PAC members with a broader goal of formulating an area-wide education plan.

“These are the initiatives needed to form PACs. Through the PACs, parents can provide their perspectives, and make decisions about how to address the issues at their schools,” said Sheri Flores, APNC education leader, and a parent from Bateman Elementary. “We’ve decided to have individual school meetings to find parents at each school committed to their children’s education. Once that’s established, we can work as a community-wide team.”

NPA, Building Momentum & Replicating Successes

These examples demonstrate how organizing is changing the framework of the national conversation about the role of parents in student achievement.

At the January NPA Leadership Meeting, community leaders enthusiastically talked about connecting with other parents and identifying solutions to the problems they have observed in their own locales. They decided to broaden the allies on their work at NPA’s National Neighborhoods Conference in April where they will seek out other national organizations to gain further support for their work at the local level.



Other organizations in the NPA network—particularly in immigrant communities where barriers to accessing public institutions can be the greatest—are beginning to address issues in education as well. NTIC is helping groups tailor these ideas to their unique local situations.

Among NPA affiliated groups, parents and youth are overcoming their own barriers, reaching out to one another and showing school policy makers how to build the home-school bridge to reach their shared goal of greater student achievement. Through working on this issue, organizations are building relationships that increase their capacity to address other school policies that affect student achievement. In the end, no one wants to see our country’s youth succeed more than their parents. ●

National Training and Information Center (NTIC):
312-243-3035

News *From the States*

A Legislative and Judicial Round-Up

Echoing Opposition to the Mississippi Governor's Education Plan

The Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) was created in 1997 to ensure that all of the state's school districts, regardless of their economic base, received sufficient funding in order to provide a quality education to their students. While it has been easy for legislators to voice support for the intent of the law, which was designed to help the state emerge from its perennial position at the bottom of national education rankings, agreeing on the funding has been much more difficult.

In January of this year, Governor Haley Barbour announced his proposed "Upgrade Education Reform Act of 2005." The initiative was a response to growing criticism from a broad base of parents, students, educators, state education officials and legislators to fully fund MAEP as required by state law. However, the proposal did little to curb the criticism.

Southern Echo, among others, has been working hard to address what its members view as significant flaws in the Governor's proposal. Echo is a leadership education, training and development organization that works with and in support of African-American and working class community leadership and organizations throughout rural Mississippi, as well as organizations in 11 other Southern states (see *Education Organizing #18* for a description of Southern Echo's "Justice Funding" concept).

Echo has argued that the plan would not only continue to underfund MAEP but would undermine a decade of statewide efforts to "implement uniform statewide standards through which to hold local school districts accountable for the delivery of an effective education for all students..." For example, the Governor's plan would:

- Exempt schools with the top accreditation levels from complying with any state performance or process standards.*
- Average the accreditation levels of all schools within each district and exempt the entire district from state standards if the average accreditation level is high enough.*

- Provide performance-based or merit pay only for those teachers whose entire school shows sufficient improvement to rank in the top 50% of all schools being graded on their rates of improvement.
- Prohibit school districts from entering into collective bargaining agreements with teachers or other staff.
- Privatize as many school functions as possible, including administration, cafeteria, transportation, teacher development, and special education.
- Allow any individual or group to create a charter school and compel the state or district to fund it.

***Together, these provisions would exempt specific schools and entire districts from such state education requirements as the curriculum framework, teacher-student ratios, class size, and student discipline. They would also be able to use any number of non-licensed teachers.**

To build opposition to these detrimental proposals, Echo has been holding a series of community meetings in the Delta region and statewide to share their new 2005 Education Policy Tool Kit and to explain the dangers of the Governor's proposed legislation. They have also been hard at work at the negotiating table. Echo members met with the leadership of the Mississippi Department of Education and agreed on a list of provisions that need to be removed and amendments to the remaining provisions. Department of Education officials in turn met with key House Education Committee members and one of the Governor's legislative representatives and convinced them to support the demands they had developed in collaboration with Echo.

While this represents a significant step toward improving pending education legislation, the campaign is far from over. Given the power and respect that it has garnered statewide, and its ability to collaborate with a wide range of partners, Echo appears poised to see through its initial success.

News *From the States*

Tuition for Undocumented Students Debated in Colorado

Higher education tuition rates for undocumented students are being debated in two conflicting bills introduced in the Colorado General Assembly. House Bill 1124 would provide in-state tuition rates to undocumented students, while House Bill 1271 would ensure that those rates, along with all other non-emergency services and public benefits, would be available only to citizens and legal residents. The debate directly affects approximately 300 undocumented students each year who have grown up in Colorado and graduated from Colorado public schools, but are unable to afford out-of-state tuition rates for college—rates that can be 3 or 4 times higher than in-state rates. The bill has been supported and watched by Padres Unidos, an organizing group in Denver.

A House panel recently approved HB 1124, which is now headed to the Appropriations Committee. However, there is concern that the Democratic Party leadership is moving to kill the bill for fear of appearing too “liberal” to Colorado voters. HB 1271 was assigned to the House State, Veterans, Military Affairs Committee, where it was postponed indefinitely on a party-line vote.

Another Legal Victory for New York City's Schoolchildren

For roughly the same amount of time as it takes a child to go through his/her entire elementary and secondary education, school reform advocates in New York City have been engaged in a judicial battle for increased funding for the city's public schools.

The lawsuit was filed 12 years ago by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, a coalition of parent organizations, community school boards, concerned citizens and advocacy groups seeking “to reform New York State's school finance system to ensure adequate resources and the opportunity for a sound, basic education for all students in New York City.”

Recently, a New York state judge, Justice Leland DeGrasse, issued the latest in a series of victories by the plaintiffs. According to the ruling, the state and city must jointly provide an additional \$5.6 billion for the city's public school children

every year to ensure them the opportunity for a sound basic education that they are guaranteed under the State Constitution. (This would constitute a 43% increase to the city's \$12.9 billion annual school budget.) Another \$9.2 billion must be spent over the next five years to reduce class sizes, ease overcrowding and furnish the city's 1.1 million students with enough laboratories, libraries and other school facilities.

One of the most significant elements of this ruling is the inclusion of a specific dollar figure, a question traditionally left to legislators to answer, but the judge stopped short of answering the equally contentious question of how much of the money should come from the state and how much from the city. The amount the judge ordered was nearly triple what Governor George Pataki's lawyers had proposed to the court, and the governor's office said last night that it would appeal the decision, though New York's highest court has largely upheld Justice DeGrasse's earlier rulings.

Justice DeGrasse also set a deadline, giving the state 90 days to act on his ruling. The deadline is a response to the lack of progress made by state lawmakers in the year and a half since New York's highest court, the Court of Appeals, ordered the state to start fixing the city's schools.

Florida DART Groups Demand Universal Pre-K

DART organizations throughout Florida are celebrating the passage of a bill creating a universal, voluntary pre-kindergarten program for Florida's 4-year-olds. But the fight isn't over. The bill that passed in special session in December, 2004 falls short of what DART groups have been lobbying for over the past two years. They plan to continue their work this spring, as the Florida State Legislature reconvenes.

Members and leaders of the nine DART organizations in Florida have been working on this issue for nearly two years, since a state constitutional amendment was passed in 2002 that mandated the creation of a universal pre-K system. DART leaders want to make sure that the program will truly make a difference in children's lives by creating high quality programs for all children. DART has also emphasized the need for professional development and training for pre-k teachers.

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The Education (eliminating) President

The dubiously dubbed “Education President” has struck again, this time with an ax. The President’s budget proposal for the 2006 fiscal year slashed funding for education, for the first time in a decade. The actual cut in funding requested by Bush was \$529 million. But, not only did the proposed 2006 budget de-fund education, it also eliminated nearly 50 educational programs, accounting for roughly a third of the programs zeroed out by the Bush budget.

In order to pay for his new High School Intervention Initiative, the President proposed eliminating vocational education, GEAR UP, Upward Bound, and Talent Search. Of course, it’s not really a fair trade. The High School Intervention Initiative would get \$1.2 billion in 2006, but in 2004, the four programs slated for elimination had a combined funding of \$1.9 billion. That’s a cut of roughly \$700 billion.

The justification for eliminating – or “consolidating,” as it’s called in the budget proposal – these four programs was that they are “narrow-purpose programs.” Perhaps Bush believes that providing students with the hands-on skills they need for specific career fields and postsecondary technical college is too narrow a purpose for an educational program. Or, maybe the President thinks that helping low-income students enter and succeed in college, as do GEAR Up, Upward Bound and Talent Search, is too narrow a purpose for an educational program.

Another program that the President slated for elimination was Even Start – a program that aims to improve educational opportunities for low-income children and parents by integrating early childhood education, adult education, and parenting education. The Bush administration claims that other “high priority” programs, like Reading First and Early Reading First are better equipped to achieve literacy

goals. This excuse ignores the fact that the elimination of Even Start results in a net cut of \$225 million for literacy programs, because the budget proposal does not increase funding for the two Reading First programs.

The education program that has received the most attention is the proposed elimination of the Federal Perkins Loan Program. Perkins Loans are low interest college loans given to students with exceptional financial need. The savings from the Perkins Loans would supposedly pay for increases in Pell Grants. However, there were 630,000 Perkins Loans given out in 2004, and 567,000 Perkins Loans will go out in 2005. The projected increase in Pell Grants, from 2005 to 2006, is only 138,000 grants, less than one-fourth the number of Perkins Loans that would be eliminated.

So aside from budget tricks and euphemisms like “consolidation” and pledging to use the savings from one program to fund another without increasing the funding for the other program, how did the President justify these cuts? By getting the Department of Education to issue a disclaimer, presumably responding to criticism of the deep budget cuts: “education in America is primarily a State and local responsibility.”

This disclaimer makes clear what progressive critics have feared all along: despite having weighed down local school districts and schools with a ton of federally required mandates under No Child Left Behind, the President is on a calculated campaign to abdicate the federal government of its responsibility to educate this nation’s children.

In March and April, Congress will draft the real budget for the Department of Education. Advocates will see if Congress follows the “education president’s” education eliminating proposals. Let’s hope not.

Another program that the President wants to eliminate is Even Start—a program that aims to improve educational opportunities for low-income children and parents by integrating early childhood education, adult education, and parenting education.

The campaign has engaged DART leaders around the state both in the state capital—Tallahassee—through lobbying meetings and actions (DART turned out 700 to a meeting with Lt. Governor Toni Jennings a year ago on the issue), as well as through local actions and meetings with legislators in several cities.

The bill passed in December and signed by Governor Job Bush, establishes the program. But DART members have some concerns, primary among them are the provisions for the evaluation of the pre-k programs based on assessments of entering kindergarteners who have been through a state-funded program. The new law calls only for this single assessment, and will evaluate programs based on student performance on the assessments. But, according to Aaron Dorfman, lead organizer with PACT in Miami, basing evaluation on what is effectively an “exit exam” fails to indicate the level of progress that children have made in the programs. “It’s a disaster for those programs serving low-income kids,” says Dorfman. “If they’re entering pre-k with few skills compared to more affluent kids, and manage to make incredible progress through their pre-k program, but still are slightly behind when they enter kindergarten, that pre-k program can be labeled ineffective, where it’s been incredibly effective.” DART is seeking a revision that would assess students both on entering the pre-k program, as well as upon entering kindergarten.

DART groups had also hoped for more extensive programs, offering 720 hours of pre-k programming each year, instead of the 540 hours passed by the Legislature. DART members and their legislative supporters are currently drafting legislation that would revise the new program in these and other ways. The state legislature began its next regular session March 8th and is expected to take up the pre-k issue again.



Exit Exam Expected to Harm California’s Poor and Minority Students

In California, the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), working in collaboration with the Campaign for Quality Education (CQE) state-wide network and key legislators, is organizing support for legislation that would delay the implementation of the state’s controversial “exit exam.”

According to CEJ, the test – a “high-stakes” exam required for high school graduation beginning in 2006 – will have a disproportionate impact on poor and minority students. Recent test data publicized by the group shows that 61% of English Language Learners, 40% of Black students, 40% of working class students, and 70% of special education students would lose their diplomas—as compared to 5% of white students, and just over 10% of middle and upper class students. CEJ plans to “bring a public face

According to CEJ, the test – a “high-stakes” exam required for high school graduation beginning in 2006 – will have a disproportionate impact on poor and minority students.

to the bills [that would delay implementation of the exam], to gather the votes needed, and to beat an expected veto from the [governor].”

Oregonians Rally for School Funding

On February 21, over 3,000 adults and children traveled to Salem, Oregon from all corners of the state to send lawmakers a clear, compelling message: “No more cuts to schools!”

The rally, organized by Stand for Children and co-sponsored by a number of organizations, including the Oregon PTA, the Oregon Business Association, and Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, was a response to Governor Ted Kulongoski’s \$5.0 billion proposed budget for K-12 education, a budget that many education leaders feel falls far short of what is needed.

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News from the States

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After the rally, Stand for Children arranged for hundreds of constituents from communities as far as Southern and Central Oregon to meet with more than two-thirds of the Legislature. To their dismay, they found that most legislators were unaware of the full projected impact of the Governor's proposed budget.

Moving forward, Stand for Children members will be following up with their legislators to help them understand the consequences of the budget in their district, promote

revenue options that would help to prevent further cuts, and hold them accountable for protecting public schools.

Rights Posted in California

As of this month, all California public schools are required to post notices informing students and parents of their rights to have clean, safe classrooms and adequate educational materials. The notices are a product of a class-action suit that charged the state with renegeing on its constitutional obligation to provide students with the essentials for a good education. The state settled the case last fall by pledging to spend \$1 billion for educational supplies and facilities.

On February 21, over 3,000 adults and children traveled to Salem, Oregon from all corners of the state to send lawmakers a clear, compelling message: "No more cuts to schools!"



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