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## ABSTRACT

The publication describes a community learning center established in Newark, New Jersey, in 1969 with concern for children, parents, and people trapped by the limiting institutions of our cities, and which is composed of three program components: a day care center (for 60 three to five year olds), an after school and summer program (for 50-100 elementary age children), and a community school (for 70 kindergarten through 8th grade children). The center emphasizes parent decisionmaking, staff-parent cooperation, and open education; and racial and ethnic diversity mark both the student population and the active parents. (Photographs may reproduce poorly.) (Author/DN)

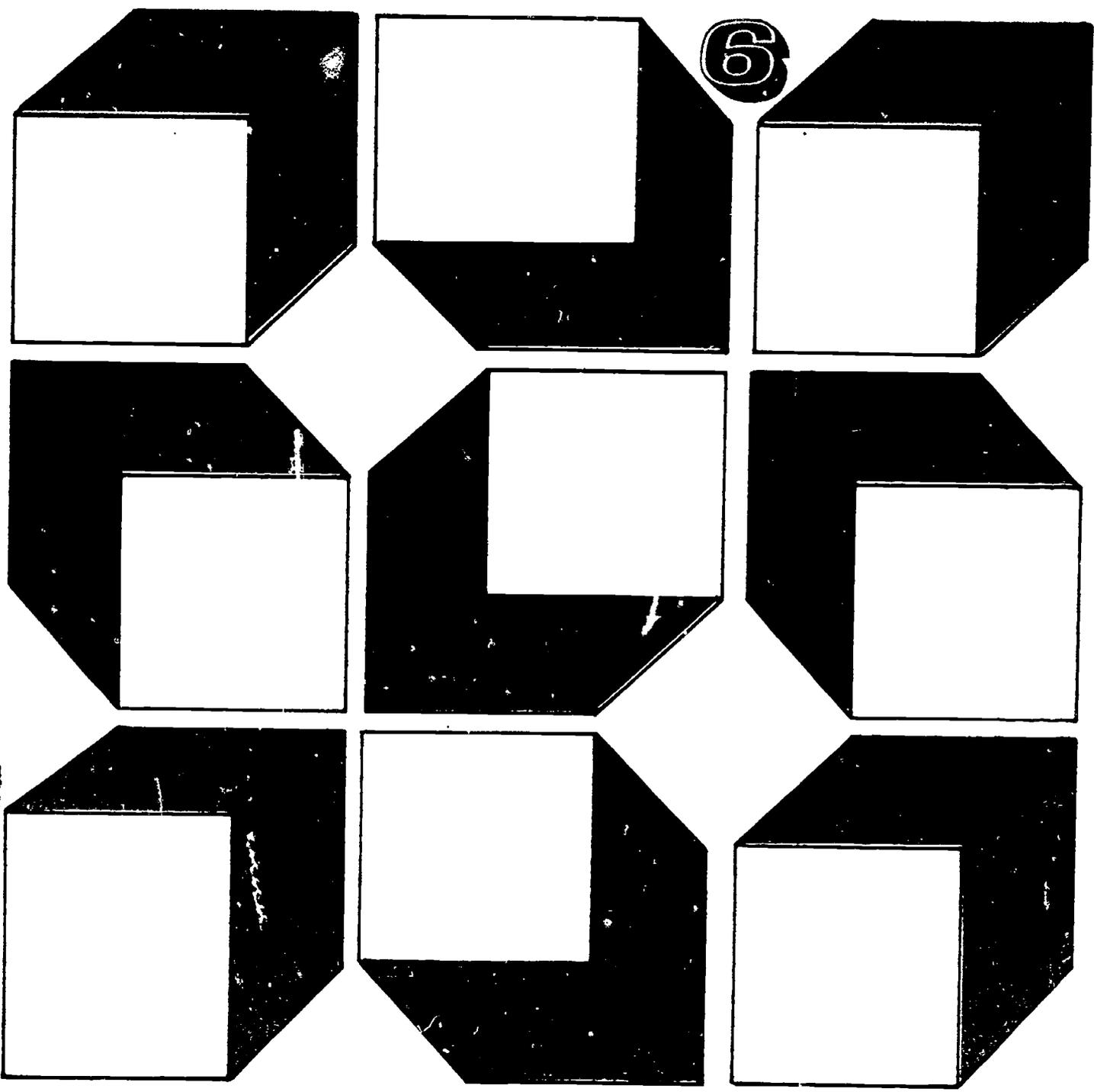
# PERSPECTIVE

## A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS: CHALLENGING, CHOOSING, CHANGING

THE STORY OF THE  
IRONBOUND COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER  
*Newark, New Jersey*

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**A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS:  
CHALLENGING, CHOOSING, CHANGING**

THE STORY OF THE  
*IRONBOUND COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER*  
*Newark, New Jersey*

Prepared by

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## PREFACE

*This publication is another in the series of Perspectives on important issues confronting education. It was prepared by Mrs. Jeanne Dolan, a parent, and Mr. Tim Parsons, an educational consultant, both of whom were extensively involved in the development of the Center, described herein.*

*The right of parents to choose the type and form of their children's education has long been assumed by Americans wealthy enough to move to the right suburb or pay for private education. Meanwhile, poor and working class parents rarely have been able to exercise this right or to participate in and shape the type of education their children receive. Public institutions in our cities have become massive and bureaucratic, controlled from remote places by remote people.*

*The Ironbound Community Learning Center in Newark was established in August 1969 with concern for children, for parents, for people trapped by limiting institutions of our cities. It has been established in a predominately white working class community with the recognition that the challenges and struggles of our cities are not restricted to any one racial or ethnic group. The Center's success has led the New Jersey Department of Education to view it as an important model of parent decision-making, staff-parent cooperation and open education.*

*As former New Jersey Commissioner of Education, Carl L. Marburger has observed: "Not only do Ironbound parents exercise their right to shape their children's education, but in the process they have gained vital knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to restructure other urban institutions; the State Department of Education is to be commended that it has begun to tap these vital urban resources by asking Ironbound Center parents to provide technical assistance to educators and parents in other communities. The development and utilization of these human resources is probably the most important step we can take in reshaping and re-making our cities into liveable communities."*

Bernard A. Kaplan  
Deputy Assistant Commissioner

June 1974

## INTRODUCTION

*The Ironbound Community Learning Center is composed of three program components; A Day Care Center (for 60 three to five year olds), an After School and Summer program (for 50 to 100 elementary age children), and a Community School (for 70 Kindergarten through 8th grade children). Although these programs have independent operations, the common spirit that flows among them stems from the effort of parents to achieve the finest quality education for all their children.*

*Yet the Center is much more than an educational and recreational program for children. It is, as one parent put it: "an oasis in the desert." It is a community within a community, where people join together in the common concern for their lives.*

*It is a multitude of people with different racial and ethnic backgrounds sharing each others' hopes, struggles, and accomplishments.*

*It is a place where one parent's needs are just as important as 30 others. Where a person's full potential is explored and excited to the point of fulfillment.*

*It is adult education, health programs, seminars in which we rediscover education and ourselves. It is the realization that we all benefit through the process of creating, changing, learning, and challenging, that makes the Center the unique community that it is.*

Jeanne Dolan  
Parent

**THE SUBLIMINAL  
"NO!"**

"Carlos, listen to your teacher."

"Stay in school, Lu Anne. You'll get ahead."

"Tony, study for that math test before you go out."

"If your teacher tells you to read, then you read, Mary.  
If she tells you to go to the moon, do it!"

Parent pleading sounds pretty much the same in any community: Black or white; middle class, working class, or poor. Yet the much more compelling unspoken message is often very different -- depending upon the parent's own experiences with schools and learning. A great percentage of the parents in poor and working class neighborhoods were defined as "Failures" by traditional schools. They were often the drop-outs, the non-readers, the laughed-at "deprived" with their ragged clothes, lacking a pencil or notebook for a test; they were the humiliated recipients of "D's" and "F's." The schools, the teachers, and their "smart" college-bound classmates all reminded them subtly or abrasively, that they must be stupid. It should be no surprise then that the powerful unspoken messages that they now communicate to their children are:

"(Carlos, teachers are always putting us down; you don't really have to listen.)"

"(Damn it, Lu Anne, school ain't worth the hassle. Drop-out like I did and deal with the real world.)"

"(Tony, it don't matter what you get on that test. That school's stacked against us no matter what ya do.)"

"(Teachers are always trying to push us around and make us do what they want, Mary. Do it your own way. Right on!)"

These messages are repeatedly communicated by shrugs, tension in the voice, or by a look of the eyes. Sometimes the statements come out at the conscious level as well: often at an informal gathering in a tavern, and sometimes with the child, but never with the teacher present.

Children spend more than four times as much of their waking hours outside of schools as they do inside. Particularly for younger children who are shaping their basic attitudes about teachers, school and education, much of this time is spent assimilating unspoken messages from parents. They often translate this into quite active opposition to school.

The subliminal message continues to be transmitted from generation to generation unless there is decisive intervention. In the unlikely setting of a predominately white working class neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey, such action has occurred.

To reach the Ironbound section of Newark, you must cross one of the encircling railroad lines that give the community its name. Entering from downtown Newark, you pass under the Penn-Central tracks before reaching Ferry Street, the heart of Ironbound's "international center for commerce." The modest one and two story frame buildings (often covered with some shiny aluminum siding so as not to betray their crumbling 19th century structures) are not centers of commerce in the same magnitude as the World Trade Center six miles away in New York City and barely visible over the rooftops on smogless days. But Ironbound is an international meeting place for commerce in its own modest way.

After passing the long-established Fidelity Union Bank, Penn Savings, and Central Loan, Ferry Street takes on a Portuguese and Spanish flavor. Bibbo Funeral Home, Fornos Restaurant, Cafe Lisbon, Sagres Restaurant, Santos Travel, Iberia Restaurant, A Nosa Terra Variety Store, Luso-American News, Roque & Rebelo Tavern, and Mike "El Cubano" Travel dominate the next couple of blocks. Preceding down Ferry Street the international mixture increases with Drs. Chon, Lupica and Hoffman sharing a building with Edward O'Deven Insurance, Susy's Beauty Parlor, Lisbon Liquors, Jesse Jones Shoe Shine Parlor, Leon Abramson Jewelers and Schreiber Hardware share one block. Crossing Adams, Jackson, Van Buren and Polk Streets, you encounter added variety: Goldfingers, Pitta's, Lorczaks, Marcaks, Andro's Diner, Tadeusz-Dziekunowski Kielbasi, O'Hara's Tavern, Antonio's Pizza....

Passing out of the commercial areas, you travel streets lined to the sidewalks with modest frame houses and small apartments. Again the ubiquitous aluminum siding conceals old or decaying frail structures. More substantial homes occupied mostly by people of Italian, Polish, Slavic and Portuguese descent occupy the tree-lined streets around Independence Park. Outside the influence of the park green, the houses are often interspersed with small stores, light manufacturing plants, trucking firms and taverns. The Blacks and Puerto Ricans (about 15 per cent of Ironbound's 55,000 people) generally live in projects and apartments at the outer edges of Ironbound. Here the community is rimmed by railroads lined with machine shops, manufacturing, storage and transportation concerns.

One estimate has 52 different ethnic and racial groups living together in Ironbound. The waves of immigration over the past century have been as varied as New York's Lower East Side, with the current wave being mostly Portuguese and Cuban. Visits to most any of the taverns, social clubs or churches of Ironbound reveal the deep divisions along racial and ethnic lines. Some bars are totally Black; others are Portuguese or Spanish; some are Italian or Polish. The churches can generally be identified along racial and ethnic lines: St. Josephs is Puerto Rican, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel is Italian, St. Benedicts is German and Irish, Paradise Baptist Church is Black, St. Casimir is Polish and Czechoslovak, etc. The Polish Falcons, Italian-American War Veterans, Sport Club Portuguese, Club Espana, Brazilian Center of New Jersey, and the Luso-American Fraternal Association further testify to the community's division.

Rarely is an available house or apartment advertised publicly or listed with a real estate agent. To be sure that "undesireables" (usually thought of as Blacks or Puerto Ricans) don't move into many neighborhoods, all advertising is through friends and social groups. Many people have been greatly relieved of a haunting worry by the influx of Portuguese and Cubans. Considered to be more middle class, they have bought up most real estate as it becomes available--keeping property resale rates high and keeping Blacks out of most white neighborhoods.

Despite these divisive patterns, the Ironbound Community Learning Center has grown with participation from all of the major racial and ethnic groups. Racial and ethnic diversity mark both the student population and the active parents. The Center's Governing Board of Sixteen members includes parents, students and staff of twelve different racial and ethnic ancestries: Italian, Puerto Rican, Irish, Black, Polish, German, Portuguese, French-Canadian, Jewish, Greek, English, and Scottish. The Thirty-five member staff has even greater diversity, including Indians, a Lithuanian and Egyptian, among others. Unlike most public issues and groups in the tense city of Newark, neither disagreements nor close friendships at the Center follow racial or ethnic lines.

## THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

Parents at the Center have jointly embraced a process which has brought basic changes in a tradition-bound community. It assures that the unspoken messages transmitted to their children will not be the usual echo of their own negative experiences in learning. Parents themselves participate in the building of institutions that improve the quality of their lives:

1. Ironbound Center parents have been challenging the usual limitations in their own, their children's and neighbors' lives. They have established a learning model which is distinctively different from the traditional school which triggers the subliminal "no."
2. Ironbound parents made or collaborated in every significant decision shaping this new center for learning. They did so by following a community-based planning process through which they, with the help of educators and organizers they selected, explored and chose among alternatives. Only by choosing themselves do the parents truly believe that their children's learning experience is different from the put-downs they encountered.
3. The parents, along with staff and students, are constantly changing their roles as learners, organizers, and teachers. By being part of the shaping and changing of the institution in which their children learn, the parents have gained a sense of owning the Center instead of feeling manipulated by social workers, educators and experimenters. Only by choosing themselves do parents become deeply involved in supporting and defending a program which challenges much within themselves and their community.

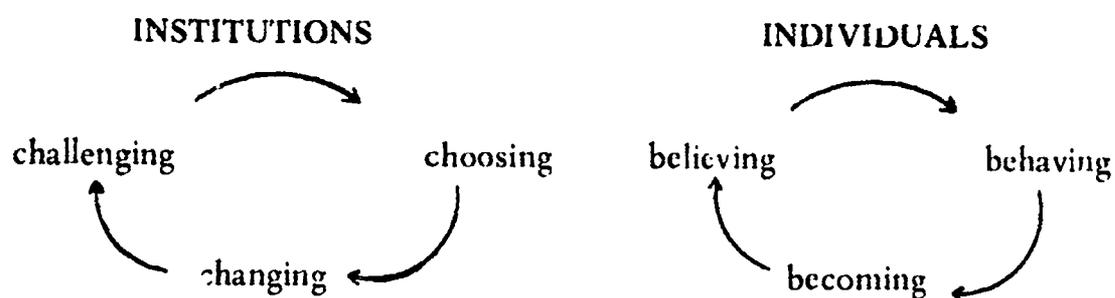
Parents have made a number of choices about the Center which clearly distinguishes it from the traditional model they grew up with:

1. Children enjoy learning tied to real life experiences.
2. Much of the time children have an opportunity to choose among alternative learning activities.
3. Progress reports are to be given in personal, descriptive language instead of grades and grade levels which remind one of failures or "not measuring up."
4. Parents insist on the right to select teaching adults who are understanding, sensitive, and "real", instead of authoritarian and aloof.
5. The programs in the Center will remain small enough for children and adults to know each other personally. Growth is to come through creating new centers.
6. The center builds a community-within-a-community defined along lines of common concern for the quality of life of all racial and ethnic groups in Ironbound.

The process which generates a strong learning institution in the Ironbound has produced a parallel regenerative affect on many individuals who were previously caught in a cycle of despair common to the inner-city:

1. Learning in new and encouraging ways has brought parents and children to believe that they no longer have to abide by the usual self-imposed or self-accepted limitations on their lives.
2. Opportunities to take initiative, choose and play new roles allow parents and children to behave with a newfound self-confidence and be rewarded for it.
3. As they become more conscious of their abilities to teach, learn and change, parents and children come to believe and acknowledge to themselves that they have the power and knowledge to change their own lives.

Although these regenerating cycles for institutions and individuals don't counter all the economic and physical environment elements of the cycle of urban decay, they provide a positive point for intervention.



**LEARNING  
ATMOSPHERE:  
"Be Real"**

A core of Ironbound parents regularly insist that curriculum and school staff "be real." A couple of parents collaborated on a social studies curriculum that defined this term:

*Students should know that our great heroes in history were also people, just like we are. Our heroes slept, ate, argued with their wives or husbands, had headaches and had all the normal frustrations and fears that we do...So instead of just learning when heroes were born, died, and what they accomplished, children should know also if they had flat feet, stuttered or had buck teeth...It would then be so much easier to relate to them as real people.*

The drafting of this section of the curriculum was accompanied by numerous anecdotes. The parent writers recalled how they had thought their own teachers were superhuman gods...until one day they discovered that the teacher went to the toilet in the same way everyone else does. Few people in working class Ironbound put on airs. Teachers selected by Center parents must be "real" to both children and parents.

Parents and staff agree that learning can't be restricted to the four walls of a classroom. "Learning Is Everywhere" is the motto of the Everywhere School in Hartford that was visited by Ironbound parents. The motto is applied throughout the Ironbound School and Center.~

A visit to the pre-school on a typical day is living proof of the belief in urging broad choices among children and adults. The pre-school services approximately sixty 3 and 4 year old children. Generally they move freely among a dozen learning activity areas.

Evelyn, Parent-Coordinator for the pre-school, and parent of four Center children, greets visitors at the door of the long narrow covered storefront building..It is difficult to hesitate for long at the front of the room. The complex of activities in a dozen different interest areas unfolds over Evelyn's shoulder. Immediately beyond the reception area, Margarita, a group teacher and mother of three children at the Center, is helping three girls to unlock the mysteries of some interlocking puzzles. Four year old Tracy is also sitting in this area assisting a younger friend with a puzzle map of the world: a visitor joining the group is challenged and then taught how to do the puzzle as well. Twin boys are creating a puzzle of their own on the felt board propped up near by.

Across the room, Pat and Gloria (young adults who have returned to school to complete a G.E.D. and early childhood training after having previously dropped out of the local high school) are supervising two additional areas, one in language arts, one in mathematics. Some children in each area are following Pat and Gloria's leadership with matching Lottos and

Cuisenaire rods; others are exploring other Lotto cards, pictures, counting materials, balance scales, etc. Victor, a four year old, interrupts Gloria's group to offer some carrots that he has just cleaned, peeled and cut up in the practical arts area. A proud smile crosses his face as he offers his workmanship to his friends. Pete, an active four year old, skips up the center aisle past the quiet learning area supervised by Carrie, mother of one Center child. Pete stops briefly to strike a few notes on a xylophone in the instrumental group supervised by Anna, another Center mother. Pete recruits two brothers and a tall girl who have tired with the instruments and are ready to choose something new. Five minutes later they settle in as part of a group waiting to wrestle on some mats in the "large muscle area." They impatiently await their turn, with some side excursions to the climbing bars and rubber tire area. With only one exception among the dozen wrestlers, the children were enjoying the process of testing and tussling their bodies. The idea of pinning an opponent was far from their minds as they smiled and laughed, usually making sure that they, too, fell solidly against the mat and felt the hug and tug of their "partner."

Tiki breaks away from the onlookers to accost Pat L. with a question: "What is for lunch, Pat?" Pat is the mother of eight (three of whom are at the Center), and the cook for the Center. For a time Pat was a parent coordinator for the after school program. However, she found out that she could enjoy her work as cook much more and still feel very much a part of the Center's growth. The children usually get a preview of the good food to come, from the fine aromas in the air.

Another group of a dozen children enter excitedly by the side entrance. They've just returned from some dancing classes conducted at the Newark Community Center for the Arts. For a short time, the generally quiet rear work areas are noisier as the newcomers teach or brag to their friends about their latest trip.

A glance around the room shows that most activities are continuing undisturbed. A group of three girls has moved from Margarita's area to Carrie's area: Evelyn is now talking with a parent and a grandmother who stopped by on their lunch hour for a visit; Pete has finished his turn at wrestling and has now joined the mathematics area. Due to the intense involvement of most children in their chosen activity area, it is hard to realize that nearly sixty children and a dozen or more adults are all located in one room.

Meanwhile, four blocks up the street in a renovated supermarket building the Community School is providing choices appropriate for the five through thirteen year old children:

Each learning environment is organized and supervised by two to four adults and includes children who span at least three ages. The k-2 (ages 5, 6, and 7), the 3-5 (ages 8, 9, and 10) and the 6-8 (ages 11, 12, and 13) areas are divided from each other only by movable dividers which double as bookcases and storage areas....At times the older and younger groups

join each other on trips, dramatics, recreation, or work projects. Often the older students will reach or supervise the younger children. More often, though, students remain with their general age group and work alternately as individuals, in reading partners, in small groups or in full class meetings and activities.

Although parents expect an underlying commitment to helping each child gain the basic reading, writing and math skills, there is also much opportunity for choice of everything from "politics to plumbing," as the parent curriculum writers stated. While a large group of the k-2's are gathering imaginary clothes and equipment to go on a "lion hunt," others are learning Spanish from a parent volunteer teacher, another is reading alone in the library area, another is dictating words and a story about a monster to Doris, the regular parent teacher who is completing her education for a teaching degree. (The story may be recopied by the child later and read back to an adult or a friend in the class).

Meanwhile the 3-5 group is proceeding to follow the daily schedules they set for themselves. The schedule book constitutes a form of contract to complete something in each of the three R's, as well as three or more open ended activities, projects, recreation, etc. It has been fascinating to observe the way in which children have adapted to the opportunity to make choices....Almost without exception, the third to fifth graders were enrolled in traditional public or parochial schools until this year. Early in the year most students seemed to be in transition between choices they had only reluctantly made. The adults would each have a small cluster of students working with them; other students would wander around, test the patience of the adults, and bother the few students who were working. It took almost four months for the pattern to reverse so that the tone of the area was being set by those at work, instead of those in transition. Now the most devastating punishment is to be told that you have to leave the area and won't be allowed to continue on a chosen activity.

Because so many of the children had experienced failure in their previous learning experiences in traditional schools, reading and math are largely taught without the textbooks. Cuisenaire rods, balance scale, number line, and science experiments are some ways approaching much needed math skills. Key work cards, dictated and reread stories, captioned art work and approaches to reading. The various trips, improvis<sup>d</sup> plays, crafts and wood-working projects, recreational activities provide similar options to both 3-5 and 6-8 students....

The decision to leave long established friends in public or parochial schools was difficult for these older children. However, the fact that their experience in the Center's after school and summer programs offered the same kinds of broad and interesting choices of activities and alternative approaches to learning basic skills whetted their appetites for more. In many cases the children decided first to make the change and then set

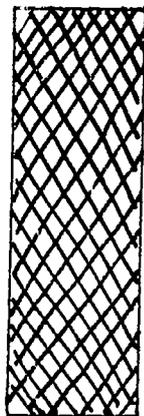
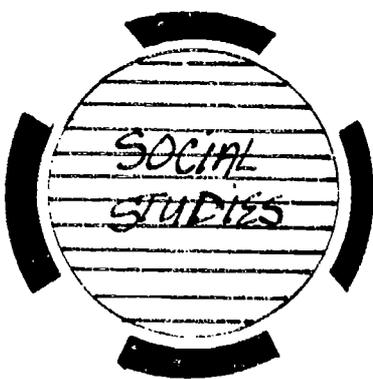
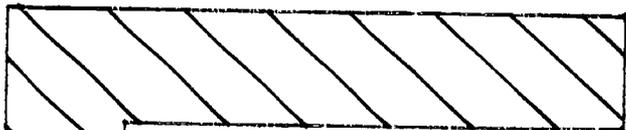
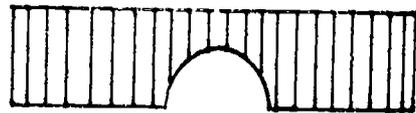
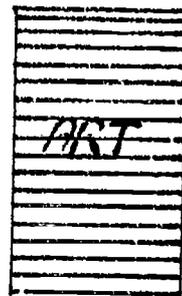
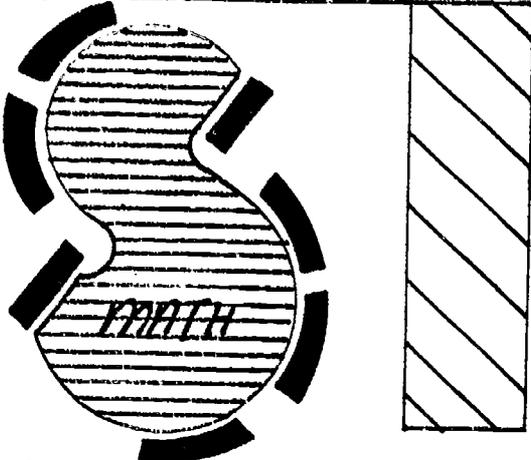
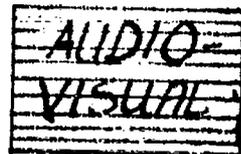
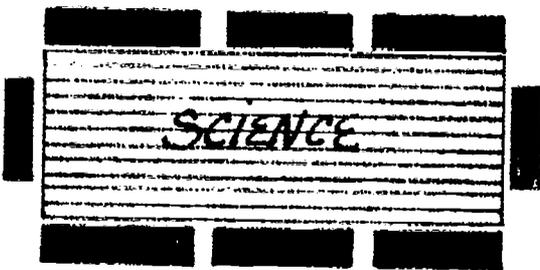
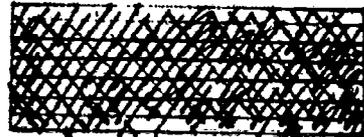
THE 3rd - 5th GRADE  
CLASSROOM

(Ironbound Community Learning Center)

This layout represents an area 30' x 43'  
(23 children and 2 teachers work in the area).



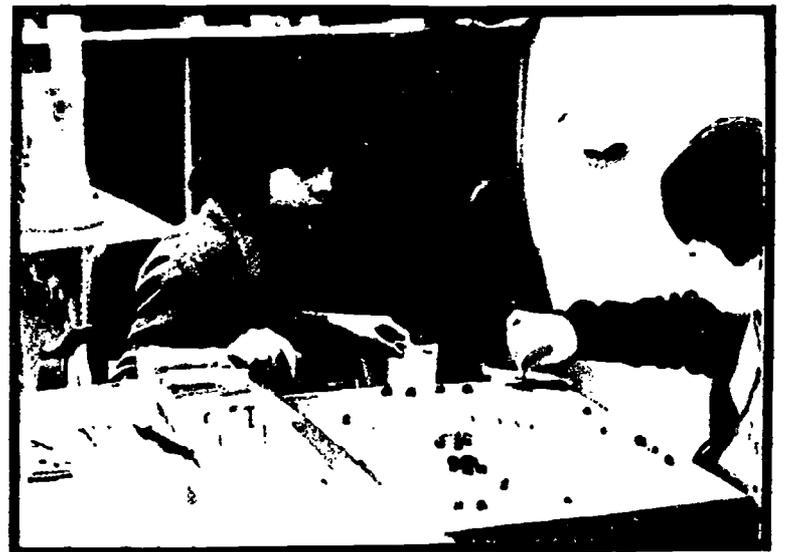
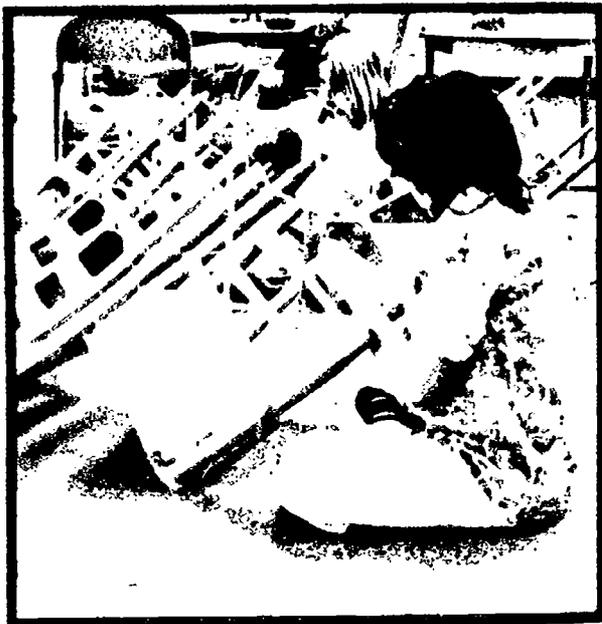
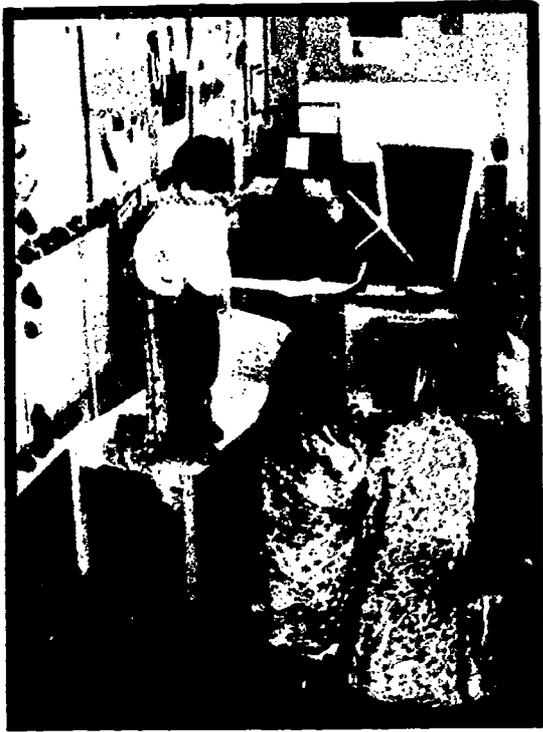
LIBRARY

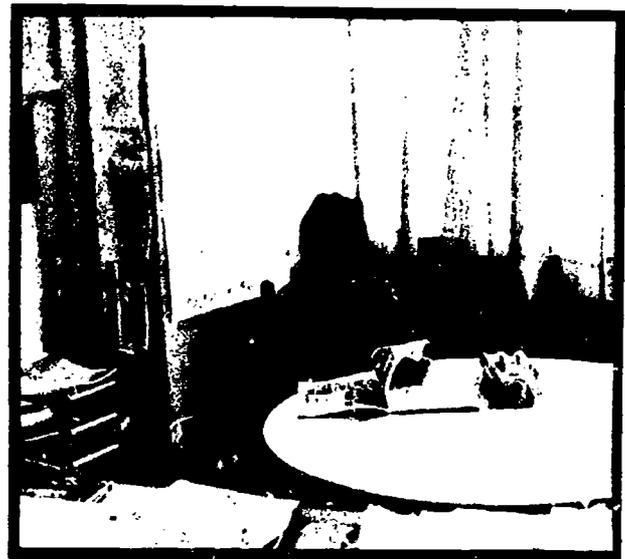


	TABLES
	CHAIRS
	OPEN-FACE DIVIDERS
	BOOK SHELVES
	SINK BLACK BOARD











about convincing their parents that this was something new and good.

## CHALLENGING

There are many forces in poor and working class communities which serve to maintain the status quo, perpetuating limits and divisions. Newark's Ironbound is certainly no exception. There are the vocal individuals and groups who oppose everything new from sex education in schools, to fluoridation in water, to an open market in housing. The churches, social clubs and bars which generally attract only one ethnic or racial group perpetuate a division that breeds suspicion and fear and from that fear comes resistance to change. Educators rarely take on the challenge of making changes in predominately white working class schools. Why locate "innovative" programs in areas that appear to be so resistant to change?

But this stereotype of the Ironbounds of America crumbles with the right combination of planning and challenging. The leadership ultimately must and can come from the community itself. By no means can everyone in white working class neighborhoods be fit into the stereotype of Archie Bunker. Not only that, but even the Archie Bunkers are very ambivalent about what they want and need. Under the gruff "America, love it or leave it" exterior is a real dissatisfaction with what they're getting in America and a growing interest in change.

The Ironbound Center was not established with great fanfares of publicity and revolutionary promises. People in most communities would resent an approach critical of their lives and community by outsiders. The Center was built carefully over time:

- August - 69    1.    A combination of local residents (mostly parents), teachers, and organizers discussed and agreed on some basic unmet needs in the community.
  
- Sept. - 69    2.    The initial projects designed to meet these needs did not compete with any established services or institutions in the Ironbound. Instead they provided much needed day care services for pre-school children and recreation and tutoring programs for older children. A combination of state and local funds was patched together to provide seed money. Parents saw their children enjoying learning, often for the first time. They began to recognize that exercising the right to choose led to improvements in their own and their children's lives.
  
- May - 70    3.    An effort to close the Center inspired by the protectors of tradition in the Ironbound was defeated by parents, staff and teenagers. They recognized that real and valuable services had grown in their community largely because they were exercising their right to choose.

- April - 71 4. In response to parent requests, a series of ten weekly seminars was organized by a specialist from the New Jersey State Department of Education. The seminars included discussion of current educational opportunities and led to a decision by parents that a community school should become a part of the Center. The public and parochial schools clearly were dull and uninteresting in comparison to what was happening in the Center's pre-school and after-school programs. Parents discussed and saw even more clearly the ways in which a lockstep curriculum, traditional discipline, and social promotions were turning their children's interests off and leading to drop-outs.
- August - 71 5. The Ironbound Center became one of the four "pioneer" day care programs in New Jersey to be funded by the State Department of Institutions and Agencies.
- Sept. - 71 6. The parents hired staff, outlined a general philosophy and opened a community school for twenty kindergarten to second grade age children. About half of the children had been to the Center's pre-school and the parents didn't want to send them into traditional schools; others were struggling or bored with the traditional schools already.
- Sept. - 72 7. A year later, the parents expanded the school so that all of their children up through eighth grade could attend the community school. A large supermarket was renovated to accommodate the enlarged school. Added help from the Victoria Foundation and State Department of Education enabled the parents to hire more staff and operate programs for about 200 children and their families. The pre-school program was expanded to serve 60 children. By now the majority of pre-school staff were gaining training on the job and in related training.
- Summer-73 8. Serious negotiation with the Newark Board of Education began with the goal of making the Community School a model of open education and parent responsibility within the public school system.

#### CHOOSING:

Choosing among meaningful alternatives is the essence of decision-making; parents at the Center have made and participated in all the crucial decisions which involve curriculum, budget, and staff selection or retention. Yet choosing is not merely decision-making in governance.

Individual interests and skills encourage some parents to teach a small group of children their language (Spanish or Portuguese in the Ironbound School), or help serve and prepare the lunches, or help by driving the van on field trips, etc. Just as the variety of people in any community is great, so are the ways in which parents may participate in their children's schooling, as opposed to the traditional school program which places its values on having the right specialist or professional complete most tasks.

The Ironbound Center provides a natural setting in which parents, students, and staff may fit skills and interests into the many varied needs of a living, working, learning community. The mystique of the teacher and professional educator having a patent on teaching as a role is not perpetuated here.

The teaching staff acknowledges and enjoys the fact that they learn from both parents and students, as well as each other. Parents become aware of the fact that they have important things to teach their own children, and that the process of teaching their own children didn't stop after they taught their babies to speak.

Yet parents also acknowledge that they have more to learn, both as adults and as parents. Many skills are reinforced or discovered in the course of building, reshaping, and expanding their own learning center. In the course of all this activity and organizing, the "subliminal no" is being dealt with. Parents know that the education that their children are experiencing is not the same as that which seemed to label them "failures." They know because they both see the results of their own or their neighbors decisions in shaping the Center and they themselves experience learning through choosing and doing.

"Choosing" is certainly the key to change at the Center. It is the defense against critics, it is the key to challenging the limitations of a tradition-bound community and it is the key to remotivating children and adults. When the confrontation with critics occurs, they can't oppose the very American right to a democratic choice--when they have the choice of participating or not participating, of enrolling their children or not. Yet acknowledging the right of others to choose leads ultimately to challenging all the limiting, restrictive values which bind the community. Respecting the right of others to choose inevitably leads to the recognition of the rights of Blacks and other minority groups to choose---to live where they want and to attend school where they wish.

There is a growing consciousness at the Center that the significant differences in American society are not between racial and ethnic groups. Instead, Ironbound parents are increasingly aware of how their lives are limited because of their class status. Visits to suburban schools reveal that public education is often not so limited as in traditional Ironbound schools. They know that executives and top level administrators exercise many choices and may fill a wide variety of roles. This is contrasted with the repetitiousness of assembly line or civil service work.

## CHANGING

"The Center was at first a day care opportunity for my kids, giving me a chance to develop more financial security and perhaps a more promising job future. After I began to realize the kinds of choices that were opening up to me from the Center, it was obvious that a new me was developing. The often shy, but questioning, exploring adult, was beginning to unfold. I was given an educational opportunity that, while still not fulfilled, excited and challenged me to the world around. It began to stimulate my kids, who then were already curious, often frustrated by unanswered questions. Their openness and honesty provoked much of my childhood restraints which had limited me for so long. My ethnic and economic background had also unjustly caused a tremendous 'block' in my life, and I was determined this would not happen to my kids."

*Ironbound parent of two girls*

When choosing is truly accepted as a positive value for adults as well as children, an entirely new kind of institution emerges. Maximizing the right and opportunity for children, parents and staff to choose leads to an institution that is constantly changing. Parents at the Ironbound Center repeatedly test whether the Center is still responsive to their choosing. Is it still different from the schools in which they experienced failure?

The fact that an ever-widening number of parents, as well as students and staff, take on and become confident in a variety of teaching, learning and organizing roles might be confusing to an administrator accustomed to pyramid-shaped and line organization charts. However, this shifting and interchanging of roles is vital to the creation of a learning community which goes far beyond the traditional school. Although the Ironbound Center has a clearly discernible order in its operation, the parents and staff have seemingly made an unwritten decision that learning and individual growth is a more important goal than efficiency and institutional growth. Parents and the staff they selected challenge too much specialization of roles. Certainly it is time-consuming for additional parents to learn about the financial operation of the Center, but this learning is judged more important than rapid, efficient action in financial, curriculum, or other matters. The shared conviction is that limiting roles did not produce significantly more efficiency in the long run. Not only do people gain only limited knowledge of the school and learning when roles are limited, but also people become bored and inefficient when carrying out repetitive tasks over and over again.

This process of trial and error, shifting of roles, and learning by doing builds on some of the best principles of learning. That is, questioning and making mistakes are not horrible, but instead are a vital part of the learning process. The Center acts on its belief that a Learning Center should apply such principles to learning, growing adults as well as to the students who so often emulate adults.

Overall this process of ongoing change seems to be changing lives. It is challenging the limitations that many adults have felt were inviolable.

Before I was satisfied with a role of wife, mother. Before I was a 'yeh, yeh', girl. My experience at the Center has made me stand up with my husband. Before I agreed with him because I felt it was my duty. I used to let people make a liar out of me just not to get in an argument or something. Then I began to say, why can't I say what I really feel? The Center made me feel I was somebody, not just something.

*A mother of five children*

As implied by this statement, there are tensions that result from the changes as well as growth. Changing brings challenges, and more choosing, and more changing. It is a dynamic process that seems essential in this learning community.

The Children's Center Governing Board is one of the most distinctive features of the decision-making powers the parents have nurtured since its beginning. A discussion at such a meeting might evolve around an issue of the van use:

## GOVERNANCE OF THE CENTER

- Parent A: "We said before that the vans couldn't be used for outside the Center activities and yet the object of the Center is for bringing people together."
- Parent B: "We don't have collision insurance. What if someone has an accident, who's responsible?"
- Parent C: "Both things are important. Parents should be able to be together on weekends and not have to worry about paying for an accident."

The conclusion to this discussion was to redefine the purpose of the van, allowing Center parents its use with proper responsibility, and to provide in the budget monies for full insurance. This is an example of the Governing Board's authority to allocate money and create policies. One might also witness a flaring of tempers, or much disagreement, but the ultimate goal is reaching a fair, sound decision which promotes the growth of the Center and School. The membership of the Board consists of four representatives of each of the Center's programs. Most are parents, but representation of staff and students is also provided for. All meetings are open to parents, and while everyone attending might not have voting privileges, they are assured of having their opinions heard.

The governance of the Center is so diversified that it requires the formation and periodic redefinition of several committees to permit its normal functioning, and enable parents to participate on a broader scale.

Budget and Finance, Curriculum, Funding, Board of Education Negotiations, and Parent Involvement are a few of such committees established.

Because parents are especially concerned that a good relationship is maintained with their staff, special emphasis is given to parent participation on the personnel committees for each of the three programs. The personnel committees interview and select candidates, review and re-evaluate staff serving their respective programs. Staff serving the Center as a whole (such as the Center Director, nurse, and cook) are selected and reviewed by a Selection Committee composed of parent representatives from each of the personnel committees. Appeals of any personnel action may be reviewed by the Governing Board.

The expanding core of Center parents has been quite aware at each step forward what was happening in the programs. Almost every day that their children were attending the Center, a group of parents came together for a Governing Board meeting, a personnel committee meeting, a curriculum committee meeting, a parent-teacher meeting or open house, a seminar in new approaches to learning, feeling, discipline, self-image, etc....Parents also visited other community schools so that they could make comparisons with their own. One group of parents had met almost daily for two months to organize and map out 1) student recruitment, 2) facilities, 3) personnel recruitment and selection, 4) parent involvement and publicity, and 5) curriculum for the first year of the community school.

In addition to the classroom teaching and assisting, the food preparation, and parent organizing on a regular basis, parents take on roles in every aspect of the Center: administrative and supervisory tasks, preparing refreshments, driving the van, painting and doing carpentry work in the buildings, doing secretarial work, providing much needed personal support to fellow parents.

The Center now contains an incredibly diverse reservoir of practical-and theoretical-knowledge and expertise. Recently a delegation of five parents met with the Newark Superintendent of Schools for almost two hours to describe and defend the goals and practices of the School. He promised his support in their effort to secure public funding for the school. Another group of parents has organized a women's group of their own so they can go beyond the mutual support group which evolved naturally.

Still undeveloped parent wishes include health and adult education opportunities in the community. The reservoir of talent for these projects now exists at the Center. Parents, instead of professional staff, now know where to look for resources and have the organizational experience and know-how to develop these additional projects. The learning community gains strength and expertise with each successful project that it undertakes.

A positive spirit of growing, learning and facing important decisions is also evident among staff members. A teacher with five years of previous public school and agency teaching experience states:

## THE ROLE OF STAFF

This is the first year of teaching during which I was actually encouraged in my effort...I've had the freedom to teach in the manner I considered healthy for the children.

Despite the stress on developing parent decision-making skills and confidence, the Ironbound parents obviously provide lots of support and latitude to the staff. Another experienced teacher reflects:

I was put into a role in other schools and not allowed to be a full person. I couldn't share my life with the children because I was only allowed to talk about certain things.

In contrast, Ironbound staff is encouraged to extend the limits of learning. Instead of seeing themselves as always in the giving or teaching role, they grow and learn along with the children and parents. A parent teacher recently talked of her appreciation for how the pre-school was "not confining for kids" and how this affected her:

I always wanted to be a teacher, but being poor I didn't have an opportunity. Working here with these kids...it's a privilege. You can learn from these kids.

Other parent-teachers speak proudly of their opportunity to return to school for a high school equivalency and college credit, often leading to a degree.

The School staff, including parents and certified teachers, are now directing much energy toward more effectively linking the teaching of skills with social studies and science content areas. Much of the staff enthusiasm is due to the recognition that they too will be learning as they explore the history of Newark, the growth of transportation networks in New Jersey, or the treatment of Indians and other minority groups in America.

There is much work yet to be done. Although there is a solid and expanding core of learning/teaching/organizing parents, there are still more to become involved. Sometimes out of suspicion, often from envy, opposition arises. Already a few parents in the traditional public schools have challenged the fact that money is being spent on "that new school" instead of channeled toward much needed improvements in their own schools. Added problems remain which are inherent within the effort of generating a parent-backed, parent-involved, parent/child-centered program: What do you do to avoid getting parents over involved? (That is, to the point that they burn themselves out and have to withdraw entirely). How do you best deal with the strains placed on families in which one or the other parent grows with the Center and the other becomes increasingly resistant to his/her involvement?

## MORE CHALLENGES

There are also some haunting questions: Can one model Center survive in the context of a city viewed so often as a model of decay? Then there is the continued uncertainty of future funding for the Center itself. How will the Federal government's newly tightened day care guidelines affect the program? Will State Department of Education support continue under a new Commissioner? Can added private funds be secured to help as the program grows? How much affect will one small Center have on the larger institutions that currently surround them? Can financial resources be found to develop added centers as the Ironbound Project generates more and more parents and staff with the required skills and self-assurance?

The answers to some of these questions are beginning to appear now. Other pockets of strength and determination continue to appear in Newark. Parents at the Center are increasingly confident in joining with Black, Spanish-speaking and other Newark parents who share their goals. The New Jersey State Department of Education has tentatively planned to hire some of the skilled Ironbound Center parents who would provide help to parents developing programs in other neighborhoods.

Parents are now beginning to negotiate with the Newark Board of Education for public funding. Although such an agreement would assure long range financial support of the Community School, parents are cautiously and warily exploring what they might have to give up to gain this security. The parents recognize that as a part of the public system much of their energy would have to be expended on protecting their right to choose the who, what, and how of their children's education. They also recognize the prospect of being continually vigilant but feel well prepared for the duration. Initial contacts with the Board have been very encouraging. Both Board members and staff have been enthusiastic on visiting the Ironbound School. A report to the Board by an inspection team reveals this:

...Finally, the two principals who visited the facility were impressed by the spirit and attitude on part of the entire personnel...Undoubtedly this experiment in open-space education in an urban area should be closely observed as a learning laboratory. Success as is evident here should put to rest the notion that urban children need rigid-tightly controlled structures and are unable to function in a fairly free, independent, stable atmosphere.

With the support and cooperation of imaginative educators, the Center's process for development of a community school could have begun within the public school system itself. Of course, this assumes that the public system is flexible enough to break up its large, impersonal schools into program units for parents to deal with other parents as friends and human

beings again. However, one would have to be cautious in applying Ironbound as a model: It is not a formula, but a process. Building a core group of parents and developing a learning community does not easily lend itself to a PERT chart. Behavioral objectives could be stated (changes in parent skills x, y, and z; children making choices about x, y ...), but the order of development should not be preordained by educational planners. Parents of one school may choose first to attack adult education programs, others would build around children, some would start with day care, others with teenagers. Most important is the choosing, and the confidence that learning is to be different "for me and my kids."

The New Jersey State Department of Education is generally in accord with the philosophy of the authors of "Perspective" papers. However, the views expressed in these papers are the result of planning and research in areas of educational interest, and do not necessarily reflect current policies of the Department of Education.