



Becoming the Face of the Community for Public Education Reform in New York City

ZAKIYAH SHAAKIR-ANSARI

When parents acquire the tools and training to engage meaningfully in decision making, they become champions of educational justice and have the power to transform education.

The power of organizing is that it makes ordinary people do extraordinary things.
— Jitu Brown, education organizer,
Kenwood Oakland Community
Organization, South Side of Chicago

In May 2013 I moderated the first mayoral debate in New York City. It was held at New York University with hundreds of parents, students, and teachers in attendance. There were more than sixty media outlets including MSNBC. We had attracted national press, thanks to Anthony Weiner's entry the day before into the New York City mayoral race.

Imagine a Black, Muslim woman moderating five mayoral candidates, all men, flanked by a panel of Black and Latino students and parents, who were all women, delivering the questions to the candidates. It was powerful.

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Before we started, I was extremely nervous, but at some point I found my groove. Afterwards, Bill de Blasio commented, “Now we know how tough a mother she is.” Bill Thompson commented, “Zakiyah, you are tough.” The best comment came from someone I greatly admire – the late, renowned political consultant Bill Lynch, who was in attendance – “Great job!”

How did I get here? Why me? I often ask myself that very question. How did a wife and Brooklyn mother of eight with no college degree – who was introverted, quiet, unassuming, and lacked self-confidence – become so relevant? How did a woman who witnessed mental, physical, and verbal abuse as a child, who experienced extreme poverty, who helped to raise her younger brother, and who had her first child at age nineteen become the face of educational justice in a massive city like New York?

My story could be your story.

My journey began with those very childhood experiences, experiences that made me sensitive to people in the street when emotions were high – women who were being yelled at by a boyfriend or husband, a fellow New Yorker who was sad or crying – no matter what else was happening around me I could spot these moments. It is that connection that gives me the focus and drive to continue this heartfelt, emotionally draining, fulfilling work. And, all along the way, people have made connections with me, and that has made all the difference.

Fifteen years ago, I was an officer of my children’s parent-teacher association and attending meetings at the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) Parent Outreach in Brooklyn. That’s where I met Fran Streich, UFT’s parent liaison. It was there that my advocacy mindset was birthed. It was there that I learned I had a voice and power as a parent. Yet I still wasn’t completely confident in doing that.

In 2003, I became a parent leader with the Brooklyn Education Collaborative (BEC), which was comprised of community-based organizations, including UFT Parent Outreach. BEC was my first experience with organizing. What a powerful moment it was! Barbara Gross of the Community Involvement Program (CIP), then housed at New York University, staffed and supported BEC by providing trainings, helping parent leaders strategize, providing school data, and offering words of encouragement. In 2007, we realized the need to build citywide parent power, so the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) was formed with the critical technical support from Barbara and other CIP staff, now part of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. It was then that the flame was ignited in me, and I haven’t looked back.¹

In June 2012, the king of organizing, the late Jon Kest of ACORN, invited me to have breakfast. When he told me he wanted to get together I jokingly said, “All right, let me get my book” and didn’t move. We met about a week later at Junior’s (a restaurant famous for its cheesecake), where he proceeded to tell me that he believed I could and should be the face for education in New York City for the upcoming 2013 mayoral elections that we were beginning to strategize about. I sat there a bit in disbelief, but I knew if Jon was saying it, he was serious (his time was valuable and he didn’t blow smoke). He asked me, “What do you think?” I said, “Sure, I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make a difference for the 1.1 million children in our schools.” It sounds corny, but it’s the truth.

He saw something in me that I hadn’t seen in myself, and he was right.

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¹ For more on the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, see María Fernández and Ocynthia Williams’s article in this issue of *VUE* and Shaakir-Ansari and Williams 2009.

After twelve years of the Bloomberg failed education agenda of closing 160 schools; using high-stakes testing to punish and label schools, teachers, and students as failures; forced co-locations; and the blatant disrespect of parent voice, only 12 percent of Black and Latino children are graduating college and career ready,² and our schools are more segregated than ever.

Fast-forward eighteen months from that meeting with Jon. It was November 21, about 4 p.m. in Albany, New York, shortly after Bill de Blasio won the mayoral election. I'm facilitating a meeting as the advocacy director of Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) with key staff members of Governor Cuomo's team along with about two dozen parents and students, a superintendent, and community members from across New York State. Earlier that day I had co-emceed a short program before 350 people, co-facilitated a workshop, and led a rally/speak out on the Million Dollar Staircase at the state capitol in Albany, with chants of "No More Excuses, Educate Every Child!" to demand that the state stop refusing to provide the funding for New York City ordered by the court in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit.

That afternoon, a small group of us gathered to share our stories – many expressed with tears or through raised voices – about the impact of budget cuts. In the midst of this intense moment, my phone was just buzzing away in my bag. I was thinking, "Is it my children? What could be so important?" I decided to just check and see what was going on, only to realize that I had missed calls and messages from reporters in addition to lots of congratulatory messages on Twitter and Facebook from parents and community members all over the country. Why? It was public.

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² NYC Department of Education, *School-Level Regents-Based Math ELA Aspirational Performance Measure, 2012-13*.

I had been named to Mayor-Elect Bill de Blasio's transition team, along with sixty other prominent people.

I live to educate, empower, and connect to all parents, but especially Black and Latino parents. We are often portrayed as being uncaring, uneducated, lazy, and a whole host of other false stereotypes.

But I am the rule, not the exception.

Amazing things happen when you engage us in a truly meaningful way; when you believe in us; when you arm us with the data to help us bring our stories to life; when you provide trainings and ensure we are the messengers. I know this because for more than a decade CEJ and AQE have provided me with all of the above and so much more. I know this because I've met and built relationships with parents who look like me all across the country and we've talked, cried, and gotten angry about how our communities and schools are being sabotaged and abandoned. But more importantly, we've become a support system for each other. We think about strategy. We INSPIRE and ENCOURAGE our communities to ACTION.

Hope is stirred through ORGANIZING.

That's how I became the face for educational justice in New York City.

REFERENCE

Shaakir-Ansari, Z., and O. Williams. 2009. "Parent Power in New York City: The Coalition for Educational Justice," *Voices in Urban Education* 23 (Spring):36-45.