

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 105

EA 032 462

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TITLE Community-Driven School Reform: Parents Making a Difference in Education.
INSTITUTION Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Flint, MI.
PUB DATE 2002-12-00
NOTE 10p.; This article was reprinted from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation's quarterly magazine, "Mott Mosaic."
AVAILABLE FROM Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Mott Foundation Building, 503 S. Saginaw Street, Suite 1200, Flint, MI 48502-1851. Tel: 810-238-5651; Fax: 810-766-1753; e-mail: info@mott.org; Web site: <http://www.mott.org>. For full text: <http://www.mott.org/publications/pdf/Mosaic%20ReprintV1N2.pdf>.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT Mott Mosaic; v1 n2 Dec 2002
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Community Programs; Elementary Secondary Education; Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Partnerships in Education; *Reading Instruction; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Direct Instruction; *Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

Community-driven school reform is receiving greater attention now as communities become more closely involved with their schools. One such program is a grassroots, faith-based organization called People Acting for Community Together (PACT). PACT is one of about 150 community-organizing groups nationwide that have worked to improve student learning in poor inner-city public schools by building relationships and leading reform efforts to overcome educational bureaucratic inertia. Viewpoints of people involved with PACT and similar projects are presented as lenses through which the reader can appraise the viability of community-driven school reform. The focus of community-driven school reform is enhanced student performance through the involvement of the school community as an educational peer with the school. PACT educates parents on how to focus on real problems of the school and gives parents a vehicle to bring about change to the school. In 2003, the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University will begin examining PACT and seven other organizing groups, their organizing strategies, and how their work translates into school change. At this time, reading programs introduced by PACT have shown better results than other programs, such as the whole-language approach. (RT)

Community-Driven School Reform: Parents Making a Difference in Education

Sheila Beachum Bilby

December 2002

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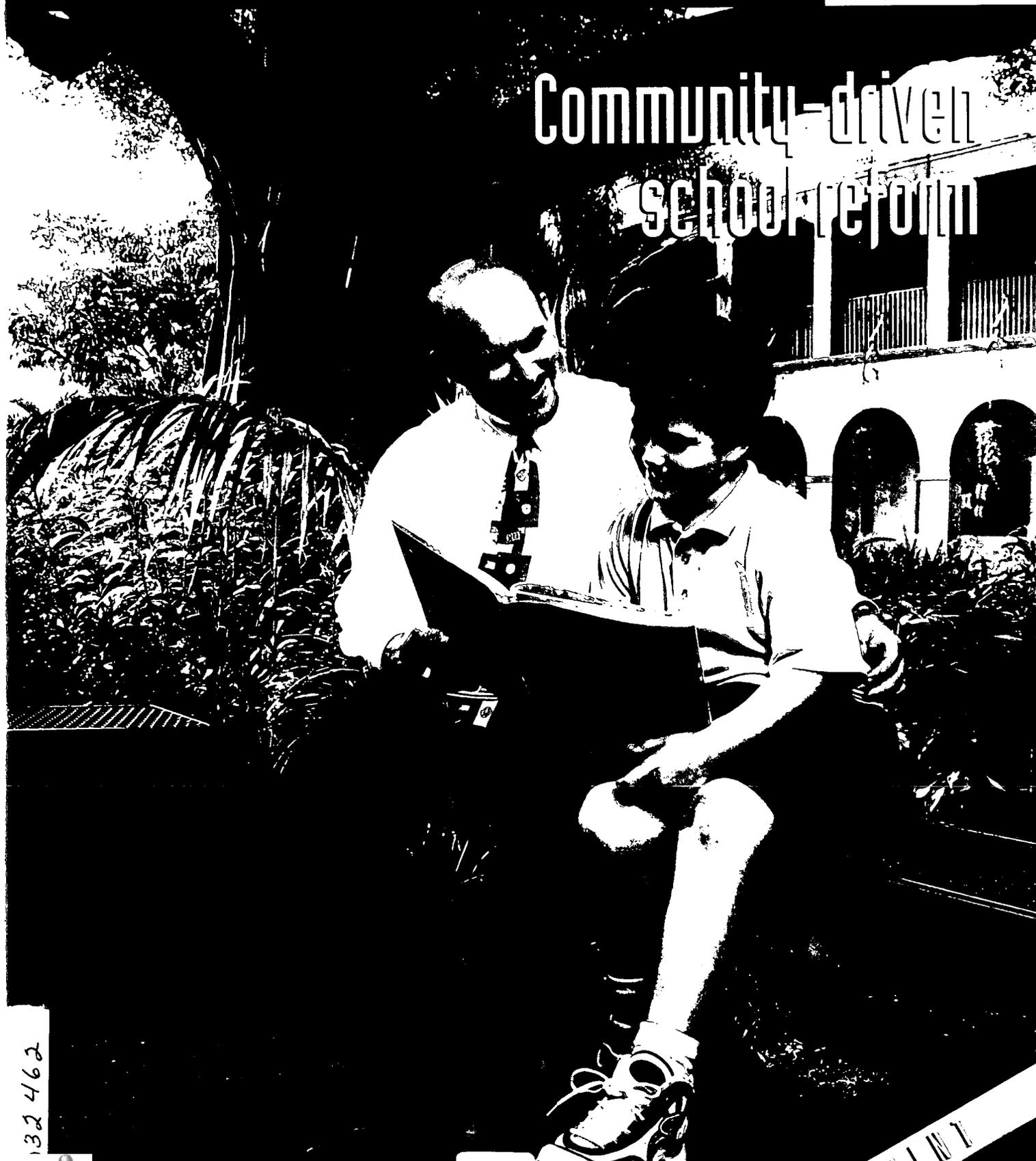
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Volume 1, Number 2

December 2002

Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

Community-driven school reform



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REPORT



Community school reform:

parents
making
a difference
in education

BY SHEILA BEACHUM BILBY

Parent Jesus Muñoz (far left), South Hialeah teacher Anita Martin and Principal Julio Carrera represent how all members of a community can work together on school reform.

When Christian Muñoz started kindergarten two years ago at South Hialeah Elementary School in the heart of Miami, his father was more than a little concerned.

“My child did not speak at all. He couldn’t even put a sentence together,” said Jesus Muñoz, 35. “And this is coming out of day care, where they were teaching him colors and numbers and all that. It was a good day care, but he just couldn’t do it.”

But the Muñoz family was about to encounter Direct Instruction, a phonics-based reading program introduced to the Miami-Dade County Public Schools six years ago by a grassroots, faith-based organization called People Acting for Community Together (PACT).

PACT is one of about 150 community-organizing groups nationwide that, over the past decade, have worked to improve student learning in poor inner-city public schools by building relationships and leading reform efforts to help move the calcified levers of power entrenched in many education bureaucracies.

The issues and results vary by group, but community organizing for

A primer on community-driven school reform

The use of community-organizing strategies to reform urban public schools, particularly in poor neighborhoods and communities of color, has grown exponentially during the past decade.

This movement is challenging traditional methods of parental involvement — particularly in low-performing schools with high staff and leadership turnover, bureaucratic and dysfunctional cultures, and a lack of adequate support and guidance from district staffs.

In these schools, parents and youth are not asking for advisory participation; they are demanding that their schools strive toward higher levels of performance. Such demands are increasingly based on research and data and they are creating new ways to partner with educators to create a school climate conducive to learning.

The key to community-driven school reform is that community

organizing creates the social capital necessary to form equal partnerships between the community and the schools. This enables groups to break through bureaucratic paralysis and to generate public demand for policies and resources to eliminate disparities in the education system.

In this context, the Mott Foundation's grantmaking in Improving Community Education aims at building the capacity of communities to align resources around student achievement.

The primary difference between community organizing and other forms of parental mobilization is that organizing requires a structure of democratic decisionmaking on issues, strategies, tactics and vision. By doing so, the community organizing builds the skills of its members and lays the groundwork for working collectively toward a common goal.

Community organizing builds strong and lasting organizations

based on creating networks of relationships throughout a community. The very process of community organizing, because it is dedicated to intentional relationship-building, alters the adversarial relationships that too often exist between schools and the wider community in low-income neighborhoods.

Some community organizing is sponsored by institutions, including congregations-based, schools, service providers and unions. These organizations draw on the power of the institutions themselves as well as their access to people in the community. Thus, representatives from community organizations meeting with a principal or superintendent may include parents, pastors and local employers.

By building relationships among institutions directed toward a common goal, the community organization builds power. ■

educational reform has achieved notable accomplishments coast to coast, from the new reading curriculum in Miami-Dade to a teacher recruitment effort in Chicago to a program promoting teacher visits to student homes in Sacramento. (See sidebar, page 7.)

Although the Mott Foundation has long been involved in community-organizing efforts and education, community organizing for education reform is relatively new. Recognizing the potential for significant inroads in community-driven school reform, the Foundation has seeded this still-developing field with 65 grants totaling more than \$10.6 million since 1999.

The centerpiece of the next phase of grantmaking is a six-year study by New York University's Institute for Education and Social Policy of education-organizing efforts at eight sites nationwide. Funding for this effort, including grants to NYU and the eight sites, is expected to total \$6.4 million through 2008. The purpose of the study is to identify, document, evaluate and disseminate community-driven reform approaches that produce concrete educational improvements.

The study, which is designed to raise the under-

standing of educational leaders about the value of partnering with community-organizing groups, will be used to highlight the potential power of community-driven reform in a wider setting. The goal is to increase the number of principals, superintendents and education reformers who effectively engage low-income parents as equal partners.

PACT, which has grown from seven congregations when it was founded in 1988 to 25 today, is one of the community organizations participating in the study, which will begin in 2003! The goal is to document how community organizing can make a difference in school improvement and student achievement.

"Community organizing, at least faith-based community organizing, focuses intentionally on building relationships between people," said Aaron Dorfman, PACT's executive director.



■ Aaron Dorfman

¹The other sites included in the study are: Austin (Texas) Interfaith, the Community Coalition for Substance Abuse, Prevention and Treatment (Los Angeles), Eastern Philadelphia Organizing Project, Milwaukee Innercity Alliance for Hope (MICA), Northwest Bronx Clergy and Community Coalition, Oakland Community Organizations, and one more site to be determined.

“Those relationships build social capital in our communities, and it’s out of those relationships that people have the strength and the courage to act to make change, to act to improve their community.”

Community-driven school reform, with its focus on parent organizing for adult learning and leadership development, can help transform the culture and climate in the schools.

Raquel Muñoz, the principal at Auburndale Elementary, sees PACT’s parent-organizing skills as essential foundation building for the ongoing work of convincing parents to get involved in their children’s schools.

“Somehow through PACT, parents become more aware of what’s going on and they feel more comfortable,” she said. “They feel like they can entrust their kids to us — that we will be taking care of those children; that we will be providing the education that the children need.”

PACT’s network of trained parent and congregation leaders became so strong that it was able to overcome stiff resistance and convince administrators in the Miami-Dade schools to implement Direct Instruction (DI) as a pilot project in five elementary schools in 1997.

This fall, 26 of some 200 elementary schools in the district are using DI, thanks to PACT’s successful efforts two years ago to lobby the Florida Legislature for \$7.25 million for the reading program statewide. Miami-Dade applied for, and received, \$2.3 million to expand DI in its schools.

DI, developed at the University of Oregon more than 30 years ago, requires teachers to follow a rigorous script in teaching reading while their students respond aloud in unison. The key is repetition and building competence by drilling students on skills that already have been introduced while adding new abilities.

While DI has its critics, it has made believers out of many people — principals, teachers, parents, members of the business community — but none more so than Jesus Muñoz.

“Right off the bat, in less than probably two months, the kid was already speaking in sentences,” Muñoz said of Christian (now 8 and in the second grade). “He was reading. You could see the interest in wanting to learn. I can tell you [that] by



R Raquel Muñoz

the end of the year I did see a complete turnaround in my son.”

Muñoz, both awed and thankful for his son’s rapid transformation, strongly felt that he needed to contribute something back to the schools. In Miami-Dade, where parental involvement traditionally has been negligible at best, he became active in the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) at South Hialeah Elementary.

This fall, Muñoz, who works in sales, began his second year as a leader with PACT’s Parent Organizing Project and as PTA president at the school, which has 1,200 students. That is why he and his wife Dalia, 34, who works in the school registrar’s office, were at St. Timothy Catholic Church on a sweltering Saturday in August to attend a daylong PACT retreat for parent and congregation leaders.

PACT relies on trained leaders from its member congregations to conduct issue research and implement the strategies needed to achieve results. A year ago, it began branching out by organizing parents in four schools, with plans to add four more this year. This Parent Organizing Project (POP) is designed to engage parent leaders in improving their schools, enable PACT to identify more issues to work on, and enlarge its power base.

“Our members are involved in PACT because they care about their community. They care about the future,” Dorfman said. “They’re angry about the problems that they see, and they want to change things to make a difference. And nothing touches their hearts more than being able to work on education issues because they see it [education] as the future.”

Muñoz found PACT’s assistance indispensable in bringing parents at South Hialeah together last year to identify and work on concerns about security and communication at the school. With training and help from PACT, he is learning organizing strategies that can be used with the parents in his son’s school to bring about change.

While some administrators might be wary of parent organizing at their school, Dr. Julio Carrera, South Hialeah’s principal, considers PACT a well-informed ally with a clear mission and a strong sense of purpose.

“PACT educates parents on how to focus on the real problems of the school, and it gives them a vehicle to go about bringing change to the school,” he said.

The August retreat was PACT’s first attempt to blend the parent groups at the four schools with congregation leaders who have been working on DI.

About a dozen parents and congregational leaders shared both success stories and struggles to bring more accountability to schools.

During the morning session, Chris Brown, director of schools and community for the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, helped participants evaluate their work. He used a framework, developed by Cross City with Mott support, for examining strategies used in education organizing and then measuring the results.



■ Chris Brown

Using worksheets provided by Brown, the participants broke into small groups. Within an hour, they reported an impressive list of PACT strategies and results, including their work on DI. They went on, with Brown's assistance, to explore issues they hope to tackle this school year, with class size topping the list.

Cross City, a national network of school reform leaders, is one of several groups trying to document what works in school organizing. Frustrated that education experts and funders were not seeing the connection between community organizing and results in the classroom, Cross City spent two years studying the education organizing of five groups.

The study's findings were released last summer. (See sidebar, page 7.)

"We went into this with a belief that community organizing is essential to make and sustain school reform," Brown said. "School systems don't wake up after 30 years of failure and say today we'll be different. They need outside people pushing them to make changes."

In undertaking the study, Cross City had three target audiences in mind: funders, educators and organizers.

The goals for each were different:

- For funders, better understand the work of organizing for school reform and provide more support for it.
- For educators, help them understand the importance of community organizing to their work and integrate it into their work.
- For organizers, help them learn from their peers and expand their efforts.

"When you're doing an organizing campaign and the goal is to be sure that all kids are learning at high

levels, that's a really long, hard process," Brown said. "And if you win a campaign today, it may be four, six or eight years before you see the concrete, winnable, measurable results you were looking for in terms of increases in children's learning."

In Miami-Dade, the 12 schools that have used DI the longest have seen student assessment test scores go up, chronic absenteeism go down and student confidence in their academic abilities soar.

"The number of non-readers is just almost non-existent now in the 12 schools that have been using DI for five years," Dorfman said.

When Principal Muñoz first heard about DI at a district meeting, it immediately struck her as something that may be beneficial for her students, most of whom are Hispanic and half of whom have limited English proficiency.

As a result, Auburndale Elementary became one of the first five schools in Miami-Dade to use DI with majority approval from its teachers. Only three or four teachers objected to abandoning the whole language reading program then in use.

"At the end of that first year of DI instruction, two of those teachers came to me and hugged me and said, 'You know, this was the best thing we could have done' because immediately that first year they did see some progress in the children," Muñoz said.

One of those teachers was 31-year-old Susana Garcia, who has taught at Auburndale for nine years. Like others, she didn't like the script teachers were required to use and the repetitive nature of the teaching method.

But once trained, she began to see the results in her kindergarten class. Children who didn't know their colors at the beginning of the school year were reading passages of six or seven lines by year's end.

Garcia found herself welcoming the monthly visits from PACT members who volunteer to stop by classrooms under a program called PACT Academically Linking the Schools, or PALS.

"Actually, it's very supportive and they're very proud of our efforts and accomplishments," Garcia said.



■ Gloria Wilby

Those words are music to the ears of Gloria Wilby, coordinator for the PALS program.

"We are there to form relationships," said Wilby, a congregation leader from Fulford United Methodist Church and a former teacher

who arrived in Florida from Jamaica in 1991. “We go in there and establish a good relationship with the principal, the reading teacher, with other members of the staff and let them know that this is a partnership.”

Like many other congregation members in PACT, Wilby knew from the Sunday school classes she taught that many of her congregation’s children who attended public school couldn’t read.

In 1994, they decided to do something about it. PACT agreed to make education — especially reading — a priority after leaders conducted dozens of one-on-ones with members of their congregations.

PACT started its research by reviewing the district’s reading curriculums and discovering, not surprisingly, that failing test scores were widespread. About the same time, some parents saw a television news story featuring a school in a poor inner-city neighborhood in Houston.

The school, Wesley Elementary, was using DI, and the children were outperforming children in suburban academies, demonstrating that high achievement is possible even for poor minority children.

Inspired by the story, a committee of five congregation leaders visited the Houston school in 1995 and “were just blown away by what they saw,” Dorfman said.

Upon returning to Miami, they shared their observations with PACT’s members, who embraced the

hot additional resources

Additional conversations and insights from education experts regarding community-driven school reform are available on our Web site at www.mott.org.

Center for Community Change,
Education Organizing newsletter
www.communitychange.org/education/organizing.asp

Cross City Campaign for Urban
School Reform, *Strong Neighborhoods,
Strong Schools: The Indicators Project
on Education Organizing*
[www.crosscity.org/programs/indicators/
findings.htm](http://www.crosscity.org/programs/indicators/findings.htm)

*Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to
Revitalize American Democracy*, by Mark
Warren (Princeton University Press)

Education Trust www.edtrust.org

Institute for Education and Social Policy,
New York University, *Mapping the Field
of Organizing for School Improvement:
A Report on Education Organizing*
www.nyu.edu/iesp/publications/polbriefs.html

goal of getting DI implemented in the Miami-Dade schools. For the next two years, hurdling over one bureaucratic roadblock after another, PACT persisted until DI finally began in the first schools in 1997.

Despite the drawn-out timeline for getting DI into the schools, PACT has benefited from recent educational trends that demand more accountability from schools and publication of measures of how schools are performing.

“The increased accountability pressure and availability of information about schools make it easier for community groups to take on campaigns to improve their schools,” said Norm Fruchter, director of the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University.

In 2003, under a Mott-supported study, the institute will begin examining PACT and seven other organizing groups, their organizing strategies and how their work translates into school change.

“Hopefully, the study will first of all establish a variety of different strategic pathways through which these eight groups link strategies of constituency mobilization to school improvement and improvements in student outcomes,” Fruchter said.

“And if we can establish that the outcomes have been improved, then we’ve got a demonstration of the effectiveness of organizing for community improvement and also a variety of different strategic pathways through which that improvement can take place.”

Joseph H. Mathos, Miami-Dade’s deputy superintendent for education until his job changed last February, welcomes PACT to the table as a force for better schools.

“The only way our schools — public education — will survive is when the public realizes that those schools are the public’s schools,” said Mathos, now assistant superintendent for adult, vocational and alternative education.

“And the only way that will happen is when administration believes that the schools are the public’s schools and welcomes the public in the educational process — not just by lip service, but by a true, meaningful dialogue and involvement.”

Mathos said the upper administration’s initial rocky relationship with PACT smoothed over after the DI program was initiated and “we started getting results.”

It’s crystal clear to Melissa Mesa that DI is responsible for transforming the teachers at her school of about 600 students into “miracle workers.”

Mesa, 35, is a reading leader and coach at Parkway Elementary School on the city’s far north side.

Ten years ago, Mesa was a new fourth-grade

Success stories

The strategies used may differ, but community-based organizing groups from around the country have been able to achieve concrete results in the education-reform arena. Here is a look at three such groups:

Milwaukee Innersity Congregations Allied for Hope

Even as the number of minority students increased in the Milwaukee Public Schools in the early '90s, the number of minority teachers steadily declined. Milwaukee Innersity Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAHA) decided to act.

Lead organizer David Liners said MICAHA forged a partnership with Marquette University and Alverno College to set up a program for alternative teacher certification, targeting college-educated people who wanted to teach as a second career.

For the past six years, the program has produced 50 to 60 African-American and Latino teachers annually for the city's middle schools.

It now continues without MICAHA's assistance.

"We force change," Liners said. "The perfect issue is one we can walk away from, knowing that it's going to continue without needing our constant involvement."

In the mid-'90s, MICAHA turned to large class sizes. Through research, the group discovered the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program, conceived at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 1995 to test the efficacy of smaller class size. The results showed leaps in student achievement and drops in discipline problems.

The state agreed to fund 30 schools in poor neighborhoods, reducing class size in kindergarten through third grade to 15 students for every teacher. This year there are 68 schools statewide using SAGE.

Sacramento Area Congregations Together

When Sacramento Area Congregations Together (ACT) started doing focus groups on education in 1996, it quickly became apparent that parents did not feel welcome in the schools.

So ACT hit on the idea of teachers visiting students' homes. The program, piloted in nine elementary schools,

teacher at Parkway. Using a whole-language curriculum, only five out of her 32 students could read on grade level.

"I was shocked and appalled," she said.

The story repeated itself every year for the next three years.

Then she was hired to oversee DI when it started in her school. Mesa said all of the teachers at Parkway have found it to have "remarkable results." Most of the school's students now are working above their grade level.

Most community organizers consider newer teachers potential allies in the struggle for making better schools because they are not yet jaded.

"I think the groups that simply try to write off educators are making a huge mistake," said Jeannie

was voluntary for both teachers and parents.

As a result of the home visits, parent participation and student test scores have soared while other markers, like student suspensions and vandalism of school property, are down.

In 1998, state lawmakers earmarked \$15 million to pilot the program in 400 schools statewide. Last spring, a standing annual appropriation for the program was signed into law.

"We're in the process of spinning off a separate non-profit that will be specifically a home-visit entity," said Gloria M. Hernandez, director of ACT, which does the training. "This has become so huge."

Northwest Neighborhood Federation

Four years ago, the Northwest Neighborhood Federation (NNF), a 22-year-old neighborhood organization on Chicago's northeast side, started hearing grumbling about school overcrowding.

After investigating, NNF found that their neighborhood schools were short by about 4,000 seats — literally. The group waged a successful campaign to get money for school construction, resulting in two new high schools and four new elementary additions.

Next, NNF turned to the problem of teacher shortages.

The federation discovered about 350 recent immigrants in their neighborhoods who had an average of 15 years of teaching experience in their home countries but who were working non-professional jobs.

Working with Northeastern Illinois University, NNF started a pilot program to help the immigrants get placed into the schools as substitute teachers or teacher aides. NNF hopes to have the first 30 in classrooms by January.

"We see churches and schools as critical, essential places in our neighborhood where we can gather people together and fight for change," said John Gaudette, NNF's director. □

Oakes, a professor and director of the Institute for Democracy, Education and Access at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Oakes, who has conducted school reform research, said many people enter education with the same goals held by community organizers: They want equity of resources for all children.

In her work helping community groups become savvy about how to negotiate the treacherous shoals of policymaking, she sees some strong alliances being forged between educators and the grassroots organizations, which is beginning to disrupt the status quo.

"The kind of processes that local people engage in as they're working together to imagine, and press for, better schools is a very educational process," Oakes said. □

On the cover:

Christian Muñoz, one of many youngsters whose schools have benefited from community-driven school reform, shows off his reading skills to his father, Jesus. Christian's school, South Hialeah Elementary, uses an instructional reading program introduced by People Acting for Community Together, one of about 150 community-organizing groups nationwide.

This article was reprinted by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation from Vol. 1, No. 2 of *Mott Mosaic*, the Foundation's quarterly magazine. Copies of both the reprint and *Mott Mosaic* may be ordered from the Foundation's Web site, www.mott.org. The full *Mott Mosaic* is accessible online at www.mott.org/publications/websites/mosaicv1n2.

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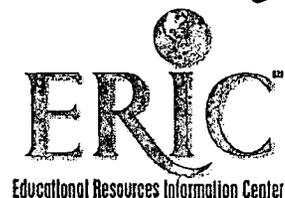
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Publication Date: December 2002

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