

# Thoughts on the Power and Promise of Parent Organizing

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Urban districts throughout the nation are contending with declining enrollment, aging facilities in disrepair, persistently low student achievement, increased competition with charters, and severe fiscal constraints. Philadelphia is a case in point. Over the past year, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) was forced to borrow \$304 million dollars to cover basic operating expenses, close 24 of its 242 schools, and lay off thousands of its employees. As of this writing, schools have been allotted a principal and a secretary but must anticipate operating without assistant principals, counselors, or support staff. Essential student programs have been curtailed or eliminated, and the district faces the very real prospect of yet another round of closures ahead of the 2013-14 school year.

Despite these unprecedented cuts, the district continues to carry an enormous budget deficit. This is due, in part, to the state, which in recent years has reduced funding and maintained an allocation formula that places Philadelphia, with its comparatively large population of low-income students and English language learners, at a disadvantage. Although the state has offered a partial bailout, it is contingent on a set of salary and benefit concessions totaling \$133 million that have yet to be approved by the affected unions, including the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. The collective bargaining agreement between the teachers' union and the district expires on August 31, 2013, and the two sides have yet to agree on salary and benefit givebacks.

In the weeks leading up to the start of the school year, it remained a question whether the schools would even open as scheduled. Superintendent William Hite had to call on city officials to resolve a stalled deal to provide \$50 million to the schools. In a letter to parents describing his dilemma, Hite wrote, "I must be able to tell you that when your child is walking through the hallways, eating lunch or at recess, an adult will be watching them. I must be able to tell you that an assistant principal will be there to handle any disciplinary issues that distract from the focus on learning. I must be able to tell you that the principal can leave the office to address issues and support staff in other parts of the school. In the absence of additional funds, I cannot do so." But even with a cash infusion from the city, the district's situation remains dire. "This is not \$50 million to provide good education," remarked a prominent advocate who spoke to us just before the deal was finalized. "This is \$50 million to create buildings that are safe for kids to walk in. We're not even close to where we need to be. We're not even where we were last year, which was inadequate."

Providing a backdrop to the district is a new ideology in American education, made manifest through a wave of policies and programs built upon ideas of choice, standards, external assessments, and high-stakes accountability, that has swept across the states in recent decades (Mehta, 2013). As long-time Philadelphia educator, researcher, and resident James Lytle notes (in this issue), the "democratizing function of public schools is being superseded" by market-based and consumer-driven models of reform, and Philadelphia is one of the central staging areas for these efforts.

With colleagues, we spent the summer assessing the political terrain of the district by interviewing a diverse group of parent advocates, organizers, and activists, as well as district staff and elected officials. Our efforts will continue in the fall. However, Lytle's commentary on the "deconstruction" of the SDP has led us to briefly reflect on our interviews—midstream, so to speak—and offer our own (still developing) perspective. Lytle writes that a social movement ("Occupy our Schools") to reinvent schooling as "engaging, demanding, responsive, accessible, timely, [and] future-oriented" is a solution. We agree. And from our interviews, many stakeholders and knowledgeable observers of Philadelphia schools would also agree. But this, of course, is easier said than done. Several of our interview participants described the disparate and disconnected nature of parent organizing for school reform in light of what many see as a vibrant and dense agglomeration of nonprofit and voluntary organizations that could play facilitative roles.

Before we proceed, let us clarify what we mean. School personnel typically relegate parents to drop-in forms of involvement—attending teacher conferences, helping children with homework, and volunteering in the classroom, for example. These are crucial activities. But the benefits confer largely to participating parents and their families. What we have in mind are activities with the potential for something more systemic. Taking our cue from social movement theorists (e.g., Tilly & Tarrow, 2006; Snow & Soule, 2010), we regard effective parent organizing for school reform as sustained campaigns that collectively challenge existing arrangements in order to bring about institutional change in education.

Mounting collective challenges to the status quo requires some degree of structure. Nonprofit and voluntary organizations are important vehicles in this regard. A burgeoning literature on education organizing offers a glimpse into just how vital community-based organizations, advocacy groups, churches, and neighborhood associations can be for creating just and equitable schools (e.g., Johnson et al., 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Gold et al., 2013). Organizations such as these harness parent concerns and interests, accumulate resources, train leaders, determine strategies, liaise between parents and schools, and provide many other

forms of support, skills, and technical assistance (Andrews & Edwards, 2004; Jenkins, 2006).

Even with such structures, effective parent organizing for school reform can be difficult to accomplish. It can be a challenge for parents to even gain a seat at the decision making table, much less wrest control—as Lytle calls for—from the powerful actors currently driving education policy. To begin with, there are those who do not regard parents as legitimate actors in the school reform process. A parent leader described the “power play” some principals exhibit when they are uncomfortable with parents who are well-informed, inquisitive, and visibly present in schools. A veteran organizer we spoke with remarked, “I think people have this assumption about low-income parents, they go, They don’t get the bigger issues, or, They’re not interested, they only care about their local school.” Professional organizers may also harbor narrow notions of the potential of parents. The same organizer confided, “I have my own assumptions about people that I have to constantly revisit and be like, Okay, what am I assuming about this person’s capacity to take on a site?” To overcome these assumptions, educators and organizers must learn to recognize and value the different “funds of knowledge” of parents and their families (Moll, 2000; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 1992).

Organizational identity can also be a constraint to effective parent organizing. If a group has traditionally been understood to be a provider of parent volunteers, expanding its scope to decision-making activities may be met with resistance or simply benign puzzlement. We spoke with a long-time parent leader of an organization that played an integral role in school decisions in years past. She relayed her ongoing efforts to clarify her organization’s role in light of more recent perceptions that it was primarily a group that raised funds for the schools. “We do fundraising, but that was not our only push [...] we sat at the table for decision-making,” she recalls having to explain to a district official. “Please take out of your mind, we are not just bake sale people and cupcake people, okay, we are not.” Another parent involved with the same organization remarked to us that “in a good, perfect world,” parents could play a greater role in school governance. “That’s the way it should be.” But educators and organizers may be locked into a particular way of thinking about the role of parent organizations.

When effective parent organizing for school reform does occur, it can be powerful. An organizer shared with us the successful campaign of a small group of parents at a North Philadelphia high school endowed with decision-making authority but whose input had been ignored. The parents organized a campaign that brought to light the district’s disregard of their authority. They were persistent, and their organizing efforts ultimately contributed to changes in district leadership. Although the campaign was of its time, it was a moment of parent efficacy. “So, I want to acknowledge and celebrate those moments when people really stand up and do something really powerful,” the organizer remarked. “But it had massive impact, it had system-wide impact on what happened.”

The public school “deconstruction” in Philadelphia demands that parents, in partnership with students and teachers, look for ways to effectively organize. And they’ve responded. We’re inspired by the participation, leadership, and engagement of parents currently taking place in all aspects of the local educative process. But we call on our fellow educators and organizers to look for ways to better facilitate and channel parent impact and power. The more this happens, the more we’ll be encouraged that the prospect of a “reinvention of schooling,” as our mentor and colleague James Lytle envisions, will occur.

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**Source URL:** <http://urbanedjournal.org/archive/volume-10-issue-1-summer-2013/thoughts-power-and-promise-parent-organizing>