



Vehicle of Change: The PS 2013 Campaign

FIGURE 1
FIORELLA GUEVARA

An innovative community engagement process in New York City led to an education platform that reflected both the priorities of the community and research on best practices.

A change in political leadership typically signals a growth in organizing campaigns to find and endorse the candidate with ideas most similar to their own. However, what if instead of focusing on finding the best candidate, organizing groups decided to focus on the conversation? How would you then use an election to engage the members of the largest city in the United States in changing the course of education reform?

For a group of education organizing coalitions in New York City, this question led them to create the PS (Public Schools) 2013 campaign.

The Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ), and the

Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) are key education organizing coalitions in New York City with a substantial base of parent and youth members that have led and won numerous campaigns.¹ In the years leading up to the mayoral race of 2013, campaign meetings were often filled with comments of concern, urgency, and hope about the mayoral election. Many of the leaders within these coalitions had been organizing to change educational outcomes for decades and had yet to see a significant change in the past twenty years under the leadership of

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¹ See María Fernández and Ocyntia Williams's article in this issue of *VUE* for more on UYC and CEJ. For more on AQE, see Billy Easton's article and www.aqeny.org.

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mayors Giuliani and Bloomberg. They continued to see young people drop out of school and receive fewer resources and supports. They saw their own children struggle to receive a great education. Organizing against a structure that did not value parent and student voice had taken its toll; parent and youth leaders were frustrated and angry. The change in mayoral leadership meant an opportunity to change the educational trajectory of many New York City children, and they knew that they wanted to do something extraordinary to impact the election.

With the spring of 2012 marking the end of another school year and Mayor Bloomberg's final full school year beginning that following fall, AQE, CEJ, and UYC began to craft a campaign that would build on the expertise of their coalition members and of many different stakeholders across the city. They believed that students, parents, educators, and community organizations knew the strengths and weaknesses of past policies and had the ability to create policies that would yield better learning conditions for New York City students. Furthermore, they wanted this election to be decided on what New Yorkers wanted, not what candidates promised.

As part of their campaign, AQE, CEJ, and UYC decided to organize a citywide community visioning process, called PS 2013, that would yield an education roadmap to influence the education agenda platform of the next mayor. They wanted New Yorkers to imagine their ideal school system, free of budget or policy limitations – and they wanted to provide a vehicle to showcase New Yorkers' expertise about what should happen in their schools. Though unknown to them at the moment, the vehicle that they would provide would actually come in the form of a bus.

FROM CONCEPT TO CAMPAIGN

AQE, CEJ, and UYC had never embarked on such an endeavor before. They had experience creating platforms with their own coalitions, but engaging a whole city would be a challenge of a different magnitude. Some expressed a hesitancy to attempt it, citing limited resources, time, and staff. They knew that PS 2013 would become the priority and that other central work would be deemphasized. They were afraid to lose their identity as organizations that primarily worked with youth of color (UYC), parents of color (NYCCEJ), and on statewide issues (AQE). Others felt a renewed sense of excitement and dreamed of the possibilities if PS 2013 was successful. If the campaign were able to shift the education narrative from choice and competition to collaboration and equity, New York City could set the course for what might happen in the rest of the country. However, this was also risky, as they couldn't predict exactly what people would say in this process. Members of AQE, CEJ, and UYC decided that PS 2013 was worth the risk, but only if they were able to get other organizations involved.

In April of 2013, they held a meeting to gauge interest with a wide array of groups, ranging from teachers unions to community-based organizations. From this meeting, they concluded that there were many organizations that wanted to invest their time and resources in creating a solutions-based campaign. UYC, AQE, and CEJ formed a new coalition, which they named A+ NYC. The coalition grew from three to fifty organizations with policy or community expertise on a wide array of education-related issues.²

Next, AQE, CEJ, and UYC created a team that would research and create a

² For a list of A+ NYC coalition members, see <http://aplusnyc.org/members>.

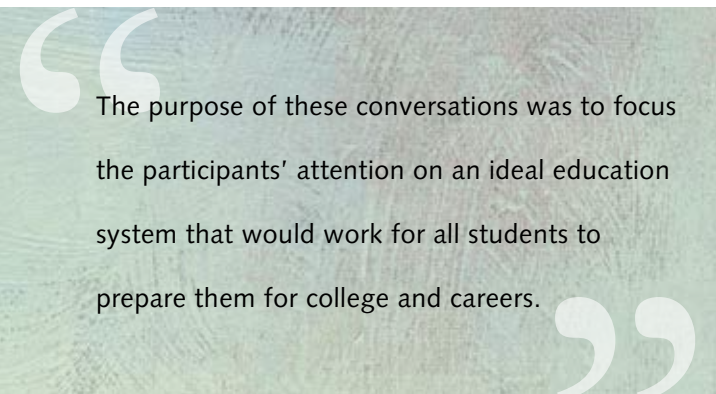
proposal for a citywide visioning process and asked the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) at Brown University to provide technical support that included coordination, facilitation, and research. My role as a program associate at AISR was to coordinate the A+ NYC and PS 2013 work.

The planning team researched public engagement strategies that were participant-centered and had been effective in successfully creating policies with the help of many different community members. They sought

of time to propose solutions for community problems. The team also wanted this process to be backed up by data, effective community engagement strategies, and research-backed policies that reinforced equity. They had data about student outcomes but also wanted to create community data that would support the final policy recommendations. This idea came from Participatory Action Research (PAR), a method that enlists those who are most affected by a community issue to conduct research on and analyze that issue, with the goal of devising strategies to resolve it.⁴

Eventually the PS 2013 planning team grew to include additional partners from the A+ NYC coalition, as well as educators, researchers, parents, and a media strategist. In July 2012, the National Charrette Institute⁵ facilitated the first broader planning team meeting and helped the group create goals, values, an outreach plan, and guidelines. Suggestions were given on who to contact, how to structure community feedback workshops for different populations, and how to make this community visioning process feasible in the sea of uncertainty that lay ahead. The atmosphere was highly collaborative: instead of engaging in conversations about which strategy was best, participants combined and built upon one another's ideas. This planning meeting proved to be crucial in the success of the initiative. It set the tone that this process would include broader participation from the onset and clarified the values and goals, which were revisited throughout the process to ensure that PS 2013 stayed true to what it was originally trying to accomplish.

Together the planning team created the framework for a campaign composed of three phases: a series of community workshops; a bus tour, with stops throughout all five boroughs to solicit further feedback from community



The purpose of these conversations was to focus the participants' attention on an ideal education system that would work for all students to prepare them for college and careers.

strategies that charged those most affected by policy to create solutions and involved as many people as possible, but that could be done in less than a year. At this point, the date of the Democratic primary had not been announced, so they could have had six months or one year before candidates began stating their educational priorities.³

The team landed upon the concept of a charrette – a collaborative process used in architecture or community planning projects that gathers feedback and builds ownership within a short period

3 The coalition decided to concentrate on the Democratic primary, since most analysts predicted that the next mayor would be one of the Democratic candidates.

4 See <http://publicscienceproject.org>.

5 See www.charretteinstitute.org/charrette.html.

members; and finally a citywide summit where an “education road-map” would be released to the public. This document, created by thousands of New Yorkers through the PS 2013 campaign, would outline an education agenda for the next mayor’s first 100 days in office and first term.

FIRST PHASE: FROM COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS TO BUS TOUR

The first phase consisted of meetings to talk to a broad constituency about what they wanted for education. These meetings included students, parents, teachers, principals, and other school-level staff from all five boroughs, but were open to anyone who wanted to attend. Though they did not attend in large numbers, superintendents, staff from community-based organizations, activists, and individuals from the business sector also participated.

It wasn’t easy to recruit participants, particularly ones who weren’t associated with any of the A+ NYC groups. Community members were sometimes wary of having people from outside their community asking probing questions; others questioned the process and wondered if it would actually make a dent in the election. To dispel these concerns, A+ NYC facilitators met with community leaders beforehand and described the process in detail. At each workshop, they engaged participants with questions about themselves and their community to make them feel comfortable – and after each workshop asked them to recommend and connect A+ NYC to other groups. Ultimately, beginning in October of 2012 and ending by January 2013, seventy-five community workshops were held with more than 1,000 individuals. Participants represented a diversity of age, race, nationality, and experience with education reform.

Facilitators asked participants the following questions:

- What is your vision for an ideal education? What do you want a student to know, learn, and do before they graduate from high school?
- What needs to happen in the classroom to achieve that vision? What would you see and hear in the classroom if you walked in? How would children and adults interact?
- What needs to happen in the school to achieve that vision? What would you see and hear in a school if you walked in? How would children and adults interact?
- What does the next mayor need to know about your community’s priority issue?

After small-group discussion, facilitators debriefed with participants about the experience, informed them about next steps, and encouraged them to fill out a quick survey translated in English and Spanish. The survey captured their demographic characteristics, experience with New York City public schools, and priority issues. Nearly eight hundred surveys were collected. All workshop comments and survey answers were recorded for further analysis.

The purpose of these conversations was to focus the participants’ attention on an ideal education system that would work for all students to prepare them for college and careers. The planning team needed to find out which values New Yorkers held about the future of education and the direction it should take. These workshops were created to find these answers.

After this phase of data collection, the steering committee assembled a design team to analyze the workshop comments and survey results. The design

team consisted of community, policy, and research experts ranging from UYC youth leaders to executive directors of some of the most prominent education organizations in New York City, such as Advocates for Children and Children’s Aid Society.⁶

Two main ideas continuously emerged from the workshops. One was that New York City schools should educate the whole child and that schools and school systems needed support in achieving this. The other was that each level of the school system, from the Department of Education to parents, is responsible for achieving this vision.

The design team was charged with analyzing which policy priorities would yield this vision of the school system and the specific direction of each policy based on the workshop data, best practices, research, and their own expertise. For example, the arts were mentioned in fifty-eight out of the seventy-five workshops – and workshop participants consistently articulated that this was a missing component in the overall curriculum that students received on a daily basis, not just something that was needed in after-school or out-of-school programs. From this information, the design team came up with the policy statement, “Integrate arts into the school day.” These policy statements would later help the design team craft the specific policy recommendations to include in the final roadmap – the report outlining an education agenda for the next mayor that would be presented in the phase three summit. In this case, the design team created the following recommendation:

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⁶ See *Whole Child, Whole School, Whole City: An Education for the Next Mayor* for bios on each member: http://aplusnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/A+NYC_Report_FIN.pdf. See also Weinberg et al. in this issue of *VUE* for interviews with four members of the design team.

More arts and physical education

Provide schools with funding and support to ensure adequate space, instructional time, and resources to meet or exceed the minimum requirements under state law, which include teaching dance, music, theater, and visual arts, providing 120 minutes of physical education per week and other mandates.

Analyzing the data and creating policy recommendations wasn’t always as simple as this example, but after a few months of deliberation and multiple versions of the content, the design team constructed twenty-seven main components of a policy platform grounded in an ideal education system that would support all students in becoming college and career ready (see sidebar). These components reflected the topics that were mentioned repeatedly throughout the workshops, but also included ideas that didn’t have as many mentions, specifically ideas that the design team believed – based on their expertise in the field – would support the creation of an ideal education system. For instance, many workshop participants mentioned that teachers needed more training on a variety of issues from cultural sensitivity to technology. However, the design team, from research and years of combined experience, knew that the best professional development systems incorporated more time for teachers to teach each other. Therefore, they decided to add the following policy recommendation: “Foster collaboration by providing additional time for teachers and schools to learn from one another.”

Together these twenty-seven components formed a preliminary education policy platform that A+ NYC members wanted the next mayor to embrace. But first, the coalition wanted to get more feedback from the community.

PS 2013 PRELIMINARY POLICY PLATFORM

To prepare every NYC student to transform our city and to succeed...

We want all NYC students to:

- Love learning and explore their own interests and passions
- Have the content knowledge, critical thinking, and teamwork skills to succeed in college and career
- Set ambitious college and career goals and achieve them
- Relate compassionately to other people and take good care of their own physical, emotional, and financial needs
- Improve their communities and participate in our city's civic life
- Engage effectively with our technologically driven and multicultural world

We need vibrant school communities...

School leaders and staff must:

- Deliver a well-rounded, challenging, college-ready curriculum that is tailored to its students' needs and interests
- Integrate arts into the school day
- Create an environment that feels safe, welcoming, and nurturing to make all of its students feel valued, not policed
- To the greatest extent possible, replace suspensions with constructive approaches that keep students in school
- Make social and emotional learning an important part of the curriculum
- Overcome cultural and language barriers to engage families and provide effective instruction
- Connect students and families to the support services they need and develop powerful community partnerships
- Integrate fun and rewarding after-school and out-of-school learning opportunities with what happens during the school day
- Help to keep our students healthy by providing physical education, nutrition, and sex education and good school food

Supported by a world-class school system.

School system leaders must:

- Make sure every student has an equal opportunity to succeed, including English language learners, students with special needs, and others
- Accept final responsibility for creating the conditions that school leaders and staff need to succeed, including appropriate resources, technical support, and additional time
- Intervene early to support struggling schools, and close schools only as a last resort
- Limit classes to a size that allows for personalized instruction
- Provide up-to-date facilities, materials, and technology and end overcrowding
- Recruit and retain high-quality teachers and principals and work with them to create supportive systems for professional development and evaluation
- Foster collaboration by providing additional time for teachers and schools to learn from one another

To get there...

Our city's next mayor must:

- Be a champion of equity, excellence, and democratic participation and appoint a Chancellor committed to these values
- Fight for more money for public education at the federal, state, and city levels, from pre-K through college
- Implement a stronger form of student, parent, and community participation in decision making, including on school closings and co-locations
- Align the work of all city agencies that support New York City students and their families
- Reduce the importance of standardized testing and insist on the use of multiple measures to assess student and school success

Source: <http://aplusnyc.org/ps-2013-policy-platform>.

As the design team deliberated, other PS 2013 organizers developed the idea to display these twenty-seven components inside of a bus that would travel throughout the city, inviting feedback on the components from those who participated in the workshops and inviting new participants to join the process.

Thus, the search for the bus began. Bus companies laughed when they were asked if the seats could be taken out. The possibility of buying a bus meant going to Ohio or Pennsylvania to attend an auction and even then, none of the organizers had the specific class of driver's license to drive it back. Finally, Beatriz Beckford with the Brooklyn Food Coalition, an A+ NYC member, mentioned that she knew someone who had a bus that ran on vegetable oil and might agree to take the seats out. With fingers crossed, the organizers reached out to Jalal Akbar Sabur with Wassaic Community Farm and The Vroom Collective, and he agreed to rent his bus, take the seats out, and supply a driver.

With the help of Karen Oh, a graphic designer with House of Cakes,⁷ the inside and outside design of the bus began to take shape. Volunteers painted the interior ceiling of the bus to look like a vivid blue sky. Each idea outlined in the policy platform was framed on vibrant blue, orange, and green circles, which were mounted on Plexiglas boxes that would serve as voting ballots. The bus also contained information about A+ NYC and PS 2013, as well as case studies of best practices. The outside of the bright blue bus was hung with a PS 2013 banner that depicted a bright sun shining over a city street. After receiving the final version of the policy platform on Friday, March 8, from the design team, volunteers from the coalition worked on assembling and painting right up to the first stop of the tour that following Tuesday night, March 12.

While the design team created the content and the bus team worked on getting the bus ready, other coalition members had arranged bus stops, ensured that candidates for mayor attended the launch, and secured press. As the bus launch neared, the excitement of the hundreds of people who had worked on the process was uncontainable.

SECOND PHASE: FROM BUS TOUR TO SUMMIT

The bus tour began with a launch at City Hall where all the Democratic candidates for mayor gave enthusiastic speeches about how the bus was the epitome of community engagement.⁸ Then—public advocate and now New York City mayor Bill De Blasio said:

I want to thank everyone who is part of the A+ coalition. This is exactly the way we need to draw the public's attention to the future of our city, which means the future of our schools. This bus is going to do a lot of good. It's going to reach a lot of people, and it's going to do what I try to do as public advocate: organize and energize parents to play the biggest role possible in a debate in this city.

Through sun, rain, snow, and battery failure, the bus made twenty-five stops over seven days in all five boroughs. At each stop, PS 2013 organizers invited participants to step inside the bus and vote on their educational priorities. After listening to a brief overview of A+ NYC and PS 2013, participants received twenty-seven tokens. To support, or vote for, a priority outlined in the initial policy platform, they could place one token in the Plexiglas box that represented that idea. All told,

⁷ See www.houseofcakes.com.

⁸ For photos of the bus, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/39>. To see video of the launch, go to: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALxjoue-H1I.

nearly 1,800 people cast more than 33,000 votes. While all the ideas received a resounding amount of votes, reducing standardized testing received the most, followed by more money for schools and more arts.

The A+ NYC coalition members were instrumental in each of these bus stops. They reached out to their communities, secured parking spaces, stationed facilitators inside and outside the bus to guide individuals through the process, and invited elected officials and media to bus stops. The majority of bus tour participants expressed their pleasure in seeing the bus in their community and having the ability to vote on their educational priorities. One participant who had been part of the workshops said, “When you said that you were going to come with a bus, I didn’t believe you and thought it sounded a bit crazy. But then you actually came back!”

THIRD PHASE: EDUCATION ACTION SUMMIT

After the bus tour, the design team reassembled and examined the findings from the workshops and bus tour in order to create the final road map report. They wanted to expand upon the initial policy platform and provide more detail. The coalition as a whole wanted a document that clearly outlined policy directions but was not so dense and verbose that the participants of PS 2013 would lose interest. Attempting to maintain this balance, they ended up combining policy recommendations and adding new items. For example, an art policy recommendation was combined with physical education due to the unmet state requirements of both of these subjects and the need to shed light on existing criteria that were not being utilized by the city. There was a particular need to add additional funding policy recommendations so

that the agenda did not all rely on lobbying the state for more money.

Ultimately, the design team created twenty-six policy recommendations, which received approval from the entire A+ NYC coalition. These recommendations were outlined in the report *Whole Child, Whole School, Whole City: An Education Roadmap for the Next Mayor*,⁹ which focused on what the next mayor should do within his or her first hundred days and first term in office. It was released at the PS 2013 Education Action Summit on July 24, 2013, which was attended by representatives of organizations and groups that had participated in the workshops or bus tour.

At the summit, more than 200 participants received a copy of the roadmap and participated in various workshops to further their understanding of educational topics or to enhance an advocacy skill. At this event, A+ NYC organizers wanted to provide participants of PS 2013 with tools to continue to advocate for their vision. For A+ NYC, it was important that the participants of PS 2013 received a product that they could use in the future. Advocating for a vision is a long-term commitment, and the summit was the first step in preparing new participants to enter the education justice fight. While the summit concluded the PS 2013 campaign, A+ NYC has continued to share the roadmap by hosting regular community workshops. A recent analysis of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s education agenda demonstrates that his agenda mirrors many ideas found in the roadmap.¹⁰

9 See the full report at: http://aplusnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/A+NYC_Report_FIN.pdf.

10 See <http://aplusnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Agenda-Comparison-Mayor-de-Blasio-and-A-PLUS-NYC.pdf>. For more on the dissemination of the roadmap, see Julian Vinocur’s article in this issue of *VUE*.

A COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE OF THE CITY

As someone who was part of this process from the beginning, it was incredible to witness the power of the many different communities of New York City. There were times where I stood back and observed my surroundings – smiles, nods of acknowledgement, hugs, words of gratitude – and wondered why it couldn't always be like this. Why can't we respect the expertise of communities and invite it wholeheartedly? Why can't we create avenues for their authentic participation and feedback? Why can't these communities drive the education agenda of a city?

Ultimately, I realized: it's not that we can't, but more that we haven't. Now, we know it's a possibility and a necessity. There were times when this process was difficult and confusing and when it would have been easier to walk away, but like the workshop participants articulated: we must all accept our responsibility to New York City students and the future of this city – and remain in that discomfort and work together to create a solution that will benefit everyone. It's not always easy or fast, but it will lead to the vision that was created by thousands of New Yorkers.

STRATEGIES FOR THE FIELD

The moment that exists before elections creates a space for numerous possibilities. Other cities facing gubernatorial or mayoral races can take advantage of these moments to elevate the voices of stakeholders and push forward a new vision for education. It will take grass-roots organizing, collaboration, creative use of resources – and maybe even some mode of transportation.

These are some strategies that organizers could adapt in their own cities.

Broad Coalition Building

Organizing groups like CEJ, UYC, and AQE are widely successful because they engage and grow their base. They commit time to creating relationships with members and provide training and resources so that members become leaders in various campaigns. However, with a whole city to engage, CEJ, UYC, and AQE found that creating relationships and collaborating with stakeholders outside their organizing base enabled them to tap into different kinds of expertise that ultimately made the process successful.

Levels of Engagement

PS 2013 organizers created three levels of engagement to accommodate a wide range of voices. The first level included representatives from the coalition who were involved in the day-to-day workings of the campaign. The second level included members or staff of those organizations who were not involved with the campaign on a daily basis but who provided input on important decisions. The third level encompassed all other participants in the process, from the volunteers who designed the bus to the community members who voted inside it. Some participants moved between the different levels at various points in the campaign.

Utilizing a tiered system helped to grow ownership over the process and the roadmap as individuals were asked to

provide feedback about content at multiple points in the process. After each round of feedback from each tier at each phase, content was revised so that it reflected the vision of the community. The different levels ensured that by the time the content went out to the general public, different stakeholders had vetted it. Although multiple feedback loops can be time-consuming, the experience of PS 2013 demonstrated that a community product deserves this type of strategy so that it truly reflects the vision of the community.

Diverse Teams

Individuals involved in various teams like the design team or planning committee brought their own experiences and knowledge to the process that pushed them to grapple with topics and come up with a compromise that reflected the needs of differing opinions and the values of the process. Having individuals who represented a diverse range of stakeholders participating in all areas of this process created a culture of collaboration, mutual respect, and creativity.

Visuals Matter

Humans learn in a variety of ways – through speaking, listening, touching, seeing, working with others, and much more. People remembered PS 2013 fondly because it utilized a variety of teaching strategies to ensure that the experience was memorable. In particular, many individuals continue to discuss the bus because it created an unforgettable visual memory coupled with an activity that made them discuss education, listen to others, and work with each other.

Using Data and Research to Drive Solutions

Data was generated through this process that reflected the needs of the community. Analysis of this data and pertinent research in the field gave the design team a solid foundation to elevate certain policy recommendations over others. However, the community data also set

the parameters for what the design team could and could not recommend. UYC, CEJ, and AQE have done numerous visioning processes with their members and could have come up with many of the recommendations, but they wouldn't have gone as broad as the roadmap did, and not as many people would feel ownership of the final product.

Positive Messaging and Media

In New York City, some of the biggest media attention that UYC, CEJ, and AQE have received in the past was due to some type of controversy. Therefore, when PS 2013 was first conceptualized, many felt that it would not receive that much attention from the press because it was a process with little to no controversy. However, the organizers of PS 2013 found out that positive messaging and a clever idea could make the front page of the *New York Times* (Sangha 2013).

REFERENCE

Sangha, Soni. 2013. "A Different School Bus: Public School Supporters Seek to Shape New York City Education Policy," *New York Times* (March 22), www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/nyregion/public-school-supporters-seek-to-shape-new-york-city-education-policy.html?_r=1&.