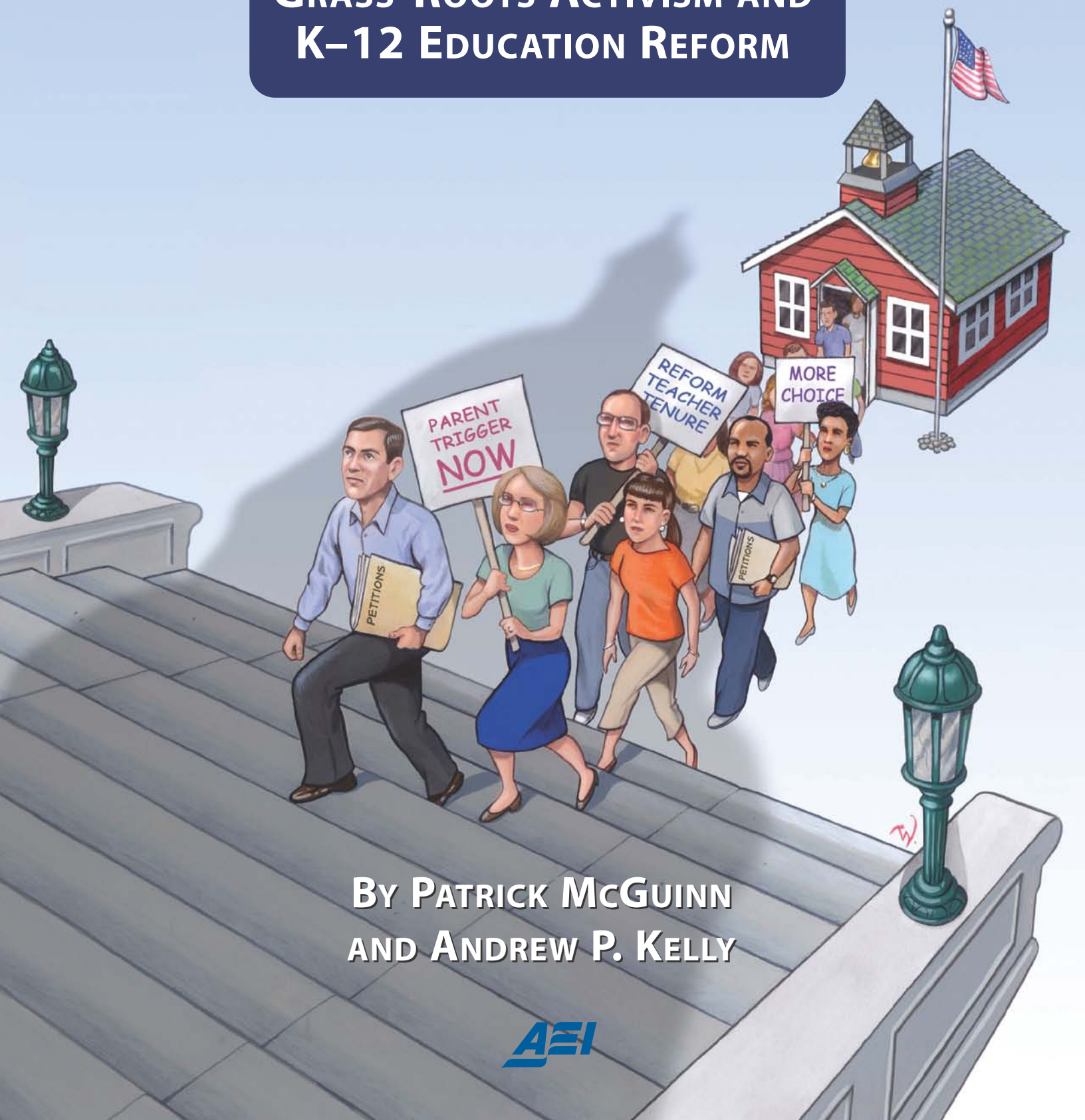
Parent Power

Grass-Roots Activism and K–12 Education Reform



By Patrick McGuinn and Andrew P. Kelly

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Contents

Foreword 1
Frederick M. Hess

Mobilizing Mom and Dad: Engaging Parents behind Systemic School Reform 3
Patrick McGuinn

Parent Voice, School Choice, and the New Politics of Education Reform 27
Andrew P. Kelly

About the Authors 51

Foreword

Parent power is the apple pie of schooling: everyone likes it and says pleasant things about it. In recent decades, of course, most parental engagement has had more to do with supervising field trips, joining PTAs, and providing extra classroom supplies than anything that smacks of meaningful school improvement.

Today, circumstances are changing. A wave of education reform advocacy organizations (ERAOs) are working to pull parents into larger policy debates over school reform by mobilizing them to lobby policymakers, testify in front of school boards, and vote for favored positions and candidates. These groups have been born of the conviction that parents can effectively battle established interests and fight for crucial reforms. Those high hopes and good intentions often lead to naïve expectations of what parent power can accomplish. Though political science can offer many lessons about the challenges of community organizing, interest group formation, and voter mobilization, for instance, few of these lessons have drawn much attention from reformers or funders.

Aside from Stand for Children, which was founded in 1996, most of the other prominent organizations engaged in these efforts—groups like Parent Revolution, the 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now, and Democrats for Education Reform—are only a few years old. They have been little studied to date, making them ripe for thoughtful and informed assessment.

The authors of these two papers, political scientists Patrick McGuinn and Andrew P. Kelly, draw on field research and disciplinary insights to capture some lessons learned and to explore key opportunities and hurdles ahead. They step back and ask a few questions about what we have learned from early efforts to empower parents to advocate for greater school choice, teacher accountability, and similar reforms. What are we learning from these new groups? Where are they succeeding, and where are they struggling? Are certain types of parents more likely to become advocates? If so, who are they, and what distinguishes them?

McGuinn, an associate professor of political science at Drew University, examines the landscape of ERAO efforts, detailing how missions, strategies, and tactics vary across these groups. Through interviews with several ERAO leaders, he unearths several key lessons and questions to guide future advocacy work. Kelly, a research fellow in education policy here at AEI, explores the individual-level incentives to engage in parent activism, focusing specific attention on how school choice and mobilization activity may influence the decision to participate in broader education politics. Through a number of interviews with ERAO leaders, he examines the degree to which dynamics of parent participation on the ground mesh with what we would expect from political science.

A few big themes emerge from both papers:

- **Choice does not equal activism.** Contrary to the oft-voiced hopes of some would-be reformers, the mere act of choosing a school does not turn parents into activists. Rather, reform groups must actively cultivate parents, building the civic skills and engagement that are necessary for participation. Like most citizens, parents are more likely to become engaged when they see an immediate payoff for their involvement or an immediate threat to their school or program. As such, reformers should be wary of assuming that parents in schools of choice will naturally become involved in

school reform debates and should instead consider how to foster vibrant networks, highlight policy victories, and otherwise demonstrate why these issues matter.

- **Exit versus voice.** Similarly, parents who send their children to schools of choice have exited the traditional school system and thereby have less incentive to use their voice at future reform discussions. These parents feel less invested in larger education reform conversations because they are often satisfied with their children's schools and many of the proposed reforms will not apply to schools of choice. Mobilizing these parents around a broad reform agenda is likely to be a challenge for ERAOs, even if they are seemingly a fertile ground for supporting school choice.

- **Building capacity.** Currently, the ERAO landscape is largely dominated by young organizations with limited resources and influence, especially compared to teachers unions. Questions linger regarding the ability of these groups to move into new states and districts, increase the number of parents involved, and become a lasting political bloc of reform-minded parents rather than a collection of sporadic rallies and protests.

Now is a great time to explore these questions and lessons from early parental advocacy efforts, and I am pleased to share these two papers. Special thanks go to the Walton Family Foundation for their generous support of this research effort and to program manager Bruno Manno for his guidance throughout. Thanks also to Daniel Lautzenheiser, program manager in education policy studies at AEI, for coordinating the endeavor and providing editorial support.

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Mobilizing Mom and Dad: Engaging Parents behind Systemic School Reform

By Patrick McGuinn

One of the most important developments in the recent politics of education reform has been the rise of a new group of education reform advocacy organizations (ERAOs) that are working to mobilize parents behind school reform at the district and state levels. As Terry Moe documents in his recent book *Special Interest*, education politics has for decades been dominated by the education establishment, the collection of teachers unions and other school employee associations derisively called the "blob" by reformers.[1]

The adults in the education establishment who benefit from the status quo are numerous, organized, and well resourced and have been historically very successful in blocking major systemic reform. They have been able to do this because there was no organized counterweight to their influence. Although parents have been periodically—and often very effectively—organized on behalf of specific groups of children or specific causes such as expanding educational access (for disabled children), providing ethnic studies (the Chicano movement), or increasing school funding (Education Law Center in New Jersey and Campaign for Fiscal Equity in New York), reformers who advocate for more fundamental changes in education policy have largely focused their efforts to date on state and national lobbying rather than community mobilizing. However, as Mark Warren argues, it is increasingly clear that "urban school reform falters, in part, because of the lack of an organized political constituency among the stakeholders with the most direct interest in school improvement, that is, parents whose children attend urban schools."[2]

But the past two years have witnessed an unprecedented wave of state education reforms to increase accountability for student achievement, improve teacher quality, turn around failing schools, and expand school choice, much of this fiercely opposed by the unions. The ERAOs and their efforts to organize parents have played an important role in pushing for these changes in state capitols, and they clearly are reshaping the politics of school reform in the United States in important ways. As Joe Williams, executive director of Democrats for Education Reform, explained, "There was recognition over time that good ideas alone weren't enough and weren't going to get us across the finish line in terms of systemic reform. There needed to be a significant investment of time and resources in advocating for political changes that would enable and protect reform."[3]

The largest of the ERAOs (in terms of staff, budget, and reach) are Stand for Children (Stand), StudentsFirst, the 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now (50CAN), Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), and the Foundation for Excellence in Education (FEE). Despite these large groups, this movement to engage parents remains relatively decentralized and fragmented. These groups embrace a wide variety of tactics, from grass-roots mobilization to lobbying policymakers and operating political action committees. But central to their work is an effort to organize and mobilize parents to agitate for school reform. Despite the increasing number and activity of ERAOs, we know relatively little about them and how they operate.

This paper will offer an in-depth examination of ERAOs and what we can learn from their efforts to engage parents in school reform and from other grass-roots community organizing experiences. Including academic research, a brief literature review, and field-based case studies and interviews (see the appendix), this paper will assess the circumstances necessary for empowerment campaigns to succeed and the factors that may hinder engagement.

Political and Organizational Dynamics of Parental Engagement

Before moving into a specific discussion of parent organizing in education, we should briefly survey some of the dynamics that affect the mobilization of citizens for political action more generally.

A first set of dynamics emerges from the work of political scientists and economists who have studied citizen mobilization; a few key theories are worth highlighting. Albert Hirschman observes that citizens typically have three options when involved with a failing organization: they can leave the organization (exit), express their dissatisfaction and seek changes from the outside (voice), or work to improve it from the inside (loyalty).[4] Which option a citizen chooses in any particular situation is contingent on the associated costs and benefits. As a consequence, it is important for those seeking to mobilize parents to know the incentives and disincentives for engagement in any particular context and seek to reduce the costs and maximize the benefits of participation.

One ongoing challenge for those seeking to organize citizens for political activity is the collective action problem identified by economist Mancur Olson. Olson observes that when the benefits of political advocacy are indivisible—that is, they accrue to all citizens in a particular community regardless of who contributed to the endeavor—people have an incentive to "free ride" on the efforts of others.[5] Investing time and energy in pursuit of the collective goal under these circumstances is not rational because all individuals will receive the potential benefits of the effort regardless of whether they participate. One way to circumvent the collective action problem is to provide "selective incentives"—side payments that reward individuals' contributions to the collective effort.

Political scientists have found a high correlation between income and education on the one hand, and political efficacy and participation on the other. The "resource model" of political participation developed by Henry Brady, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlotzman, for example, argues that time, money, and civic skills are the "communications and organizational capacities that are essential to political activity" and find that they are all affected by socioeconomic status.[6] The poor tend to have lower levels of education and engage less in all types of political activity, including voting, communicating with elected officials, attending public meetings, joining interest groups, and contributing to campaigns.

A second set of dynamics is related to race and ethnicity, which exert a profound influence on urban politics, school reform, and parent organizing. The combination of immigration, racial and ethnic diversity, and poverty in urban areas can undermine the development of trust in a community as well as the social capital that is the central foundation for collaborative action.[7] As one classic study of urban politics observes, "Open conflict within and between minority groups now represented in city governments has sometimes replaced the unity that was once attained when the city and its white, established power holders were the common enemy."[8] In *The Color of School Reform*, Jeffrey Henig and coauthors argue that the legacy of mistrust from years of segregation and discrimination continues to exert a major influence on the attitudes of blacks toward white political and business leaders and poses a serious obstacle to the creation of urban reform coalitions.[9]

A third dynamic centers around the relationship between teachers unions and community leadership in urban areas that makes taking on the status quo in education difficult. Marion Orr has argued that public schools constitute urban "employment regimes" that are often the largest employer in the city and that teachers are the backbone of the urban middle class and its key political constituency.[10] And as Paul Hill and Mary Beth Celio observe, "The politics of jobs exacerbates these conflicts. Defenders of government control [of schools] and civil service employment note that the public school systems have become the principal employers of African-American and immigrant middle class professionals in big cities."[11] In majority-black cities like Cleveland, Ohio, the teachers unions are generally dominated and controlled by blacks and have great influence

and prestige in the black community. Former NAACP Chairman Julian Bond has also emphasized this point, noting that, "the black teacher class is solidly entrenched in the African American community and teachers unions occupy an important political position in the black community. A threat to them is perceived as a threat to the whole group."[12]

A final dynamic centers on parents' perceptions of school system performance. Studies have shown that parents often are ignorant about the performance of their child's school and that much of what they think they know is incorrect. Public Agenda has found that "parents rarely know the facts that make the school turnaround issue so urgent . . . many simply aren't aware of how dysfunctional and ineffective some of these low-performing schools really are or how seriously their children are being set back."[13] When parents are reluctant to accept that their school or child is failing, a kind of cognitive dissonance is created that can make it harder for parents to be mobilized for action to solve an education crisis.[14] The performance issue is exacerbated by the competing claims and data from antireform groups that challenge both the notion that schools are failing and the effectiveness of proposed reforms. It is difficult to create a constituency for reform when the potential benefits are ambiguous or seem far downstream. At the same time, public schools in urban communities are also embraced as vital community institutions and social service providers for poor families who have no place else to go. Public Agenda, for example, conducted focus groups with parents and found, "Most low-income parents saw local public schools as important symbols of the community, even though they criticized them for not fulfilling their educational mission. Many had strong feelings of loyalty, affection, and nostalgia for local public schools."[15] Together, these dynamics can make it very difficult to convince urban parents that major reform is needed and mobilize them for action.

Theorists have long argued for the importance of parental engagement in education, and scholars have long documented the effect engaged parents can have on both their children's school performance and the system as a whole.[16] But it is often assumed that parents have the interest, time, or skills with which to actually become engaged. However, many challenges to organizing citizens for political action exist, and these challenges are even more pronounced in the sites where ERAOs focus much of their parent mobilization efforts—urban areas where the population tends to be poorer and less educated.[17] The communities most likely to have chronically poor-performing schools are also the ones least likely to have large numbers of engaged parents capable of advocating for change.

Stephen Rosenstone and John Hansen argue that citizens deploy a cost-benefit analysis when thinking about whether to participate in politics and that the interaction between individual resources and strategic mobilization efforts by political elites is key. ERAOs need to be cognizant of the general and local contexts within which parent mobilization occurs as they seek to reduce the barriers and increase the incentives for participation.[18]

Mobilizing Parents: Lessons from Other Sectors

Community organizing has been going on for a long time and in many areas outside of school reform, so it is important to identify the lessons we can draw from efforts in other sectors. The civil rights movement originating in the 1950s, the antipoverty movement of the 1960s, and the environmental movement that began in the 1970s, for example, all offer interesting examples of efforts to mobilize a broad coalition of citizens behind policy change. Efforts in all three of these areas successfully connected local grass-roots organizing campaigns with national legislative lobbying—which is one of the greatest challenges facing ERAOs.[19]

An important lesson from the community organizing literature is that no single model—or set of best practices—exists for grass-roots mobilization. Rather, there are a number of different models and

tactics, each with its own set of advantages and disadvantages, and a particular approach may be more or less effective with certain issues or constituencies. Jack Rothman, for example, has devised a three-pronged model of community intervention—locality development, social action, and social planning and policy—accompanied by a typology of twelve different practices, for a total of thirty-six different variables.[20] He argues that community organizers should pick and choose from this toolbox to create different combinations of tactics to meet the needs of a particular organizing context.

Kristina Smock, on the other hand, identifies five distinct models of community organizing (power-based, community-building, civic, women-centered, and transformative) and argues that each has a distinct logic that can complicate the creation of hybrid models. She concluded that although each model can fill a "distinctive community organizing niche," they also have unique trade-offs around the inclusiveness of their decision-making processes, the tension between education and action, and the capacity to effect large-scale change. Smock cautions that "organizational plurality" in a community can be a positive force for change, but only if the organizations are self-conscious about the tension between complementarity and incompatibility.[21] Research on the civil rights movement similarly emphasizes that a tension can exist in community organizing between insiders and outsiders and old and new organizations. Aldon Morris argues that although charismatic national leaders and the creation of new organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee played an important role in mobilizing blacks, the movement was crucially supported by and "spread through sophisticated, preexisting formal and informal communication networks."[22] These older local community organizations, such as churches, had deep and long-established ties to the community, building a reservoir of trust that could be tapped to educate, inspire, and organize citizens for collective action.

A deeper exploration of community organizing in other sectors and the transferability of these lessons to education is a promising area for further research. It is tempting to see all community organizing—and all public policy domains—as more similar than dissimilar. But while insights certainly can and should be drawn from other sectors, it is important to note that the education sector has a number of unique features that may complicate community organizing efforts. As the Center for Education Organizing observes, "Education funding and policy are shaped by a complex web of federal, state, and local funding and regulations, making targets hard to identify. Because parents and community members do not 'live' inside schools the way tenants live inside buildings—and because many schools and systems actively discourage parent participation—it can be challenging for parents and community members to develop a nuanced understanding of local education issues."[23]

ERAOs and Contemporary Parent Engagement Efforts in Education

In this section, I will survey the landscape of organizations working to educate and engage parents around systemic reform, highlight the groups' different agendas and tactics, and assess the opportunities and challenges the groups have encountered in undertaking this work, both individually and collectively.

What Are the ERAOs? As noted above, a large and diverse array of groups are working to mobilize parents and advance school reform today. ERAOs differ in their tactics, scope, and where they operate. Groups such as DC School Reform Now, Advance Illinois, and the Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education are independent operators that focus explicitly on a single state or city. Stand for Children, 50CAN, DFER, and FEE are national organizations that work in multiple states. Stand for Children currently has affiliates in ten states, 50CAN operates in four states (originating from its flagship ConnCAN, which operates in Connecticut alone), and DFER has eleven state chapters.

Although the ERAOs by no means agree on every issue, they tend to share similar reform agendas. As Andrew Kelly notes in his paper that accompanies this one, ERAOs tend to have a strong connection to school choice and, in particular, to the charter school movement. Many ERAOs emerged from the frustration of charter school operators—and their supporters in the business and civil rights communities—with the restrictions placed on charter operations and growth. In addition, ERAOs generally embrace test-based accountability, reforms aimed at improving teacher quality, and aggressive interventions in chronically underperforming schools. One of the most important developments in recent years has been the coming together of two previously separate strands of the education reform movement: system refiners, who advocate for reforms (such as standards and testing) to improve district schools, and system disrupters, who advocate for the expansion of choice to provide alternatives to them. Many reform groups are also funded by the same foundations, particularly the "big three"—the Walton Family Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation.

Newer school reform advocacy organizations often partner with older groups like the Education Trust, but they differ in approach and tactics. Older groups have tended to confine their efforts to lobbying and disseminating research to policymakers, while the newer groups are more explicitly political, creating public pressure for reform to make it easier for policymakers to embrace difficult changes and then rewarding those who advance the groups' agendas. Robin Steans, executive director of Advance Illinois, observed, "In the past, the state education agency was often alone in pushing reform in the state. Now we are able to help lead the charge, attract media attention, and change the stakes and to get folks to the table." Central to this effort, as Bruno Manno notes, is the quest to mobilize parents.[24]

ERAO Tactics. While the ERAOs share many common policy goals, they differ in the approaches that they utilize to engage parents and the purpose to which they seek to engage parents. Some of the groups (such as 50CAN) seem to focus more on so-called "astroturf," or synthetic, mobilizing—getting parents to sign on to statements of support for their policy agenda in the state legislature with little or no face-to-face contact.[25] Other groups (such as Stand) focus more on grass-roots mobilizing. A related issue concerns different approaches to creating local chapters and selecting leaders for them. Stand for Children appears to be the national ERAO most committed to grass-roots parent organizing at the school level, so I will devote extra attention to their efforts. (Other groups like 50CAN and StudentsFirst seem to focus more on state-level policy advocacy built around discrete campaigns and, to the degree that they engage parents, do so only sporadically to demonstrate public support for reform proposals.) Luis Avila of Stand for Children Arizona noted that "unlike other school reform organizations, we are not campaign-based but rather stay in the communities for years."

Stand for Children's focus on grass-roots mobilization seems to stem from its unique origins and comparatively longer (compared to the other ERAOs) history of community work. The organization was founded by Jonah Edelman—the son of famous activist and Children's Defense Fund (CDF) founder Marian Wright Edelman—in the wake of the 1996 CDF-sponsored Stand for Children Day rally that he helped organize. Initially the group's mission was to mobilize parents in support of a broad array of children's issues, including but not limited to education. The group later shifted its focus to advocating for increases in school funding and in 2007 broadened its focus to include advocating for education policies related to teacher and principal effectiveness; school autonomy and accountability; standards, assessments, and data systems; and interventions in chronically low-performing schools. Although the group's agenda has evolved over time, its focus on grass-roots mobilization has not. Edelman reports that he was mentored by Cesar Chavez protégé Marshall Ganz and Midwest Academy director Jackie Kendall and attended the Industrial Areas Foundation's ten-day community organizing training. These influences,

Edelman said, encouraged him to build an organization that emphasizes authentic organizing by empowering local community members to play key leadership roles.[26]

Stand for Children's Megan Irwin emphasized the group's adherence to the iron rule of organizing, that "you don't do for people what they can do for themselves." One Stand leader I spoke with noted that in the states where they had tried to build a constituency from the top (state-level) down instead of from the bottom up, they had not been as successful. At the end of 2011, Stand for Children reported having 24 urban chapters, 8,600 members, 108,500 e-mail contacts, and 133,000 social media contacts.

The Stand approach to parent organizing is to create a chapter at the district level (primarily in large, poor-performing urban districts) that is supported by teams based in schools. Each team has three volunteer leaders and about thirty members who are parents, educators, or other community members. The team leaders are identified and trained (over five to six weeks) by Stand community organizers and staff and then sent out to recruit and train other team members. (Stand staff often rely on receptive principals to help them identify parents who are active in the school and would make good leaders. Although many principals are eager to help, others either are not supportive of the reforms Stand is endorsing or are scared about having their parents organized.) Stand staff support the team leaders and hold monthly strategy meetings. Interestingly, Stand asks its members to pay small membership dues (whatever they can afford) to support the organization's 501(c)(4). Although this may seem like a strange policy in what are often poor or working-class communities, Irwin believes that "by paying dues, members feel more invested and are more active owners and participants in Stand's work." The Stand parent teams occasionally focus on school-based issues but more often on affecting change at the district and state levels. Their campaigns include elections (school board, mayoral, gubernatorial, and legislative), legislative lobbying, influencing district policy and teacher contracts, and ballot measures.

In some places, ERAOs work with parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and parent-teacher organizations (PTOs), but their ability to do so varies considerably and is contingent on whether an active PTA or PTO is in place in a particular school and whether the group supports the reform agenda. In fact, Kenya Bradshaw of Tennessee's Stand chapter said that in some places, the local PTA and the local Stand chapter are one and the same. However, other observers in the field remarked that many PTAs are not willing or able to be effective advocates for reform because they "lack focus and clarity," "are wedded to the status quo," or "fear being political." But partnering with other community organizations is often a crucial part of the parent engagement process. Stand Memphis, for example, has built a coalition of groups—many drawn from the civil rights movement—that includes the Urban League, United Way, Teach Plus, Teach for America, and Communities for Teaching Excellence. They also work with Seedco, a national nonprofit that promotes economic opportunity for those in need, meeting with poor parents at its welfare transition sessions. Stand's Arizona chapter also partners with a variety of civic and civil rights groups including Mi Familia Vota, United Way, Communities in Schools, Promise Arizona, and Teach for America. Irwin observed that it is important to "avoid thinking about parent organizing as just a means to an end and instead see it as an end in itself. The key to success is a core group of committed *authentic* parent leaders—don't just use parents as political window dressing."

The importance of "authentic" and "organic" parent mobilization was a recurring theme in my conversations with ERAO leaders. Kathleen Nugent from DFER NJ remarked that "organic mobilization of parents is key—an outsider with no connection to the community can't lead a parent organizing effort in Newark." Her group has to date played a supporting, behind-the-scenes role: disseminating information about school system performance, organizing public forums to educate parents about proposed reforms, and partnering with schools to provide parent advocates platforms for their voices to be heard before district and state policymakers. Nugent remarked,

> I've learned that reformers have to be much more aggressive in disseminating information and that the silent majority must be strategically engaged by their peers, not by outsiders. The heart of the dialogue is in and among the community. We must support those who want change and amplify their voices so they are heard above the noise. Until then, we're just not going to win. It is not sustainable to do reform without an organic base in the city that actually wants it.

Bradshaw remarked that it is a common (but incorrect) assumption "that parents aren't knowledgeable or capable of grasping policy issues—they are and we teach them." Avila seconded this point, stating, "We have learned that you should never make assumptions about parents' capabilities and limitations. You need to empower them; we need high expectations for kids *and* parents." However, Irwin acknowledged, "Low-income parents have a longer runway to engagement, and it takes time. We found you can't just go from 'yay, you joined' to 'let's talk about teacher evaluations.' You kind of have to go A to B to C; you've got to connect the dots for folks, and that can take a little bit of time."

Although ERAOs recruit and deploy parents differently, they share many tactics. One of the most fundamental is informing parents about the performance of their school system. Nearly all of the ERAOs support reforms to improve the quality and transparency of state standards and assessments and the creation of state report cards that enable parents to view school-level data on student achievement. The groups work hard to disseminate this information and use it to highlight the need for school reform and build support among parents and community groups. 50CAN, for example, releases a detailed "State of Public Education" report before launching each new state branch. The groups also build momentum for change by documenting community support for reform through public opinion polls. In Indiana, Stand for Children hired an independent firm to survey teachers about proposed reforms and was able to report that many reforms had strong teacher support despite union opposition. They also wage very public campaigns for the hearts and minds of average citizens by organizing town hall meetings with parents and publishing op-eds in state and local media. They publicize the report cards developed by national research organizations—such as the National Council on Teacher Quality's "State Teacher Policy Yearbook" and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's "State of State Standards," which enable comparison of each state's policies with those in the rest of the country. ERAOs also organize phone banks, rallies in state capitols, and online petitions to build momentum behind reform.

ERAO Communication and Coordination. It is tempting to see the patchwork of state and national school reform organizations that are attempting to mobilize parents as a fully integrated and coordinated movement. Yet as a January 2012 study from the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network concluded, "The most common thread across these states that enacted reforms was actually a lack of tight coordination among the varied members of these coalitions."[27] Although many ERAOs share goals and move on parallel paths, coordinating where it makes sense, no one group dominates or is in charge. One reason is the significant variation in political context. The unique policy landscape of each state necessitates that reform coalitions and agendas be built state by state. In Colorado, for example, the coalition that successfully pushed for the Great Teachers and Leaders Act was composed of twenty-two different stakeholder groups and forty different community and business leaders.

Although many members of state reform coalitions are education-specific groups, others focus on civil rights or business issues. Coalition size and diversity ensure considerable variation in the groups' education agendas and often even greater variation in their noneducation agendas. Civil rights and business groups, for example, often find themselves on the same side of school choice debates but on opposite sides of collective bargaining and taxing-and-spending issues. Even when groups

share common agendas, they often compete with one another for limited attention, influence, or resources. As a result, a standing coalition of ERAOs is difficult to build or sustain across different policy proposals, which may make the organizational landscape confusing to parents.

Given the similar policy agendas of many of the ERAOs and their mutual desire to mobilize parents in support, however, communication and coordination must be an important part of their work. They are investing considerable and growing effort to learn from one another about approaches that do and do not work for engaging parents. Many of the ERAOs talk to one another frequently, through a regular conference call organized by the Education Trust, at meetings organized by funders such as the Walton Family Foundation, and at conferences convened by groups such as the NewSchools Venture Fund.

To the degree that there is an organizational home for ERAOs, it seems to be the PIE Network, which held its first meeting in 2007. The PIE Network emerged, according to executive director Suzanne Tacheny Kubach, because of "the growing realization that the arena of state policymaking matters a lot for school reform and you can't just do everything at the federal level." She added, "We needed to connect the conversation in Washington with a coalition of different kinds of groups at the state level—business leaders, civic leaders, and grassroots constituents." The thirty-four organizations in the network operate in twenty-three states and Washington, D.C. Network members include affiliates of Stand for Children and 50CAN; business groups like the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, the Oklahoma Business and Education Coalition, and Colorado Succeeds; and civic groups like Advance Illinois and the League of Education Voters (Washington). The PIE Network is also supported by five "policy partners" that span the ideological spectrum but agree on the network's reform commitments: the Center for American Progress, the Center on Reinventing Public Education, Education Sector, the National Council on Teacher Quality, and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Like many ERAOs, PIE Network is funded by the big three foundations (Walton, Gates, and Broad) along with the Joyce and Stuart Foundations.

The PIE Network facilitates regular communication among its members by distributing a bimonthly newsletter, hosting a monthly conference call for leaders of its member groups, and convening two face-to-face meetings each year—one for group leaders with about forty participants and another larger, invitation-only meeting designed to bring the advocacy group leaders together with policy experts and policymakers. The organization also uses Twitter to act as an information clearinghouse by retweeting or aggregating all of the posts from its member organizations. Kubach argued that it is extremely difficult for individual state reform organizations to do this work by themselves and that the PIE Network has worked to encourage cross-state collaboration and the "cross-pollination" of reform ideas, and enable the "acceleration of the school reform movement." Robin Steans (Advance Illinois) added:

> I think that there is a very nice combination of coordination, discussion, and coming together around core ideas. At the same time, there is plenty of independence—use of different strategies, local energy, and effort—and I think this is how it should be. There isn't a homogenous model of 'here is what needs to be done and here is how to do it,' but there is enough discussion so that when there are ideas that make sense, there is good back and forth on how to do it well and how to think strategically about making progress. So, to my mind, this mix is incredibly beneficial.

Nonetheless, despite the increasing communication among ERAOs, it appears to be too early to speak of them as forming a coordinated movement—and given some of their challenges and divisions, they may never become one. Indeed, Kubach explained that, at least for the PIE Network, centralized coordination has never been the goal: "There's a pretty clear

understanding across the sector that states are where most of reform policy is made and that local actors concerned about their schools are the most credible voices to lead that change. Our goal is to strengthen those local voices—not to overshadow them with a single-minded, nationally orchestrated campaign."

ERAO Influence and Impact. One important point to consider is the ways in which ERAOs' efforts to mobilize parents are profoundly influenced by—and, in turn, influence—the broader political environment around school reform. Political scientists often talk about the importance of agenda setting, priming, and framing with regards to public opinion, emphasizing that the media and political leaders have the ability to elevate policy issues on the public agenda to prime citizens to be more attentive and receptive to certain kinds of policy proposals.[28] State and federal policymakers who support the ERAO reform agenda should think strategically about how they can create conditions on the ground in communities that will make it easier for ERAOs to engage parents.

The ERAO leaders I spoke with, for example, praised the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grant program for creating unprecedented clarity and momentum around reform at the state level. Michelle Rhee, former D.C. Schools superintendent and founder of StudentsFirst, said, "RTTT was a brilliant idea. It really helped us build bipartisan coalitions. Right now, Republicans are being more aggressive on education reform than Democrats at the state level, but being able to say that a Democratic president and education secretary were supportive really helped to convince Democrats to do more courageous things." As Steven Brill noted in *Class Warfare*, school reform advocates seized the momentum created by RTTT to mobilize and collaborate in advancing their agenda in state legislatures.[29] PIE Network director Kubach observed that the initiative "created urgency, a moment of real comparability across states, and pressure to change." ERAOs helped to facilitate state-to-state comparisons and develop legislative agendas by assessing existing state policies against the RTTT criteria. They then lobbied state policymakers and created grass-roots campaigns to mobilize support.

It is difficult to precisely gauge the impact of ERAO parent organizing efforts, but it is clear that they are having a large—and increasing—influence on debates at the state and national levels and that their efforts have contributed significantly to the passage of important legislation. Indiana governor Mitch Daniels recently remarked that he has seen a "tectonic shift" on education in states and that "more legislators are free from the iron grip of the education establishment."[30] Hari Sevugan, communications director at StudentsFirst, noted, "What we've lacked and what those fighting for the status quo had was an organized effort that decision makers had in the back of their mind as they put together education policy. That equation was highly imbalanced, but is now changing." StudentsFirst claims to have signed up a million members in its first year and to have helped change fifty different state education policies. The recent wave of teacher quality reforms offers perhaps the best evidence of ERAO impact, as no area of education reform has been more strongly resisted by the unions. Nearly two-thirds of states have changed their teacher evaluation, tenure, and dismissal policies in the past two years: twenty-three states now require that standardized test results be factored into teacher evaluations, and fourteen allow districts to use these data to dismiss ineffective teachers. In 2009, no state required student performance to be central to the awarding of tenure, but today eight states do.[31] ERAOs have been hailed for playing a pivotal role in the passage of these new laws, with Stand for Children leading a coalition of groups behind the effort in Colorado and Illinois.

Key Lessons and Challenges

How can parents be more effectively engaged in the school reform movement, and how can this engagement be sustained over time? What are the key challenges to doing this kind of work, and how can they

be overcome? What are the key questions around parent organizing for school reform that remain in need of further research? This analysis of ERAO activities offers some key lessons.

The Engagement Continuum. It is clear that there are different kinds of parent engagement in education and that different groups seek to organize parents for different purposes. Three distinct models or approaches seem to have emerged—voluntarism, advocacy, and empowerment—and researchers (and the groups themselves) need to be clear about which approach is being utilized and the trade-offs involved. Although an ERAO could employ all three approaches simultaneously, one approach may be more or less appropriate for certain venues or issues than others. Voluntarism focuses on getting parents involved in the life of schools to support the work of students and teachers. This kind of engagement—most prominently through groups like PTAs and PTOs—involves activities like volunteering in classrooms and fundraising, and while it can have a major impact on student and school performance, it does not seek to fundamentally challenge or reform existing school practices or policies.[32]

Parent advocacy of the sort facilitated by ERAOs, on the other hand, involves mobilizing parents for political action in support of demands for policy reform. If parent engagement is about supporting the status quo in schools, parent advocacy is about challenging the status quo. In this sense, the ERAO approach—even as it may partner with PTAs or borrow some of the tactics of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and earlier parent organizing efforts—differs from them in fundamental ways. As Warren notes, the IAF approach believes that "it cannot be the job of community organizers and parents directly to transform instruction—that remains the province of professional educators."[33] ERAOs generally seem unwilling to embrace such a hands-off approach to reform because of a deep skepticism about the willingness or ability of professional educators to bring about transformative change and improved outcomes. As Arnold Fege notes, a difference exists between "volunteerism, supporting individual children, and conducting fundraisers" on the one hand and work that "organizes and mobilizes the community; knows how to collect and evaluate school performance information; builds collaborations between school and community; votes for education-oriented candidates; and pressures the school board and decision-makers" on the other.[34]

Both the voluntarism approach of PTAs and PTOs and the advocacy approach of ERAOs tend to view parents as a constituency to be mobilized in support of an agenda created by others—in the case of PTAs and PTOs, the agenda of the school or district leadership and in the case of ERAOs, the agenda articulated by reform group leadership. A third model of parent engagement in education, however, centers on empowerment—giving parents the power to create their own agenda for improving schools.[35] Although the empowerment approach to parent organizing is generally seen as most authentic, it can also take a much longer time to deliver impact and result in a less coherent and systematic approach to reform than the other approaches. ERAOs also need to be very cognizant of the "public engagement paradox" as described by Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Andrés Alonso: "Everyone wants changes, as long as it doesn't affect them in any way."[36] Even those parents who are aware of and concerned about the poor performance of the public schools will often resist change, particularly when major changes are being pushed rapidly. There can be a real tension, however, between the need to build a constituency for reform in the community (which takes time) and reformers' desire to press forward quickly.

Much of ERAOs' parent organizing to date appears to be limited in two important ways. First, with the notable exception of Stand for Children, most of these efforts have been of the astroturf variety—centered on documenting and communicating parent support for the reform agenda to policymakers at the state level. Though this can be a successful tactic, it is unlikely to result in the creation of broad and deep parent *movement* for school reform. As Stand's Megan Irwin remarked:

> I think it's tempting sometimes to find a really smart, savvy, well-spoken parent or two and build a great media campaign around them to achieve that legislation. What we've learned is that you can do that, but when the campaign ends, if you haven't built a real organization of many parents who are connected to each other, connected to the issue, connected to the organization, then you're sort of in a place of perpetually searching for advocates instead of developing and growing them in a way that is more permanent. Especially at the district level where parents have both the influence and voice, it's important to build out that real permanent network of parent advocates and then when it makes sense, to occasionally filter them up to bigger campaigns at the state level. But there's kind of no shortcut around doing the organizing work, if you want to have a permanent base of parents so they're there to support you.

Another issue is that even where genuine, grass-roots parent organizing around education has occurred, it seems to be largely confined to schools. As the Center for Education Organizing has noted, however, "Often the parents who have had the worst experiences with schools—both as students and parents—are the least connected to formal school events or organizations."[37] They note that parent outreach should be expanded to neighborhood organizations, after-school and child care programs, religious congregations, and door knocking. The rise of pro-reform "parent unions" in a number of cities and states also offers a potentially promising partner for ERAOs in their organizing work, though the parent unions remain small and have varied and often school-based agendas.[38] StudentsFirst and 50CAN, for example, recently joined forces with the Connecticut Parents Union to advocate on behalf of reforms in that state.

Data Dissemination and Parent Education. One of the things that has distinguished contemporary parent organizing from earlier periods—and enhanced its effectiveness—is the increased availability and transparency of student and school performance data. Ross Danis (Newark Trust for Education) noted that "parents tend to get most of their information from teachers" and that this limits their awareness of the problems and possible reforms. Heather Weiss, Elena Lopez, and Heidi Rosenberg argue that "families' abilities to understand and use data on school performance can help focus their advocacy efforts, and for those parents who might not be aware of the school's conditions of the need for change, community organizations and advocates can act as intermediaries to both inform and empower parents to demand excellence from their children's schools."[39] ERAOs have played a crucial role in disseminating this information to parents and using it to highlight the need for school improvement. Jeremiah Kittredge of Families for Excellent Schools spoke of the need to help parents "become literate about school performance." And as US Education Secretary Arne Duncan has observed, the continued development of common standards and assessments and the shift to value-added measures that parents can more easily understand and use to compare teacher, school, and district performance across their state and the country is extremely important.[40]

Supporting the collection and release of this data—and teaching parents how to make sense of it—has been a priority of ERAOs and should remain so. Universities can also be important partners in this area (as they have been in Chicago and New York), as they can assist in data collection, analysis and dissemination and add credibility with parents and policymakers. DFER's Kathleen Nugent observed, however, that "the reform movement does not do a good job of disseminating data strategically." It is thus important for ERAOs not only to document failure but also to show what is possible with examples of success that highlight schools or reforms in the community (and elsewhere) that have been effective in generating improvement for disadvantaged students. Kittredge argued that it is imperative to "create a vision, a narrative, of what

change would look like because empathy alone does not get it done." He admits, however, that reform groups "have not done a good job with this" and that the messaging effort has often been "like rolling a rock uphill."

It is important for ERAOs to recognize that a serious countermobilization effort is underway, in which groups that oppose the ERAO reform agenda, such as Save Our Schools, are actively creating their own parent grass-roots campaigns. The result is a lot of competition for parents' attention and a lot of competing claims about school system performance and the efficacy of reform; therefore, it is imperative that ERAOs articulate and communicate a clear and powerful message to parents. Speaking from the reform perspective, Newark (N.J.) School Board member Shavar Jeffries observed, "We're not doing the work in Newark, but lots of other folks are out in the communities spreading the traditional education message from the union perspective." DFER's Nugent observed:

> We need to combat the other side because their fear mongering is really effective. It is a lot more effective to elicit a response from people when you go out and say, 'Outsiders are coming in and they're taking your money, they are taking your schools, and they are privatizing public education. These outsiders are taking advantage of you.' That resonates real well, as opposed to 'We're selling an idea, what we're doing is new and we don't have the complete plan yet, but there is fierce urgency to work together toward getting your child the best education possible, as soon as possible.' School turnarounds and replicating successes are hard and it may take a while, but this is the way that we are going to bring about real change and high-quality opportunities for all children. It is really hard to say, 'Your kids are failing.' That is a terrible message. That makes people feel bad, and rightfully so. It is absolutely not the children who are failing, but the adults who can do something to improve the schools. We need to sell more of the promise of what's next as opposed to saying, 'You're trapped right now; sorry, but we're going to give it our best shot.'

ERAOs have tremendous opportunities to take advantage of emerging new social media for data dissemination and parent mobilization. Victoria Carty argues that "new emerging information communication technologies and the Internet in particular . . . can revitalize communicative action in the public sphere and thus enhance participatory democracy."[41] 50CAN has done a particularly good job of using data microtargeting capabilities to identify potential supporters and social media like Twitter and Facebook to regularly inform and mobilize them for advocacy. However, even as access to computers, smartphones, and the Internet has become much more widespread in recent years, it remains unclear how many parents in urban communities possess such technology or can use it skillfully. There is also a "supplement, not supplant" issue with technology, as some in the movement fear that too great a reliance on it will create the false impression that it can substitute for the essential—but labor-intensive and time-consuming—work of face-to-face community organizing.

Social media should not replace old-fashioned opportunities for social interaction; as Rosenstone and Hansen observe, social networks often provide the crucial foundation for political participation. Such interaction can itself serve as a kind of side payment or selective incentive for parents to engage with school reform. Derrell Bradford, executive director of Better Education for Kids, for example, spoke of the need to make education reform "cool" and to "leverage the social" to "drive positive brand associations." He cited his organization's "Old School for School Choice" hip-hop concert and family day in Newark in 2010, which included a number of celebrities and attracted more than two thousand people, as a successful example of this approach. DFER held a school uniform fashion show and back-to-school jamboree in Newark, where they

distributed free school supplies to more than one thousand parents and used the events to hand out information about school reform and collect parent contact information. Many ERAOs have also held viewing parties for parents that featured documentaries about school reform such as *Waiting for Superman*, *The Lottery*, and *The Cartel*.

Race, Class, and Authentic Organizing. Many of the ERAO leaders I interviewed mentioned the skepticism of "outsiders" and the importance of "authentic" leadership in urban communities. As I discussed at the beginning of this paper, tensions around race and class further exacerbate this challenge. Newark Public Schools observers, in particular, noted that there is tremendous suspicion of many of the individuals and organizations advocating for reforms in the city. Some have suggested that superintendent Cami Anderson's race (white) and lack of previous ties to the city have made it difficult for her to gain community support for her school closure plan, despite the fact that the district is one of the worst performing in the country. She was shouted down by community members when she attempted to announce her reform plan at a public forum in February 2012.[42] Jeffries referenced the outsider problem as well, noting,

> Too often, reform groups focus on state lobbying over the grass-roots [efforts] and rely on a franchise model, but we need to be sensitive to the local context. Too often, the impulse is to find three or four national people and import them and have them spread the message of reform, but we need to find local folks. If we don't figure out a way to empower local communities and this looks like a colonial sort of thing, where there's a regime of folks who drop out of the sky with this self-righteous belief that they know what is better for these kids than their own communities, then we'll fail.

Despite the importance placed on "authentic" parent leadership, however, it is clear that these groups are still figuring out how to approach parents in urban communities that are often unable or unwilling to devote a lot of time to their cause. Kenya Bradshaw (Stand Tennessee), for example, observed, "We have had to revise what we can expect from parent volunteers because the explicit time commitment we were asking for was too much and was scaring interested parents away." However, the parents that do take on the work, she noted, often become so engaged with it that they exceed the number of hours they originally committed to. She said that passion often matters more than numbers and that "a small group of committed parents—around twenty-five—can bring about major change even without large numbers." Megan Irwin (Stand) added, "What we've learned is that you can't think of things as a means to an end or just one tactic as part of a strategy. It kind of needs to be a strategy in and of itself because parents can tell if they're a means to an end, and so you lose that authentic engagement. . . . You have to be willing to take the time to invest and learn, and I think that is something that Stand's learned over the last couple of years as we've grown. And some places tried to take shortcuts and then just realized there really aren't shortcuts; you have to authentically do that education and empowerment work if you want to really build an army that's going to be able to stand up for the right policies for kids and understand why they are standing up for those policies." Other groups, such as Families for Excellent Schools, use side payments—financial stipends of $250–$1,000 per year—to give parents an incentive to participate in mobilization and advocacy efforts.

Given all of the various class and race issues that swirl around education reform, staffing and training issues are extremely important for ERAOs. Bradshaw emphasized that "hiring the right people is crucial" in parent organizing and that they look for candidates who have leadership skills, a focus on social justice, and experience doing community work (even if not necessarily in education). The ERAO leaders I spoke with repeatedly highlighted the importance of building relationships and earning the trust of parents. Luis Avila (Stand Arizona)

noted that "we have to be social workers as well as parent organizers." Bradshaw remarked that "relationships are critical—you have to value them and take the time to educate parents and give them a voice and respect."

Building trust is crucial but often difficult given the hostility of many urban parents toward perceived outsiders. Just as ERAOs need to be very sensitive to issues of race and class in their outreach to parents, it is also crucial that they appreciate the emotional attachment that many parents have to their local public school and its staff, even when the school is performing poorly. Danis noted that in Newark, every school has a full-time paid parent liaison but that these people are generally underutilized and ineffective, in part because they are used as patronage positions. Realizing the potential of these parent liaisons could really help with the effort to engage parents in schools.

In addition, ERAOs should seek to partner with established community organizations. This is a clear lesson to be learned from earlier mass movements such as those around civil rights and environmental issues. Stand's Tennessee chapter, for example, works with groups that assist low-income families. Building relationships and partnerships with organizations such as churches can enable ERAOs to both tap into existing communication networks and piggyback on the legitimacy and trust that these long-standing organizations have in the community. This is particularly important, given the traditional suspicion and hostility of many urban residents to outsiders.

Need for Increased Coordination. Even as individual ERAOs expand their capacity, one key question for them going forward is whether and how to coordinate their efforts. Currently their efforts are fragmented geographically as well as organizationally, as many ERAOs have a 501(c)(3), a 501(c)(4), and a political action committee. How to coordinate the efforts of a varied and diverse set of groups with different organizational structures within and across different states is a large task. Groups tend either to set up shop where no other ERAO is present or where one is, operate largely independently. As these groups expand their activities and geographic reach, however, it will become more important for them to think strategically about how they can differentiate and coordinate their parent organizing work. Irwin noted, "We are in such a strong place to work together and build a strategy around collaboration because I don't think that the movement moves forward without a clear plan for how the organizations that are out there can effectively leverage our different strengths. There's got to be a strategy for how we work together, or how we divide and conquer, whatever the ultimate goal would be."

Irwin went on to say that "50CAN does a wonderful job doing broad community engagement and microtargeting education advocates around campaigns, but what they don't do is focus at the school district level and do the kind of permanent base building that we do at the school district level. It is neat when you think about the opportunities if we ever do wind up in the same state to have one group go crazy at the state level and one go crazy at the school district level, and the way that we could filter up and down with each other is kind of cool to think about." Stand and 50CAN do not currently overlap their operations in any state, but they recently completed an agreement that outlined their future collaboration. This agreement—and the work of PIE Network—is promising, but it is clear that the groups have only just begun to think about how and where to coordinate their efforts and that the foundations that fund their work need to push them to accelerate their efforts to do so. Close attention to the comparative advantages that different groups—and different kinds of groups—bring to the table on behalf of school reform should be an important part of this conversation. Robin Steans (Advance Illinois) observed, for example:

> It is really tough for national organizations. They can put out as many hard-hitting reports as they want, but if there isn't somebody at the state to pick up and run with it, it will not have

> much impact. . . . It's been enormously helpful to our organization to have access to the wealth of information supplied by national organizations, and at the same time, it is also helpful to the national organizations to have a local counterpart that has the credibility at the local level to put that information to good use. And that's what we are trying to do.

Challenges

Bottom Up or Top Down? One of the great challenges of parent organizing centers on the extent to which the agendas of local community or parent groups can be left to emerge organically or need to be set or refined by the state or national organization. How (or how much) should ERAOs ensure fidelity to their policy agenda? How much alignment should ERAOs expect—or require—of their parents and local chapters? Because Stand chapters grow organically and are led by parents, for example, it can be a challenge to get them on the same page with one another and with the state organization.

A related but slightly different challenge revolves around the amount of time and energy that local parent groups devote to school-based issues (such as those around discipline, fundraising, facilities, and extracurricular activities) instead of broader systemic reform issues. Stand, for example, establishes state- and national-level policy agendas but allows local chapters to vote on their own agendas. Irwin (Stand) noted that this approach "builds a level of trust between parents and the organization, and getting something concrete right in front of them that they can see makes it so much easier to connect them to the bigger, more systemic issues that we also need them to help us address. So those kind of small wins that come up organically are really worth investing in if it's something that builds trust and actually helps kids in the school."

Although this approach clearly reinforces the democratic and grass-roots nature of their effort, it may make it more difficult to harness and direct parent energies toward systemic reform issues. A profound tension can be at work here because centrally mandated agendas may undermine the authenticity or legitimacy of a local group (and affect its ability to attract and retain parent support) while agendas that emerge organically may stray from or even oppose the stated policy goals of the ERAO. Danis (Newark Trust for Education) observed, "You have to engage people early in the process—need ownership with genuine and sincere involvement, not just buy-in at the end of the process." However, ERAOs face a real dilemma between creating ownership and empowerment at the grass-roots level and providing state- and national-level leadership and direction. It is also crucial—but difficult—to move beyond "random acts of family involvement"[43] and connect school-level parent organizing with mobilization for state-level policy advocacy. As DFER's Kathleen Nugent observed:

> None of this is sustainable if we do not have a base of support from our parents. None of it is. Administrations change, leadership goes away, resources disappear, the national spotlight moves on. The only way that this works is if we mobilize parents and create powerful platforms in a strong and strategic way. I think what you're going to see is more investments in the community organizing, hopefully more media coverage of it, too. The real wins will come from within the community, among the community's voices. A supportive op-ed or Commissioner Chris Cerf easing a regulation to release some of the burden on our schools may alter the statewide dialogue or how schools operate internally, and that is a part of the effort. But whether or not this is ultimately sustainable is going to be, in my opinion, determined by the dialogue in the community and the ability to mobilize parents desperately seeking a better education for their children.

A related issue centers on the involvement of school and district leadership in ERAO parent engagement efforts. These leaders are crucial gatekeepers to

parents—both because they have the parent contact information that ERAOs need for their outreach efforts and because they are often trusted and influential members of the community. As a result, the support—or the opposition—of principals and superintendents to ERAO parent mobilization efforts can have an enormous effect on their success or failure. In fact, many of the organizations I spoke with will not enter a district or school without supportive leadership. There is a big difference between collaboration and confrontation, however, and working with school leaders and teachers may require ERAOs to adopt a more incremental agenda that does not threaten long-established practices instead of introducing rapid transformative change. How to balance working with school and district leadership while pushing that leadership to undertake more radical reforms than they might otherwise embrace is a difficult challenge for ERAOs. The emergence of new pro-reform principal groups like New Leaders for New Schools and new pro-reform teacher groups like Educators 4 Excellence and Teach Plus is a promising development in this regard, but it does not appear that ERAOs have developed a strategy for capitalizing on it as of yet.

Exit or Voice? Another important issue in need of further examination by ERAOs (and further research by scholars) is how the array of options available to parents with children in failing schools influences their behavior and, in particular, their willingness to advocate on behalf of systemic school reform. The parent organizers I spoke with indicated that they often use charter school parent lists (and charter wait lists) to identify and recruit parents on behalf of reform activism. But as Andrew Kelly notes in his paper, it is not altogether clear whether the ongoing expansion of school choice across the country will ultimately result in more or less parent engagement in reform advocacy. One of the ironies of the school choice movement is that increasing the ability of parents to exit failing schools may make it less likely that such schools will ever improve by removing the most attentive, vocal, and perhaps able parents. Danis observed, "This is a real problem. With so many options available (and growing), there are fewer kids in the district schools, and parents are mobilizing to exit to charters rather than push reform." Nugent (DFER) added that "it is hard to get charter parents engaged in the struggle of the school reform, to fight for other people, because their child is already getting a good education."

Absent school choices, such parents might instead have to direct their energies toward reforming their child's original school. A separate but related challenge is how to get parents to move from school-based action to systemic reform—to get parents to look beyond the improvement of their particular child's school (or educational opportunities) and engage in a broader effort to reform the education system at the district, state, or federal level. It will be interesting to see, for example, how the increasing number of "parent trigger" laws in California (see Kelly's paper follwoing this one) and other states will affect ERAO parent mobilization efforts around reforms for district schools.

Another dimension to the exit or voice dilemma centers on the need for ERAOs to be attuned to the ways in which parents' perceptions of self-interest and community interest affect the incentives for engagement. Andrew Kelly's paper (p. 27) highlights the important role that self-interest can play as a motivating force for parents, but efforts to build a long-term mass movement may well hinge more on appeals to parents' loyalty to and concern for their broader community. Political scientists such as Gregory Markus have long recognized that citizens are significantly influenced by what they think is best for the community or the nation as a whole, in addition to what is best for their immediate personal well-being.[44] Such attitudes are especially prevalent when voters are thinking about policies that resonate with their conceptions of a just society or impact vulnerable and sympathetic populations, as with education. It will be crucial for ERAOs to devote considerable care and attention to crafting a message that can appeal not only to parents' simple self-interest, but also to cultural conceptions of American values and ideals and, in

particular, to the nation's commitment to educational opportunity.

Partisan Politics. Partisan politics may complicate ERAOs' efforts to mobilize parents because parents often are partisan. Although the ERAOs emphasize bipartisanship so that they can work effectively with parents and policymakers on both sides of the aisle, the groups confront several very different challenges related to partisan politics. One of the most important and unresolved issues is how the ERAO groups will navigate their complicated relationship with civil rights organizations and teachers unions—groups that have their own strong and long-standing ties to parents. Teachers unions are a crucial part of the Democratic Party's base and yet have long resisted the kinds of reforms the ERAOs are advocating on issues such as school choice, test-based accountability, and teacher quality. Recently, for example, Change.org, a progressive petition-based advocacy organization with ties to the labor movement, dropped StudentsFirst and Stand for Children as clients over claims that the groups take an "anti-union" stance. The break was precipitated by a petition drafted by the Illinois chapter of Stand for Children that called upon the Chicago Teachers Union and the Chicago Public School system to stop the "political posturing" around contract negotiations.[45] But nationally, the unions themselves are also in flux. Harvard University's Susan Moore Johnson has noted the rise of "reform unionism": support for reform is increasing inside the unions, particularly in the American Federation of Teachers and among younger teachers.[46] This trend has spawned such pro-reform teacher organizations as Teach Plus and Educators 4 Excellence.

Collectively, civil rights groups have assumed an ambiguous and fluid position in the school reform debates, though with major groups at times supportive of elements of the ERAO agenda. As Jesse Rhodes observes in a 2011 article in *Perspectives on Politics*, a number of civil rights groups have "played a central role in developing and promoting standards, testing, accountability, and limited school choice policies in order to achieve what they view as fundamentally egalitarian purposes."[47] Yet these groups have historically been closely politically aligned with teachers unions and continue to find common ground given the large number of minority teachers, particularly in urban areas. This helps explain why the NAACP sided with the unions against school closures and charter school expansion in New York City and Newark, for example, even as the group supported the ERAOs' call for closing achievement gaps. There is also a major generational and racial gap between the leaders of groups like the NAACP and ERAO leaders, who are often young, elite-schooled, and white and as such are often viewed skeptically by people of color. Figuring out how to create state-level alliances with civil rights groups and mobilize urban communities—which are disproportionately minority and poor—remains an ongoing challenge.

The second challenge is preserving over time the fairly broad bipartisan consensus on the ERAO agenda, both among parents and policymakers. As DFER's Williams observed, "There are times where we agree with Republicans on reform, but also plenty of times where we disagree—especially at the federal level and about funding." Although ERAOs generally support an active role for the federal government in promoting school reform and accountability, the rise of the Tea Party has highlighted that many conservatives continue to oppose such activism. And though ERAOs have led the charge to reform teacher evaluation and tenure policies, they have generally opposed more fundamental changes to collective bargaining pushed by Republican governors in states like Wisconsin. Similarly, although many Democrats (as well as many ERAOs) support the expansion of charter schools and school choice, other proposals like those around school vouchers that Republicans are pushing in many states are met with much greater ambivalence. And as noted above, there appears to be a growing tension between parents who want to focus resources on reforming district schools and those who want to divert more public dollars to charter schools or vouchers.

Measuring and Sustaining Success. Any effective organization needs to regularly assess its performance, but ERAOs have struggled to develop direct measures of their impact. A study by Public Impact found, "Interviewees admitted that they did not capture many metrics that allowed them to accurately measure the success of their engagement efforts. They have focused more on the results of the change effort itself (school results, dropout rate reduction, etc.)."[48] This is not surprising, as one study noted: "For a number of reasons, the work of community organizing for school reform is often invisible. . . . It is an ongoing process seeking to transform relationships and institutions. These kind of structural changes occur over many years of work and hence there is no neat beginning, middle, and end."[49] As a result, ERAOs tend to rely on more indirect proxies of influence, such as dollars raised or parent "touches," or to highlight policy victories in which their precise contribution cannot be disaggregated from those of a wide variety of other actors.

Stand Tennessee, for example, cites as evidence of their success that they have enlisted more than 1,000 parent members and more than 250 teachers and have had 15,000 people attend their meetings. On the policy side, they highlight the state's passage of legislation in support of its RTTT application, a petition drive to document stakeholder support for the reform plan contained in the application, the push to secure additional funding for schools, and the passage of teacher effectiveness legislation. ERAOs—and the foundations that support them—need to devote more attention to developing metrics to use to assess the effectiveness of their organizing efforts, even as they recognize that any such metrics will be imperfect and fail to fully capture the totality of ERAO impact.[50] It is also important that successes—especially early wins—be communicated to parents and that their role in bringing them about be highlighted to combat hopelessness and develop a sense of efficacy around reform efforts.

Another challenge for ERAOs involves sustaining parental engagement in school reform over time. Over the past two years, ERAOs have shown that they can mobilize parents quickly and effectively on behalf of reform. But as FEE's Patricia Levesque warns, education reform is a long-term endeavor where "success is incremental" and "progress can be torn down quickly if momentum is stopped." The recent struggles of the Race to the Top grantees have demonstrated that ensuring that policy reforms are implemented effectively on the ground and sustained over time is crucial, though less "sexy" than winning legislative victories. Major policy victories can quickly be undone by a new governor or legislature or undermined during the rule-making process, what Levesque called "death by a thousand cuts." Battles over implementation occur in different venues (state boards, task forces, and education agencies), are more technical and less visible (especially to parents), and demand different tactics than legislative fights. ERAOs' roles must include technical assistance, reporting, and playing watchdog vis-à-vis state education agencies, but it may be harder to communicate this kind of work to parents. But Pickens from DC School Reform Now noted that this can lead reform groups to spend a lot of time "playing defense" and that these additional tasks may reduce the resources that ERAOs can devote to lobbying and grass-roots mobilization. ERAOs have to think carefully about strategies for playing both offense and defense around school reform and how to effectively balance the two.

Building Capacity and Scaling Up. Despite the recent proliferation of ERAO groups and activities, it is important to remember that these are, for the most part, new groups with limited resources and reach. Warren argues that community organizing groups "need the financial resources to pay a sufficient number of professional organizers, expert knowledge to engage in policy development and a broad enough reach to affect district policy."[51] A major future issue for ERAOs related to parent organizing thus centers on expanding their capacity and coverage. Currently, most ERAOs remain quite understaffed and underresourced, particularly compared to groups like the teachers unions that are working to mobilize parents

against the reform agenda. Hari Sevugan (StudentsFirst) remarked that despite ambitious goals, his group is essentially a "start-up" and "trying to fly the plane while [they] build it." Even in Newark, a place widely seen as a major hub of school reform, Jeffries reported, "There has been no cultivation of an education reform constituency among parents. We are getting hit in the mouth daily and not fighting back enough. For every ten people or mailers that the unions have, we have half of one. There is no mechanism or infrastructure in place to rebut the claims of the reform opposition."

To date, ERAOs have focused on large urban districts and states they consider hospitable to their efforts. However, this approach leaves the vast majority of the nation's 14,000 school districts, as well as many entire states, unserved; twenty-seven states, for example, are not represented on the PIE Network's membership list. Indeed, focusing on *receptive* districts and states may actually ensure that areas *most* in need of reform advocacy and parent mobilizing (and perhaps with the worst-performing school systems) will be ignored. The hope among ERAOs is that laggard states will feel pressure to follow reform-oriented states, but no one can guarantee that this will happen. The PIE Network's Kubach observed:

> A huge next piece of this puzzle is helping people that are leading this effort stop fighting over the ten or twelve states where everybody is excited to invest money and figure out how do we bring the rest of the country along. That's the next challenge for us all: the foundations who care about this, the reform communities who care about this, what are our strategies for tapping into those states where we don't have all the leading factors that you need to do this, to bring them along so we're actually moving the country and not just a collection of states.

Clearly, to be successful over the long haul, ERAOs will need to better coordinate their efforts within and across states. Michelle Rhee (StudentsFirst) is optimistic on this front, noting, "More critical masses of reform-oriented folks are being built up, and I'm seeing more leaders of education reform organizations saying, 'We need to figure out how we can align our efforts in a more effective and efficient way than in the past.' It's not going to happen overnight, but I'm very hopeful that it will happen in the next two to three years."

The scale issue has several different dimensions, as the ERAOs seek to expand the number of states, districts, and schools that they operate in as well as increase the number of parents involved. One of the most interesting questions for these groups going forward is how much they want to be all-purpose organizations that do everything from grass-roots organizing to state and national lobbying, or whether they want to specialize on a certain piece of the work and then partner with other groups that can complement their particular focus. A related question concerns the issue of subcontracting and whether efficiencies can be harnessed by relying on third-party vendors to provide certain support services rather than providing them in house. Instead of developing their own parent training programs from scratch, for example, some ERAOs are beginning to bring in consultants to do the work for them. Many ERAOs in the New York–New Jersey–Connecticut region, for example, are relying on Families for Excellent Schools—to train parent leaders and give them the skills necessary to become reform leaders in their local communities.

Conclusion

The concerted effort by ERAOs to inform and engage parents behind school reform is a crucial, if understudied, component of the contemporary education reform movement. It is important to recognize, however, that this nascent effort has really only just begun and these groups face many challenges as they seek to enlist parents as allies in this fight. Much of the initial wave of parent organizing

has revolved around the isolated, intermittent mobilization of charter school parents behind temporary campaigns in support of legislative change. But this approach has several limitations. First, as Andrew Kelly observes in his companion paper, parents who apply to charter schools are often disinclined to engage in school reform either because of apathy once their child has secured a spot in a good school or because of anger once their child has been denied. Second, even though the number of parents with children in charter schools has grown dramatically in the past decade, they still comprise a small minority of parents overall, limiting their potential political impact. Third, the school reform agenda of ERAOs is much broader than expanding choice and today encompasses a number of proposals—such as teacher evaluation and tenure reform—that are largely irrelevant to charter parents.

ERAOs are increasingly realizing that the successful enactment, implementation, and protection of the education policy reforms on their agenda—and public perception of the agenda's legitimacy—necessitates the development of a new, more active approach to parental engagement. This new approach will need to build a permanent, coordinated, nationwide network of organizations operating at the school, district, state, and national levels that is committed to the kind of grass-roots parent organizing that can create a genuine social movement behind school reform and convert parent power into political power. As Shavar Jeffries, the president of the Newark School Board, noted, much of the reform focus to date has been at the state and national level. But, he says, "All politics is local and all community organizing is local. It's harder and more time-consuming work, but there is a big payoff. . . . I have full confidence that we will win if we do the work." As this paper highlights, however, ERAOs have really only scratched the surface of parent power as a potential force in education reform, and the large and diverse array of organizations working in this space—and the foundations that fund them—will need to develop a coherent long-term strategy that can better leverage and connect the particular capacities and comparative advantages that different ERAOs bring to the table.

Appendix:
Interviews Conducted for This Paper

Luis Avila, Organizing Director, Arizona Chapter of Stand for Children, April 19, 2012

Derrell Bradford, Executive Director, Better Education for Kids, May 30, 2011

Kenya Bradshaw, Executive Director, Tennessee Chapter of Stand for Children, May 11, 2012

Ross Danis, President and CEO, Newark Trust for Education, May 17, 2012

Megan Irwin, National Expansion and Program Director, Stand for Children, April 3, 2012

Shavar Jeffries, Founder and Chair, iReform, and Member, Newark School Advisory Board, May 23, 2012

Jeremiah Kittredge, Founder and Executive Director, Families for Excellent Schools, May 16, 2012

Suzanne Tacheny Kubach, Executive Director, Policy Innovators in Education Network, January 24, 2012

Patricia Levesque, Executive Director, Florida Foundation for Excellence in Education, January 27, 2012

Marc Porter Magee, President and Founder, 50CAN, January 20, 2012

Kathleen Nugent, New Jersey State Director, Democrats for Education Reform, April 26, 2012

David Pickens, Executive Director, DC School Reform Now, May 16, 2011

Michelle Rhee, Founder and CEO, StudentsFirst, January 31, 2012

Hari Sevugan, Vice President of Communications, StudentsFirst, January 30, 2012

Robin Steans, Executive Director, Advance Illinois, January 23, 2012

Joe Williams, Executive Director, Democrats for Education Reform, January 19, 2012

Ellen Winn, Executive Vice President, 50CAN, and Former Executive Director, Education Equality Project, January 20, 2012

Notes

An earlier treatment of some of the material in this paper was published as "Fight Club: Are Advocacy Organizations Changing the Politics of Education?" in the Summer 2012 issue of *Education Next*. That article provided a brief overview of the advocacy organization landscape and the groups' activities and impact. This paper addresses these issues in more depth—and with additional research and interviews—and focuses much more on the parent engagement efforts of these organizations.

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3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from personal interviews with the author. See the appendix for a full list of interviewees.

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8. Rufus Browning et al., ed., *Racial Politics in American Cities* (New York: Longman Publishers, 1997), 4.

9. Jeffrey Henig, et al., *The Color Of School Reform* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 276.

10. Marion Orr, *Black Social Capital: The Politics of School Reform in Baltimore, 1986-1998* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

11. Paul T. Hill and Mary Beth Celio, *Fixing Urban Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 35.

12. Julian Bond, NAACP chairman, interview with author, March 29, 2001.

13. Jean Johnson, *What's Trust Got to Do with It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 2011), 9.

14. Some recent research challenges the idea that urban parents cannot accurately assess the performance of their children's' schools. See Nathan Favero and Kenneth J. Meier, "Evaluating Urban Public Schools: Parents, Teachers and State Assessments," American Political Science Association 2011 Annual Meeting Paper, http://ssrn.com/abstract=1901010 (accessed July 9, 2012).

15. Johnson, *What's Trust Got to Do with It?*, 7.

16. See, for example, Heather Weiss, M. Elena Lopez, and Heidi Rosenberg, *Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform* (Washington, DC: National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement, December 2010), 2.

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36. Lucy Steiner and Dana Brinson, *Fixing Failing Schools: Building Family and Community Demand for Dramatic Change* (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, May 2011), 7.

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Parent Voice, School Choice, and the New Politics of Education Reform

By Andrew P. Kelly

American education reform is awash in a surge of "parent power." Long-considered bystanders (and occasionally obstacles) to the push for change, a new collection of education reform advocacy organizations (ERAOs) has made a concerted effort to organize and mobilize parents around expanded school choice, teacher tenure reform, and accountability policy.[1] In New York City, routine public hearings on charter school facilities draw standing-room only crowds and often drag into the wee hours of the morning. In states such as Connecticut, Texas, Washington, and Ohio, enterprising parents have started "parent unions" to serve as a counterweight to the teachers unions that will provide parent activists with a seat at the bargaining table. In California, parents of children in struggling schools have used the state's new parent trigger—which allows a majority of families at a failing school to petition for major changes—to confront district management and the teachers union, leading to two high-profile court cases with national visibility. And in late January 2012, national School Choice Week drew hundreds of thousands of parents to state capitals and city halls across the country. Observers have argued that the new parent power bloc—though still in its infancy—has successfully shaken up reform politics.

This new movement also raises fundamental questions about the traditional relationship between socioeconomic status, political participation, and public policy. Scholars have traditionally found that low-income citizens are less likely to participate in politics and have argued that social programs like welfare and food stamps can reinforce political apathy. In education policy, however, proponents of school choice have argued that the act of choosing schools can positively affect parents' social capital and level of engagement, creating "better citizens" and opening the door to broader civic participation.[2] But school choice may also activate a different set of incentives, as parents exiting the traditional public schools may have less incentive to use their "voice" to support a broad education reform agenda.

These new parent organizing efforts have the potential to shed fresh light on the dynamics of choice, parental engagement, and political mobilization, but they have not yet been studied systematically. How have advocacy groups managed to activate citizens who tend to be less involved in politics? Where do these parent activists come from? Are activists drawn from the ranks of aggrieved parents whose children are stuck in failing schools? Or are the beneficiaries of existing policies—namely those parents who have used school choice to find a different school for their child—the ones manning the barricades? Finally, does parental engagement extend beyond concerns with their child's education to encompass broader reforms that may not affect their child directly?

The goal of this study is to leverage intuitions from political science and the firsthand experiences of parent organizers to freshly examine questions of school choice and parental engagement. In particular, I examine how the popular belief that choosing schools lays the groundwork for broader civic engagement jibes with what advocacy groups are finding on the ground. As school choice and parent organizing continue to take root in states and districts across the country, these dynamics will become increasingly important to education reform debates.

Through a series of interviews with practitioners who are actively organizing parents, I identify a set of lessons about the types of parents that groups are targeting, the breadth of the issue agenda around which parents can be mobilized, and the mobilization

strategies that have proven effective. Because people are most likely to participate in politics when they are mobilized to do so, the behavior and beliefs of parent organizers is a critical influence on patterns of parental participation.

Lessons include:

- The act of choosing schools does not spontaneously generate activists. Instead, what choice parents experience after enrolling—school culture, new interpersonal networks, and interactions with reform organizations—can unleash parent participation.

- School choice parents are often easier to locate and mobilize because they are embedded in existing networks, but their participation does not necessarily extend to broader reform issues.

- Organizers generally reported that mobilizing choice parents around issues that are not directly related to the day-to-day business of their children's school is a tougher lift. Helping parents make the leap from self-interested involvement to altruism is seen as a looming challenge.

- Parents whose children are on the waitlist for a school or choice program are a potentially fertile target group for activism, but these parents must be carefully cultivated by the right organizations. The politics of disappointment and resentment can quickly derail attempts to mobilize parents who have been frustrated.

- Few things activate parents like an imminent threat to a choice program or a particular school. Organizers often cited examples where crises had driven high rates of parental involvement. They likewise highlighted the importance of "policy wins" in building efficacy and sustained engagement.

- There is a sense among some organizers that the movement must extend beyond sporadic rallies, protests, and public testimony to more sustained involvement in electoral politics and voter mobilization. Creating a lasting political bloc with choice parents at its core represents one of the next frontiers in parent organizing.

The first section of the paper explores some insights from political science and school choice research. I provide a crash course in the political science research on political participation. Next, I examine how this research may translate to school choice policy before summarizing the research on choice, parental engagement, and political participation. The second section of the paper examines the key lessons that have emerged from contemporary efforts to organize and mobilize parents.

It is worth noting that I set out to examine parental participation in activities that are broadly political (for example: voting, contacting elected officials, attending and speaking at public hearings, or engaging in protests and rallies) rather than school-specific (for example: volunteering for school activities, joining the parent-teacher association, or attending parent-teacher conferences). In his companion study, Patrick McGuinn makes a similar distinction between "voluntarism" (which entails school-level activities) and "advocacy" and "empowerment" (which correspond to activism beyond the schoolhouse). Given the explicitly political nature of the parent power movement, I chose to focus on advocacy and political involvement.

Political Participation 101: Who Participates and Why?

If traditional patterns of political participation are any guide, organizing parents to participate in state

and local school reform politics should be a significant challenge. Political scientists have spent decades exploring why people choose to participate in politics and have consistently found that citizens of lower socioeconomic status (SES) are less likely to participate. But research has also found that there is more to the participation story than demographics alone. At the risk of oversimplifying, most of the work in this area has focused on the three consistent predictors of participation that Sidney Verba, Henry Brady, and Kay Lehman Schlozman lay out in their classic study *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*:

- First, people participate in politics because they have the *resources* to do so (time, money, and civic skills).
- Second, people participate because they are *politically engaged*—they are interested in politics, concerned about pressing policy issues, and have a sense of political efficacy.
- Third, people participate because somebody asks them to—citizens are often embedded in "*networks of recruitment*" that expose them to politics and mobilize them to participate.[3]

This basic typology serves as a useful framework for thinking about participation in the context of urban school reform.

Resources. Research has consistently found a strong relationship between participation and SES: individuals with more education and higher incomes tend to vote and contact public officials at much higher rates than their less-advantaged peers.[4] This should not be particularly surprising—affluent, well-educated citizens are more likely to learn about politics, discuss it with their peers, and be exposed to opportunities for participation. Based on this consistent pattern, we might expect the very citizens that are the target of education reform mobilization efforts—low-income, typically minority parents—to be among the least likely to participate.

But SES is only part of the story. Research suggests that African Americans actually participate at higher rates than we would expect given their SES, though not necessarily in traditional activities like voting or contacting public officials.[5] Verba, Brady, and Schlozman emphasize the importance of civic skills—things like organizing a meeting, writing a letter, or making a presentation—in shaping participation patterns. While these skills are common among the affluent and well-educated, the authors show that local institutions like churches and community organizations also provide less-advantaged citizens with opportunities to build civic skills. Indeed, low-income African American voters who are active in their church often build necessary civic skills through participation in church activities, and these skills in turn make individuals more likely to participate.[6] As we will see below, mobilization efforts can also bend the traditional relationship between SES and political participation. Education and income are powerful predictors of political participation, but they do not tell the entire story.

Engagement. Attitudes toward politics and political activity are also important. Research shows that political engagement—an amalgamation of efficacy, interest, trust in government, and a concern for pressing policy issues—has a strong influence on political participation. In particular, a sense of political efficacy, or the belief that participation can influence government policy, is highly correlated with political activity. Those who are high in both efficacy and trust in government are particularly likely to participate: they believe they can affect policy and trust the government to be responsive.[7] And efficacy not only encourages political participation, it responds to it; citizens report an increased sense of efficacy after having voted.[8] Again, this relationship presents a challenge for school reformers looking to mobilize urban parents, as research suggests that African Americans and those of low SES often have low levels of efficacy and trust in government.[9]

Networks of Recruitment. The third factor that Verba, Brady, and Schlozman identify—networks of recruitment—gets to the heart of the work that parent organizing groups are doing. In their canonical study of participation, Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen show that mobilization is a "powerful inducement" to participate in politics. According to the authors, mobilization increases participation via two routes:

> First, party mobilization underwrites the cost of political participation. Party workers inform people about upcoming elections, tell them where and when they can register and vote . . . and remind them of imminent rallies and meetings.
>
> Second, mobilization occasions the creation of selective social incentives for political involvement. It taps networks of family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and associates and exploits the complex relationships of social identity, expectation, and obligation. People participate not because parties ask them, but because people they know and respect ask them.[10]

Rosenstone and Hansen find that the effects of political mobilization are most pronounced among citizens who are otherwise the least likely to participate (low-SES minority voters).

None of this is to suggest that mobilization creates activists out of whole cloth. On the contrary, savvy advocacy organizations use resources strategically, mobilizing citizens who are "both convenient and predictable . . . identifiable and accessible . . . [and] who are likely to respond and be effective."[11] More often than not, mobilization activates citizens with latent political resources and interest, plugging them into opportunities to participate that may not be on their radar screen.[12]

Wild Cards: Self-Interest and Public Policy. Two other influences are worth mentioning here. First, while political science research has typically found little evidence of self-interest effects on attitudes, a subset of work on local and state politics—some of it focused on education policy—has uncovered clear self-interest effects. Studies of the protests surrounding forced busing, referenda on local school funding, and examinations of anti-tobacco initiatives have found that self-interest can be a powerful determinant of political behavior and attitudes.[13] When the political stakes are high and clear, citizens do tend to act on their own self-interest. Indeed, activating citizens' self-interest sometimes reverses the traditional relationship between SES and participation.[14]

Second, a newer line of research suggests that public policies themselves can shape beneficiaries' propensity to participate, both positively and negatively. This dynamic, dubbed "policy feedback" by scholars, argues that policies structure the way individuals interact with government, coloring their perception of the system and providing them with a direct stake in policymaking. In the case of government welfare programs, Joe Soss argues that the feedback loop is negative, as participation in welfare depresses individuals' sense of efficacy, trust in government, and likelihood of participation.[15] Andrea Campbell argues that US Social Security had the opposite effect, providing lower-income senior citizens with incentive to participate and activating them as a political bloc.[16]

In particular, Campbell's study shows that senior citizens increased their political activity whenever the US Congress threatened to change Social Security, often at the urging of advocacy groups like the American Association of Retired Persons. This suggests that policy feedback effects are particularly pronounced when there is an imminent threat to the policy that activates the self-interest of beneficiaries. Policies create constituencies with a stake in the program, and those constituencies are easily mobilized when benefits come under attack.

School Choice and Parental Engagement: "Virtuous Circle" or Exit and Apathy? How might the research on political participation translate to the context of parents, school choice, and education reform politics?

Choice Lays the Groundwork for Broader Political Activity. In theory, school choice could impact many pieces of this equation. Most obviously, self-interested parents should be relatively easy to activate when there is an imminent threat to choice policy or their children's school. But choice effects may go beyond self-interested involvement by building the civic skills, engagement, and mobilization networks that lead to broader activism.

A policy feedback story would suggest that because school choice programs bring parents into a community where expectations for engagement are high, educators are responsive, and parents are satisfied, the programs are likely to generate positive attitudes toward government and increased interpersonal ties and trust (social capital). These attitudes and beliefs can then spawn greater levels of political participation. Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider lay out this logic in the context of charter schools:

> Many proponents argue that charter schools are creating opportunities for . . . adult political learning. This argument is supported by empirical evidence showing that many charter schools encourage parents to become integral to the functioning of the school. Proponents further argue that as this fundamental change takes place, parents will learn to respect one another and other members of the school community. In this atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect, the schools will improve, while at the same time, parents will develop the norms essential for democratic participation and a virtuous circle will be built.[17]

Research on Catholic schools—often the destination of students who win publicly funded vouchers—has found that enrollment does boost parental engagement in school activities.[18]

There are a number of steps in this causal chain. But there is clear evidence that schools of choice tend to elicit more parental involvement in school-level activities, and this baseline engagement could lay the groundwork for broader civic activity. These dynamics would also lead advocacy organizations to see choice parents as natural targets for mobilization.

"Exiters" Have Little Incentive to Exercise Political Voice. But why would parents who have successfully exited the public school system have incentive to push for systemic reform? Organizers who wish to harness the energy of school choice parents must contend with the tension between "exit" and "voice" described in Albert O. Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Hirschman argues that consumers can respond in one of three ways to a decline in a firm's quality: they can "exit" the firm by choosing another provider; they can use their "voice" to signal their dissatisfaction to the current provider in the hopes that the firm will respond; or they can remain "loyal" to the firm. (Hirschman specifically discusses how these dynamics may play out in the case of public schools; see the sidebar on the following page).[19]

In the contemporary debate about education reform, the relationship between exit and voice is an important one. Parents who use school choice policies to find a new school for their child have effectively exited the traditional public school system. Exiting may reduce their incentive to engage in voice-related activities such as public rallies, school board and town council meetings, and voting that would signal dissatisfaction to the traditional public schools. In Hirschman's view, voice and exit are alternative courses of action: "Once you have exited," he writes, "you have lost the opportunity to use voice."[20] The opportunity for exit can therefore "*atrophy the development of the art of voice*."[21] What's more, while the most quality-conscious consumers "are those who would be the most active, reliable, and creative agents of voice," they are also likely to be the first to exit when they become dissatisfied, leaving the remaining parents without the most vocal activists.[22] In the context of parent organizing, Hirschman's theory would suggest that choice parents would be less likely to participate in activities to promote system-level reform.

The flipside of his logic is also intriguing—it suggests that parents who lose out in school choice

Hirschman on Public Schools and School Choice

Hirschman admits that "public goods" such as schooling present a special case for his exit-voice logic. Even if consumers "exit," those who remain in the community may still have an interest in the quality of the public provider. He even confronts the issue of school choice directly: "A private citizen can "get out" from public education by sending his children to private school, but at the same time, he cannot get out, in the sense that his and his children's lives will be affected by the quality of public education."[23] Frustrated parents who leave the public school system may still find it in their interest to exercise "voice from without" in pushing for policy change.

Even if their membership in the community provides beneficiaries of school choice with some incentive to continue pushing for systemic reform, these parents face a collective action problem and a serious temptation to free-ride on the political activity of truly aggrieved parents.[24] As I discuss later on, many advocacy groups are working to shift parental engagement from being rooted in self-interest to being rooted in a sense of duty to the community.

lotteries might be the most likely to use voice. Because school choice lotteries are random, parents who lose out should be just as quality-conscious and likely to use voice as those who won a seat. We will see below that some groups have capitalized on this intuition in their organizing work.

Which Is It? Which hypothesis jibes with existing research on choice and broader political participation? The limited amount of work on this topic has revealed little evidence that choice parents are more likely to be civically active beyond the schoolhouse.

In their study of the DC Opportunity Scholarship, Thomas Stewart and colleagues found that a core of scholarship parents expressed interest in "[making] their voice heard" on the reauthorization of the program. However, the authors found few indications that the core group was involved in civic activities outside of the focus groups. Most parents admitted to little involvement with other civic activities beyond those related to their children.[25] The authors attribute this lack of activity to the fact that scholarship parents were scattered across disparate neighborhoods and had little opportunity to come together and communicate about their "common interests."[26]

In one of the more direct tests of the nexus between choice and political activity, Justine Hastings and others studied the public school choice lottery in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina. The researchers linked the results of the lottery to voter registration records to examine the effect of winning or losing the lottery on the decision to vote in a school board election. The authors found that lottery winners were no more likely to vote than those who did not win the lottery. They also found that losing the lottery only had an effect on the turnout of likely voters—white, affluent citizens with prior voting histories who lost were more likely to turn out.[27]

Finally, Buckley and Schneider's exhaustive study of charter schools explores the notion that charter school attendance has "spillover effects" on parents' civic participation. They found no evidence that "positive 'within-school' attitudes spill over much to broader domains."[28] The authors spell out the potential consequences of this finding in the conclusion:

> [If] charter schools are not nurturing social capital among parents that can then translate into broader political practices, these parents will fail to develop the political skills to protect charter schools in the face of inevitable challenges. Thus, the failure of charter schools to fully develop the civic capacity of their constituent consumers may present problems for the movement—and, perhaps, for school reform in general.[29]

Boots on the Ground: What Parent Organizers Can Tell Us about Parental Engagement

The aforementioned studies raise doubts that choice parents are more likely to be civically involved than other types of parents. But do these findings mirror what parent organizers are learning on the front lines?

Large datasets, quasi-experiments, and multivariate analyses are worthwhile tools for documenting macro-level patterns and trends. But these macro-level analyses might miss smaller-scale events or activities that have an immediate and lasting impact on parental engagement in particular locations. By their nature, empirical studies typically measure a snapshot in time and analyze parents across different settings. This design compromises the studies' ability to analyze processes that may be dynamic, targeted, and event-driven.

Meanwhile, parent organizing groups are rapidly evolving, or "building the airplane while it's flying," as one interviewee put it.[30] In the absence of more systematic data collection, insights and intuitions from practitioners can inform our understanding of parent activism. What are today's organizers learning about school choice, parental engagement, and civic participation, and do these lessons match up with existing theory and research? Or are they uncovering new patterns of behavior that are worthy of further inquiry?

What follows is a collection of lessons and looming challenges that emerged from eighteen semi-structured interviews with representatives from education reform groups that are organizing parents. I also draw on a trip to Albany, New York, in February 2012 for the annual Charter School Advocacy Day. I interviewed representatives from a variety of organizations, from charter school networks to state or local advocacy groups, to organizations with national reach (for a full list of interviewees, see the appendix). While the groups' reform agendas varied—from expanding school choice programs to reforming teacher tenure to changes in school governance—each interviewee has had a hand in organizing parents to accomplish policy goals and was willing to share some insights on choice, parent advocacy, and mobilization.

Where Do Parent Advocates Come From?

Lesson 1: Choice Does Not Spontaneously Spawn Activists. Well-designed studies of choice and parental engagement have argued that it is not the act of choosing a school that affects parent attitudes and behavior, but the context in which parents and students end up once a choice has been made.[31] Parent organizers and advocates tended to agree on this front, arguing that the real work occurs after parents have chosen to enroll. Jenny Sedlis, director of external affairs at Success Academy Charter Schools, a high-profile network of New York City charter schools, suggested that attitudes and behaviors of parents are truly determined after enrollment occurs: "I don't think by virtue of making that choice that they're naturally more engaged and ready to fight," she reported. Instead, schools and advocacy organizations must educate parents about education reform and the need to participate. Success Academy starts this process before new students even matriculate. Michael Benjamin of Step Up for Students, a group that organizes parents to lobby in support of Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship, suggested that the same is true of private school parents. "I don't think that parental choice equates to naturally being an advocate, quite the contrary. . . . Parents don't start saying 'Hey, look, you need to sign me up for something, I'm ready to go.'"

For parents who are simply in search of a better school, the need to become advocates for reform is hardly self-evident, as the contentious politics of education reform are likely to be far-removed from their daily lives. Instead, advocacy groups and educators have to explain to parents where their individual experience "fits" in the broader landscape of education reform—to "connect the dots," as one organizer described it. Nina Rubin, who runs the pro-charter Georgia Parent Advocacy Network

(GPAN), highlighted one basic obstacle in this process: many parents in the school choice market do not actually recognize what a charter school is or how it is different from traditional public schools.

While the savviest consumers may have a preference for the features that make charter schools unique, most parents lack a sophisticated sense of what sets charter schools apart, let alone the divisive politics that often surround them. As such, Rubin has found that one key to organizing charter parents in Georgia is explaining what charter schools are, what parents should demand from their charter school leaders, and why it is important to be an advocate for these schools. Without a basic understanding of how their choice of school fits into the larger world of education reform, parents feel little reason to become advocates.

Lesson 2: Choice Parents Are Easier to Reach and Mobilize On Relevant Issues. Since choice programs do not tend to automatically create advocates, advocacy groups must work to organize parents to push for reform and protect policies. And because political organizations operate under budget constraints, these groups are under pressure to target those citizens who are easy to access and likely to turn out. Do organizers see choice parents as prime targets in their grass-roots activity?

Interviewees generally agreed that parents in schools of choice—particularly charter schools—were often easier to reach and, at least on choice-related issues, easier to activate than traditional public school parents. There was far less consensus on whether choice parents were easier to mobilize across a broad swath of reform issues, many of which are not of immediate concern to schools of choice. Many interviewees identified charter school parents in particular as the "low-hanging fruit" of the organizing game. This advantage stems from a combination of school cultures, logistics, and self-selection: charter parents are contained in one place, charter leaders are often sympathetic to reform agendas, and charter parents often have more social capital from the start.

Organizers saw the relationship with school leaders as being of particular importance. Joe Williams, director of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER)—a national group that advocates on a range of issues like expanded choice, tenure reform, and governance reform—explained, "It's a lot easier to mobilize charter parents because they are already organized within a school. Principals and teachers can use their command and control relationship to move parents to participate. [Parents] will show up."

Marc Porter Magee, president and founder of the national reform group 50 State Campaign for Achievement Now (50CAN), echoed the importance of the relationship between parents and school leaders in high-performing schools of choice. As he explained: "I think almost any advocacy group working in education reform realized very quickly that the relationship that parents in high-performing schools form with their principals is very powerful." Magee cited 50CAN's work in helping parents from the Achievement First charter school network to advocate for their schools as an effort that has worked "really, really well."

Identifying and mobilizing choice parents also poses less of a logistical challenge than does organizing public school parents. As any political campaign demonstrates, contact information is the lifeblood of mobilization efforts: if you cannot find people, you cannot ask them to turn out. Because choice parents are part of a defined group (a voucher program or a charter school), they are easier to identify, which often makes it easier to obtain their contact information. In contrast, parents in traditional public schools are scattered across schools where leaders may be less sympathetic to reform agendas. Because of privacy regulations, schools are typically not allowed to provide parents' contact information to third parties. But advocacy groups have devised some legal mechanisms to obtain parents' contact information without the school directly providing any of the data.

For instance, some advocacy organizations have had success in getting permission from schools to hand out self-addressed postcards to students and

parents who can then send the cards back—of their own volition—with their contact information. Patrick Van Keerbergen of DFER shared an anecdote about the group's work raising charter caps in New York during Race to the Top. With the blessing of charter leaders, organizers used postcards and petitions to get in contact with parents at some of the top-performing charter management organizations (CMO) in New York City. According to Van Keerbergen, DFER had considerable success mobilizing these parents—via phone banks—to make calls to state legislators and express support for a lift of the charter cap.

Some charter schools have agreed to use an "opt-out" strategy during the charter school lottery that allows the schools to pass along the contact information they receive on applications to outside groups. These organizations can then use that contact information to identify and mobilize parents. Including an "opt out" box on registration forms provides legal cover to pass contact information on to organizing groups; parents who do not opt out have given their consent. Families Empowered, a Houston-based group that works with parents who are on the waitlist, has used such a system in Houston to build a list of "lottery hopefuls."

But the advantages of mobilizing choice parents go beyond logistics. Organizers also argued that self-selection and experience in the new school create significant attitudinal differences between choice parents and those who remain in public schools. These differences position choice parents as the prime targets for mobilization. Kathleen DeLaski of StudentsFirst, a national group that advocates for reforms to teacher evaluation policies, the expansion of school choice, and increased transparency, told me that when you compare charter school parents and public school parents according to their levels of engagement on education reform, "it's not even close." DeLaski argued that charter parents are likely advocates not because they are more active in general, but because "they are willing to fight for what they sought out once they find a school that they think is the right fit for their child." The contentious politics that often surround charter schooling helps to activate parents. Because charters "are the underdogs in so many of these states and cities where their school gets less money, they don't have buildings, and they're getting kicked out of buildings," DeLaski argued, "[charter parents] have got more to fight for."

Not surprisingly, groups advocating for the expansion of school choice have found that the beneficiaries of existing voucher programs or charter schools are often the best source of activists to promote and protect choice policies. Rubin (GPAN) operates in a state that is not particularly friendly to charter schools. As such, she has found that "the biggest bang for the buck for me is to go to existing charter schools or new charter schools that are enrolling and try to meet parents there. . . . It's easier for me to try to engage parents who are already bought in, in some way, to the charter school idea."

Shree Medlock of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), a national group advocating for the expansion of school choice, has found that choice parents are also well-suited to motivate other parents who currently lack options. Medlock suggested that one of BAEO's strengths was connecting parents who have benefited from choice with those parents who do not have access to options. If you "mix the two," she says, the parents doing the testifying get even more excited about what they have, while those parents who do not have it "get engaged because they're hearing a story from the people that have [choice] and they're wondering why not." Medlock argued that this is a particularly potent strategy in a state like Louisiana, where New Orleans parents have access to a wealth of choice options whereas those who are just outside of the district's borders have very few. Testifying at public meetings not only helps motivate public school parents to push for more options, it also helps to engage the choice parents doing the testifying.

Lesson 3: Mobilizing Choice Parents around Systemic Reforms Is a Challenge. Some of the groups with broader reform agendas had a less sanguine view of choice parents as advocates for systemic reforms. Their arguments generally fell along

two dimensions. First, choice parents are typically satisfied with their schools, muting the incentive to participate. Second, many of the issues on the reform agenda are far removed from the day-to-day education in charter or voucher schools. Some do not even apply at all. Megan Irwin of Stand for Children, a national group whose issue agenda goes beyond choice, identified the tension between satisfaction and political action:

> We do target charter school parents. And I have to say with mixed results. . . . I think that charter school parents are just a little bit harder to organize because their kids, in general, have what they need. And so, the organizing seems to go a little bit slower unless there is an immediate threat to their ability to have their child stay in that school. Because, overall, parents who have gotten their kid into a great school are generally really happy.

David Pickens of DC School Reform Now, a group that works with public school parents who did not get their school of choice in Washington, DC, argued that relying on choice parents to push for district or state-level reforms poses a sustainability problem: "When parents are successful and their kids are being taken care of, it's really difficult to get them to be angry," he told me. While parents who are satisfied with their school might occasionally participate on the behalf of families that were not so lucky, this is not a long-term strategy: "Once they're satisfied with the education is when they become apathetic, in a broader sense. . . . And if they did care, why would they sustain it over a long period of time?"

Beyond the political inertia that can result from parental satisfaction, organizers also recognize that many of the broader reform issues currently on state and district agendas will have little bearing on choice schools. Some issues (like teacher tenure and evaluation) often do not apply to charter and private schools at all. Interestingly, as Williams (DFER) pointed out, charter advocates often expend political capital to ensure that some of these reforms do not affect charter schools. Even debates about expanding choice programs can be a step removed for parents who have already won a seat. So, while choice parents are easily stirred up by issues affecting their own school or choice program, organizing them around issues that go beyond the schoolhouse is typically a much more difficult lift.

Colleen Dippel, who works with waitlist parents as the founder of Houston-based Families Empowered, argued that charter school parents are usually only concerned about the subset of issues that are immediately relevant to their lives:

> I mean, the charter parents may be for lifting caps on charters, or equalizing funding or facilities funding. But in general, parents weren't saying "where can I sign up to do political activism?" There are a lot of political fights that just are not really relevant to day-to-day people, like curriculum fights or testing issues.

Sedlis (Success Academy Charter Schools) suggested that it has been challenging to get Success parents to advocate on reforms that go beyond the network's immediate concerns. Success first engages parents around what they call the three Fs—"our funding, our facilities, and our freedom." Only after parents are successfully motivated by these three school-level concerns does Success consider trying to mobilize them on broader reform issues. According to Sedlis, that last step is far from easy: "I would say it is difficult to organize parents around more abstract reform issues that they don't see having an immediate benefit to their child." For example, when there was a debate in New York City over mayoral control, the issue "was just a little far removed" from the immediate school context for most Success Academy parents. This made it more challenging for Success to explain to parents why it was important to advocate for mayoral control. On reforms that do not affect choice schools at all, motivating choice parents by invoking a broader sense of responsibility to the public school system is a difficult sell.

Many interviewees also recognized that parents have finite amounts of time and political capital, meaning that both parents and groups must prioritize what activities they take on. Magee suggests that one of 50CAN's goals was to unite disparate sets of parents, advocates, and stakeholders around a broader agenda, but admitted that this was not always a simple task. For parents in particular, their concerns for their child come first:

> I think the degree to which parent engagement in one area translates to another is a little up for grabs. . . . It may be that right now, if you're working two or three jobs, the thing that you can marshal your time around is to save your child's school—that coming out for a rally on another issue may just be one too many asks. So I think you naturally see a lot of fall-off between issues.

From a political science perspective, this pattern makes sense. Even the most active citizens have a limited stock of political capital and will be more likely to spend it on the issues that matter most to them. Organizing groups themselves are keenly aware of the potential for mobilization fatigue and have structured their behavior accordingly, conserving their resources to promote the goals at the core of their mission. Indeed, some of the interviewees representing school choice interests saw great risk in trying to broaden their mobilization agenda, arguing that asking their membership to engage on every issue could make them less likely to be available when they were truly needed.

Benjamin (Step Up for Students) identified this caution clearly, arguing: "We can't be all things to all people, so we take care of our own. . . . We have to make sure that we don't use up our human capital taking care of everyone's causes. . . . In good conscience I can't mobilize families just for a good legislative cause that doesn't affect the [Florida Tax Credit Scholarship] program." Dippel (Families Empowered) argued that providing parents with targeted, relevant information about and support for their child's education was a key to ensuring that the parents would "be the political advocates we'll need at the very specific times we need them." Targeting the issues that are directly relevant to parents is likely to be more productive than trying to build "quote unquote 'advocates' where we have to make up stuff to keep them engaged when there's nothing really going on."

DeLaski (StudentsFirst) had a somewhat different take. Her group discovered that charter school parents are ready and willing to advocate on other issues such as teacher effectiveness if they are asked. DeLaski suggested that the apparent difficulty in mobilizing choice parents around a broader agenda may be partly a function of the groups' concerns with their own political capital: "I think the argument that you're hearing . . . is coming from the activist organizers. They want to protect their capital. But the parents are willing to do more." With respect to charter school parents, DeLaski has found that they:

> are ready to be supportive and engaged in other educational reform issues. The piece that we've tested is 'are charter parents willing to come out in support [of] a lot of the teacher effectiveness issues that only really apply to traditional public [schools], and the answer is yes.

Organizers' concerns about broadening the issue agenda both reflect and reinforce the individual-level incentive for parents to engage on only those issues that affect their immediate self-interest. Parents may not have the time, interest, or incentive to rally for a policy change that will not affect their children's school. And if the advocacy groups are also being careful to avoid using up their political capital, they are likely to focus activity on their core concerns.

Lesson 4: Mobilizing Waitlist Parents Requires the Right Messenger. If successful school choosers are more satisfied and less likely to be concerned with issues that have little bearing on their school, what about waitlist parents? These parents are frustrated

and unable to exit, perhaps providing them with incentive to agitate for a number of reforms. Are waitlist parents a key constituency of the parent power movement? It depends on whom you ask.

The charter operators that I interviewed were generally pessimistic about the idea that they themselves could mobilize their waitlist parents to promote the expansion of school choice. Seth Andrew, superintendent of the Democracy Prep charter school network in Harlem, once thought "our political goldmine was going to be the waitlist." As he put it, "I thought you could tell parents, 'you got denied your right to a good school; why don't you help us get more seats so you don't have to be denied again?'" Andrew's hopes were tempered by the school's annual lottery. On Democracy Prep's lottery day, parents who do not win a seat are provided with a stamped postcard addressed to the speaker of the New York State Assembly, asking him to promote more charter schools. All parents have to do is fill out their name and drop the card in a box on the way out the door. Nonetheless, Andrew revealed:

> One thousand parents are there, we probably get one hundred or one hundred and fifty postcards. And it's a light lift; they fill it out and we mail it for them. This was not at all what they wanted to do. They probably thought, "You shut me down, and now you want my help?" I guess if you feel disenfranchised by the process, then the postcard seems unnecessary.

Sedlis (Success Academy Charter Schools) echoed Andrew's reluctance: "I would never organize our waitlist, because they've already lost. [In order] to organize people, they have to see a direct benefit." She went on to place waitlist parents at the bottom of the list of most likely advocates: "If I were to put into tiers who fights the hardest in the movement . . . I put parents on the waitlist who've lost the lottery at the very bottom." In the aftermath of a losing lottery try, the schools themselves become symbols of parents' disappointment. This suggests that CMOs are not the right messengers to channel waitlist discontent into reform energy.

Jeremiah Kittredge of Families for Excellent Schools (FES), a New York-based group that organizes charter parents for political activity, told me that the ability to mobilize waitlist parents depends on the message they receive and who they receive it from. According to Kittredge:

> We think a lot about what actually happens at the moment parents hear "no." What are you telling a parent who doesn't get in or is waitlisted? Better luck next time? Or are you telling them, "this is an incredibly important movement, those who get in and those who don't get in are helping to build it, here's what you can do to help create even more opportunities for families." The moment that matters is that first moment of rejection, when families must decide how to respond.

The key, Kittredge argues, is to build institutions that keep these parents involved and engaged: "Creating a chapter or a structure where people come to a meeting every month is better than calling them out of the blue a year later and saying, 'Hey, you applied to [a charter school] in 2009, right?'"

Families Empowered is creating this kind of structure in Houston. Because the group is not allied with a particular school or sector, they are not linked to the frustration that "lottery hopefuls" might feel toward the schools. Dippel (Families Empowered) argues that based on sheer numbers alone, "lottery hopefuls" are an underutilized resource—in many urban areas, far more families wind up on the waitlist than at a school of choice. Families Empowered is not yet an advocacy organization in the political sense, but a resource for parents. The group provides parents with information about their options, helps them apply, and connects parents with schools that have open slots. The hope is that as Families Empowered builds a relationship with their members by providing relevant, helpful information, when the group chooses to advocate for a particular

reform, they will be able to draw on their lottery-hopeful membership.

What Works to Mobilize Parents?

Lesson 5: Imminent Threat Is the Great Mobilizer. There are few foolproof ways to mobilize parents. But interviewee after interviewee suggested that imminent threats to schools or choice programs were the most powerful motivators of parental engagement. Some even suggested that urgency was often the only lever that would draw parents into activity. Rubin (GPAN) explained it as follows:

> I used to be very involved in fundraising for Israel. And you raise money for Israel when Israel's under attack. Bright sunny day and things are fine and quiet, you do OK. But when rockets flare and scud missiles land in your town, the floodgates open and people respond.

As in many other areas of public policy, when government action threatens to take benefits away, constituents can be mobilized to respond quickly and powerfully. Advocacy groups are pivotal in this process; they prod beneficiaries into participating by conveying a sense of urgency. As Medlock (BAEO) put it, parents must be constantly reminded of the fragility of school choice options: "You have to understand how this works. You can't wait until your program is in jeopardy, because your program is always going to be in jeopardy, always."

Many interviewees highlighted the work that Success Academy charter network has done to convey a sense of urgency and an "all-hands-on-deck" mentality to parents. Brian Carr of New Jersey-based Excellent Education for Everyone cited Success Academy's high conversion rate on mobilization efforts, chalking it up to the fact that Success parents "know from day one that their kid's school will be under siege." Carr argued that Eva Moskowitz, the school's founder, "knows how to tune into the fight or flight instincts of her school's parents. She makes education reform feel dangerous." Andrew (Democracy Prep) used a military metaphor, suggesting that the Harlem Success parents are at "Def Con 4" at all times.

The sense of imminent threat, according to Andrew, can be "a very effective tool—more effective than asking people to participate out of a sense of good citizenship." For their part, practitioners at Success Academy see the perennial presence of political opponents as both a curse and a blessing. Sedlis (Success Academy Charter Schools) reported that while it is a "nightmare" to deal with the constant political and legal challenges, "our parents see the opponents and they see the lies that they spread and it's a great organizing tool for us because it's not some anonymous force—the boogeyman shows up at a hearing about their school."

Other groups shared examples of when crises led to high levels of parent activism. In Denver, battles over the future expansion of charter schooling prompted a flood of activity by charter school parents. In 2010, when the successful West Denver Prep charter school applied to open a new campus, school board member Arturo Jimenez responded by proposing a moratorium on new charter schools.[32] Stand for Children's Denver chapter had been organizing charter and district parents for the prior year and were well prepared to respond to Jimenez's proposal. According to Irwin, Stand's Denver chapter was "able to successfully organize charter school parents and district parents around Stand's vision for reform and, when the moratorium was proposed, we were positioned to effectively mobilize against it. And that's a reflection of the power of proactive organizing combined with an imminent threat." In the face of the mobilization (which included both district and charter parents), Jimenez backed away from the moratorium idea.

Over a year later, the 2011 Denver school board election attracted national attention as a "showdown" between "reform-minded" candidates who supported rigorous teacher evaluation, school turnarounds, and expanded options and candidates endorsed by the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (including Jimenez) who opposed many of these ideas.[33] In the

context of this high-profile race, Stand for Children had considerable success mobilizing their membership in get-out-the-vote activities in support of candidates who supported school turnarounds. According to Stand's Colorado website, the group's members contacted over twenty-one thousand voters in the run-up to the election. In an interview, Irwin reported that Stand's conversion rate—the rate at which contacted parents participated in activities during the Denver race—was exceptionally high (65 percent).

Rubin (GPAN) described her group's response to a recent setback in Georgia. When the Supreme Court of Georgia deemed the state's charter schools commission unconstitutional, it left public school districts as the only charter authorizers in the state, threatening the expansion of the movement as well as the lifespan of existing charters that must be renewed. Charter schools and charter advocates responded immediately: "We had a rally within forty-eight hours of that decision," Rubin told me, "and now I have parents who are ready to throw Molotov cocktails because their schools are threatened."

Lesson 6: For Political Novices, Winning *Is* Everything. As McGuinn argues in his paper, one of the fundamental challenges that parent organizing groups face stems from the fact that disadvantaged communities often have low trust in government, little faith that they can affect policy change, and an active mistrust of outsiders. The common reformer's refrain "we're here to help" often sets off more alarm bells than welcome banners. This lack of trust and political efficacy is an obstacle to groups looking to organize parents. Organizers not only have to identify people, hand out flyers, and load buses; they must also try to influence parents' deeply ingrained attitudes toward the political system. Rayne Martin, director of Stand's Louisiana chapter, crystallized the problem, claiming, "it's absolutely reasonable that these parents would be suspicious about organizing for something different if they have never seen or been given something different or trusted the system to offer them something different."

Building efficacy and faith in political action is no small feat. One strategy that emerged from the interviews was to provide parents with regular opportunities to participate and achieve policy "wins," even on small matters. According to Sedlis, leaders at Success Academy try their best to ensure that new parents experience a successful mobilization effort early on, because "the best way to combat mobilization fatigue is to win. It will be discouraging to lose." When political novices see concrete proof that they have contributed to a victory, they will be more willing to participate the next time around. In contrast, a loss off the bat can lead to disappointment and frustration.

Van Keergbergen (DFER) argued that small-scale successes can encourage parents to become increasingly active:

> Local, immediate projects show them return on their investment. . . . You have to get a win on a short-term campaign. You need to show that you're getting there. That's part of their education, part of showing them that they can affect change. Maybe over time, as you show them what they're engaging in is getting results, they'll buy into other projects.

Ben Austin of Parent Revolution, a group that organizes parent trigger effforts, suggested that this evolution was one way to build parents up to the point where they are interested in engaging in higher-level policy debates: "You get people some success. And they build their skills. And they build their confidence. And they get a sense of efficacy. And that builds on itself. And then getting them to the point where [they say] 'wouldn't it be nice if we had a conversation about [last-in, first out]?'" Austin readily admits that "there's going to be some winnowing" because "some parents will not have the political capital or interest in participating."

These smaller projects also provide opportunities for parents to build their civic skills and get more comfortable with the peculiar demands of participation—for example, how to ask the right questions of policymakers and how to respond to tough questioning.

Many of the organizers I spoke to spend considerable time on professional development for their parent advocates, including everything from one-day "advocacy academies" to a multi-week course with formal curriculum (Parent Revolution) and "one hundred hours of rigorous instruction and field experience with expert professionals" (FES). The thought is that these skills—combined with efficacy-building experience—prepare parents to participate and increase conversion rates.

These approaches stand in stark contrast to the efforts that sometimes attract headlines—filling buses, packing capitol steps, or sending some pre-fab postcards. Many organizers concurred that going beyond these short-term activities to build a sustainable cadre of activists requires significant investments of time and resources and a different model of organizing.

Looming Challenges

The new parent power has had a hand in a slew of recent policy victories—raising charter caps, passing parent trigger laws, knocking down the teacher-data firewall. But the movement faces challenges, and there are legitimate questions about its staying power. Grass-roots energy is difficult to maintain over the long term, and lasting policy change requires a sustainable constituency. Three challenges stand out.

Challenge 1: Making the Leap from Self-Interest to Altruism. The agenda breadth discussion reflects the real puzzle for parent organizers: how can they push parents past an instrumental view of participation—I participate to help my kid—to an altruistic view of participation—I participate to help other people's kids who are not so lucky. "Altruists" do exist—economists using simple laboratory experiments to document how people will split benefits with others have found that a nontrivial number of subjects behave as altruists even when there is little economic incentive to do so.[34] Building on this work, political scientists have found that these altruists are also more likely to participate in politics.[35] Much less is known about how to encourage this kind of behavior, or whether it is even possible.

The need to push parents past their immediate self-interest to broader advocacy is not lost on the organizers I spoke with. Andrew (Democracy Prep) argued that this puzzle is critical to school reform: "Going from self-interest to interest in the success of others and the system as a whole is difficult. But successful social movements figure out how to make this leap." Derrell Bradford of Better Education for Kids, a New Jersey-based group that advocates for choice and tenure reform, suggested that this was partly a failure of choice advocates to focus energy on what happens *after* the choice is made. "When you buy a car, there's an understanding that you have to invest in maintenance," Bradford told me. "But in school choice, our message never goes beyond the transaction." As a result:

> [Advocates] can get people to a rally, we can get people to a board meeting, but can we get one hundred phone calls to board members? No way. There is no baseline understanding that as a recipient of school choice, your work does not stop when you get your kid into this charter or private school. You have a responsibility to protect that after you get your kid into school.

Van Keerbergen (DFER) agreed that "bridging the gap between local concerns and policy is the area that a lot of people struggle with. It's why the math in organizing is so difficult."

Organizers had various terms for this transition: moving people along the "curve of engagement" or taking steps up the "engagement ladder." What works to move parents in this direction? Most organizers admitted that this was a difficult puzzle to solve. But some cited the progress that Success Academy had made on this front: "[Eva Moskowitz] smartly engages parents in the idea that it's not just about you making the choice to send your kids

here," Irwin (Stand) told me. "It's about having a system that allows us to continue to do this for your kid and many other kids. She connects the dots. And she is really successful in mobilizing her parents."

How does Success move parents along the curve of engagement? Sedlis (Success Academy) described a strategy that capitalizes on social pressure to participate. Recall that political organizations often use interpersonal ties to set up a sense of obligation and expectation. People participate because "someone they know and respect" asked them to. Success Academy enlists parents who were active in earlier policy fights to motivate the newcomers: "We'll ask parents who fought the previous battles to speak to them and say 'you have the seat you're sitting in because we fought for them and we're going to keep fighting and our kids deserve this.' It's really to rally and inspire the parents," said Sedlis. The group also uses short videos that portray advocacy work from the past—trips to Albany, facilities hearings, and images of the opposition. "Witnessing the activism of their fellow parents is very exciting," said Sedis.

But not every parent needs to make this leap for the movement to survive, and most organizers had realistic expectations about how many parents would get there. Benjamin (Step Up for Students) calls his advocates "Spartans" in honor of "the three hundred"—"I'd rather have three hundred conscious, competent individuals than three thousand lukewarm people, people who I have to spend twice as much time trying to convince them to do something for their kids." As McGuinn's paper outlines, Stand for Children has built some of this natural segmentation into their organizing model, recruiting highly involved parents to serve as parent leaders, who then help to organize others at their school site.

Challenge 2: Moving from Picket Signs to the Ballot Box. There is a sense among some advocacy groups that parent organizing must move beyond temporary, sporadic activism—what McGuinn refers to as "astroturf"—to more lasting political activity. Rallies, shirts, and picket signs eventually fade, people get back on the bus, and the political world goes back to normal. If this grass-roots work is to have a lasting impact, some organizers argued, the focus must be more so on what politicians care about most—votes. The problem stems from the chronically low levels of voter turnout among low-income minority voters, particularly in local and off-cycle elections (like primaries). Mobilizing low-income parents for a rally or a lobby visit may have a momentary impact, but most lawmakers recognize that this demographic group is not likely to sway an election. Dippel (Families Empowered) spelled this problem out clearly: "But they don't vote. . . . If you really look at it, they're not voting on ballot measures. . . . They're not voting in local races. . . . They're not voting in statewide races. There may be energy around issues but that's very different from translating the energy into action that affects change."

Some groups have confronted this problem head-on by attempting to organize school choice parents into a group with real voting power. "Nothing is going to sway [a state assemblyman] like votes," Andrew (Democracy Prep) told me, "and there is some simple math here: how many dollars per vote does a local politician spend, and how many votes can our group deliver?" It is the latter piece of this equation that has largely been missing from the discussion. Parent organizing groups have generally focused on highly visible grass-roots activities and have done less in electoral politics (with the exception of Stand for Children, which has been very active in state and local elections). Because schools themselves are prohibited from mobilizing voters by their 501(c)(3) tax status, some advocates have created allied 501(c)(4) groups that can legally engage in electoral politics.

For example, Democracy Builders, a 501(c)(4) group created by Andrew, can legally support candidates, register voters, and electioneer because it is a distinct political organization. Democracy Builders organizes charter school parents from across the city to support and campaign for pro-charter candidates. In 2011, the organization left its mark on New York City politics, helping two upstart candidates for Democratic district leader and sixty-two candidates

for Democratic county committee score unexpected electoral victories. District leader is an elected position within the New York Democratic Party that has considerable sway in the nominating process, and there are two leaders per district. Democracy Builders' preferred candidates for district leader faced long odds: their opponents had been hand-picked by the Democratic establishment and endorsed by political giants like Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY) and Assemblyman Keith Wright. In one race, New York State Senator Bill Perkins, one of New York's most vocal charter opponents, encouraged and endorsed his own staff member to run. In the other race, the incumbent had held the post since 1993 and had never faced a serious challenger. Against these odds, both Democracy Builders-supported candidates for district leader won, as did sixty-two members on their County Committee slate. The *New York Post* headline declared a "Harlem Slap to Big Dems."[36] According to Andrew, the election was "proof of concept," meaning the question is no longer whether Democracy Builders can become a political force, but whether the group can be a player in larger local and state elections.

New York-based FES has a similar plan. The group works with eighty charter schools in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut to organize parents into chapters that will mobilize voters in state and local elections. Kittredge (FES) explained, "the long-term goal is demonstrating that charter families are built into an infrastructure that has political power. We want, over time, to be winning [a] certain number of races and then demonstrating turnout goals in larger citywide races." Like Stand for Children, Democracy Builders, and state-level parent unions, Families for Excellent Schools wants to build an enduring institution that can continue to attract and educate parents, support candidates, and turn out voters each year. Whether these groups can consistently wield real political power in city or statewide races remains to be seen.

Challenge 3: Navigating Parent versus Parent. In February of this past year, the *New York Times* SchoolBook blog described a scene that has become common in urban school reform:

> Gathered in the middle school's auditorium, nearly three hundred parents, students, teachers and advocates literally took sides: those who sported vibrant orange Success Academy spirit wear were on one side of the room, with a larger group brandishing red stop signs with the phrase "no to charter schools" sitting on the opposite side.[37]

Like any effective political movement, reform-minded parent power has generated a counter-mobilization of parents who support the status quo and have been encouraged by traditional education interests. From the perspective of advocates, this is a good sign—it shows that the establishment recognizes parent activists as a potent threat to the traditional balance of power in education politics.

At the same time, the counter-mobilization requires groups to deal with a new dynamic: divisive, parent-versus-parent policy debates that may be a hurdle to policy gains. Reform-minded parent groups are likely at their best when they face off against organized interests such as teachers unions or district management. It is the classic David versus Goliath story, one that puts Democratic politicians in the position of siding with "special interests" or their constituents. When the battle becomes parent versus parent, the political dynamics shift. In this case, taking one side entails putting one set of vocal constituents above another, which is a politically unpalatable spot. Williams (DFER) argued:

> There's an action-reaction dynamic to this parent organizing and mobilization thing. Once you get five thousand parents out, the unions will get five thousand parents out. Then it's parent versus parent, and parent versus parent lets politicians off the hook. It's easier to say "we're going to stick with status quo" when you have parents yelling at one another in public hearings. . . . Longer-term, these parent versus parent battles can detract from policy goals.

This dynamic played out firsthand on my visit to charter school advocacy day in Albany. I observed Democracy Prep parents ask a New York City assemblyman about his position on charter schools. He deflected the question by invoking a controversial collocation fight between a New York City charter and the public school that shared the same building. In the course of moving into the shared space, there was an incident in which public school personnel were unable to access the property, leading to charges that the charter school had locked out the public school. This anecdote became the centerpiece of the assemblyman's noncommittal response: "my problem with charter schools has been collocation. Where it has not worked it has been very divisive. When I see charters locking out parents from the public schools, I'm ready to go to war."

Confrontational politics effectively generate attention and showcase passionate parental engagement. And the counter-mobilization is a sign of the new parent power's increasing political relevance. But confrontations may also create political fallout. Organizing groups will have to navigate these tensions carefully in order to ensure their grass-roots activity continues to pressure lawmakers in a productive way. School choice is still controversial enough that necessary allies—particularly Democrats—may waffle at signs of trouble. Herein lies a key reason to shift toward electoral politics: so long as those parents who rally and debate also register and vote, politicians will have a harder time siding against them, however acrimonious the politics become.

What Comes Next? Three Questions for the Future of Parent Organizing

Question 1: Will Parent Activism Flourish in Cities Where Choice Is Plentiful? The tension between exit and voice raises questions about the prospects for grass-roots activism in cities with a lot of school choice options. While charter and voucher students make up a modest percentage of enrollments overall, in cities like Washington, DC; Dayton; Milwaukee; and New Orleans, schools of choice serve a sizable proportion—if not all (New Orleans)—of district students. Increases in the number of choice parents might reduce the critical mass of activists pushing for reform of the traditional public schools. Hirschman's theory of exit and voice identifies this as the "lazy monopoly" problem: for firms that can afford to lose some customers without going out of business, the opportunity for exit may actually be in the firm's interest. In this case, exit helps to rid the firm of its "more troublesome customers"—the most quality-conscious consumers who are also the most likely to use their voice.[38] With schools of choice taking on an increasingly large slice of the market in many districts, advocacy groups must figure out how to maintain an active parent voice in the presence of abundant opportunities for exit.

New Orleans tops the list of question marks. Post-Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has moved to a charter-heavy open-enrollment system, where most students attend charters. It has also become a hotbed for reform, attracting many of the organizations I interviewed. Martin (Stand) suggested that New Orleans would be an interesting experiment for parent organizers: "The challenge becomes what is the actual "hook" that you organize people around? . . . In most circumstances, that happens around something that is occurring badly or not occurring at all. [In New Orleans], you have a mass of folks who feel like their kid is getting a better education than they were before Katrina."

Expanding school choice opportunities is clearly a net gain for parents and students. But increased choice is unlikely to solve all of the district's problems, particularly if the quality of charter and voucher schools is uneven. Organizers will have to figure out how to maintain grass-roots pressure for reform in choice-heavy districts.

Question 2: What Will More Sophisticated Recruitment and Mobilization Efforts Mean for Parent Organizing? Parent organizing is a logistical challenge. Before you can mobilize people, you have to identify likely activists and contact them. In

earlier eras, advocacy groups had to rely on blunt tools to uncover activists—direct mail, advertising in mass media, or knocking on doors. But political campaigns have made great strides in what they call "microtargeting"—the use of sophisticated data analysis and modeling to identify likely activists based on fine-grained demographic and voter registration data. Using these techniques, political organizations have gotten much better at finding likely voters and activists, and better targeting allows organizations to deploy their resources more strategically. Some parent organizing groups are not far behind, borrowing sophisticated microtargeting strategies and experts from the campaign world.

For example, 50CAN is using "predictive modeling" to identify likely activists. The group collects data on who shows up, what the emerging advocates have in common, and how particular appeals work with particular types of parents. Through this institutionalized experimentation and research on what works, 50CAN could inform and improve its efforts down the line. Magee suggests that the group has learned quite a bit about the types of people who are likely advocates in search of opportunity. Citizens who have more education than is the norm in their neighborhood—as well as those who are already politically active—are good bets. These epiphanies are only possible through the systematic data collection and experimentation that is commonplace in political campaigns.

Groups are also importing human capital from professional politics. Parent Revolution's organizing director got his start organizing with Cesar Chavez, more recently serving as the state director for the Obama campaign in California. Van Keerbergen (DFER) brings his expertise from his position as Manhattan field director for Michael Bloomberg's reelection campaign. Once the 2012 campaign wraps, campaign strategists will find a willing audience in these parent organizing groups.

As parent organizing groups get savvier and more sophisticated in their targeting, they may find it easier to locate likely parent activists, even those who are buried in traditional public schools that are typically difficult to find. Groups with broader issue agendas may become somewhat less reliant on the choice networks that they currently leverage to reach parents (charter networks, churches), particularly if choice parents are more difficult to turn out on issues like teacher effectiveness, governance reform, and increased accountability.

Question 3: Is Parent Organizing a Product of the Times? Parent activism has played a role in a series of important policy victories, from changes to charter caps in a number of states during the lead-up to the Race to the Top to parent trigger laws in California, Texas, and Mississippi. The recent voucher and parent trigger law passed in Louisiana is the latest in a series of wins. But parent organizers have also taken a few lumps of late—a failed push for the parent trigger in Florida and a shelved tenure reform bill in Connecticut.

It is tempting to conclude that the high-profile victories, particularly around Race to the Top, were the result of the political pressure generated at the grassroots. But it is also important to remember that there were many other forces at play—shifts in elite opinion on charter schools and teachers unions, large federal "carrots" to be had in exchange for state policy reform, and the reform energy unleashed by the election of a reform-friendly Democratic president. In other words, the flurry of reform activity between 2009 and 2011 took place in what political scientist John Kingdon calls a "policy window"—a moment in political time when policy entrepreneurs have a rare opportunity to pair up solutions (reform ideas) to identified problems.[39] The push for reform around Race to the Top represented such a policy window.

It would be a stretch to suggest that this policy window has closed. Evidence from districts and states across the country indicate otherwise. But it does seem reasonable to conclude that opponents of popular reforms like expanded choice, tenure reform, and teacher evaluation have counter-mobilized, perhaps making policy victories tougher to come by no matter how great the demonstration of grass-roots support. As Williams (DFER) put it,

grass-roots organizing effectively "shows people that you are in the game," but it is unlikely to drive policy change in and of itself.

Some of the education reform ideas at the core of these advocacy groups' agendas have enjoyed a privileged position in the spotlight and the support of powerful political allies. The question is how advocacy groups will respond to changing political circumstances and the inevitable challenges to momentum and engagement that these changes can bring. Building a sustainable movement will require that groups and parent activists are able to weather these storms.

Conclusion

In the end, though, worries about counter-mobilizations, political setbacks, or activist fatigue are actually a mark of how far the movement has come. The fact that any parents—let alone hundreds of engaged, confrontational parents—are out there advocating for education reforms is a major accomplishment.

There is clearly much work to be done. Organizers often talk of the "silent majority" of citizens in school districts—polling data suggests that most citizens favor a broad reform agenda, but their voices and clout are still drowned out by reform's opponents. When activated on the right issue, parents who have benefited from school choice can lead this charge. But real questions remain as to how broad that list of "right issues" can be, partly because too few groups are really testing the limits of parental engagement. As Andrew (Democracy Prep) told me, "it is sad to think that we are on the cutting edge of [grass-roots organizing]. We're not doing anything all that different." Given the attention the new parent power has garnered of late, this is bound to change. And with more time, additional success, and further experimentation and study, this movement will generate important lessons about parental engagement and its impact on policy in the years to come.

Appendix:
Interviews Conducted for This Paper

Seth Andrew, Founder and Superintendent, Democracy Prep Public Charter Schools, February 7, 2012

Ben Austin, Executive Director, Parent Revolution, February 14, 2012

Michael Benjamin, Vice President, Grass-Roots Advocacy and Outreach, Step Up for Students, January 30, 2012

Derrell Bradford, Executive Director, Better Education for Kids, February 6, 2012

Brian Carr, Director of Design and New Media, Excellent Education for Everyone, February 6, 2012

Kathleen DeLaski, Senior Strategy Adviser, StudentsFirst, February 21, 2012

Colleen Dippel, Founder, Families Empowered, January 5, 2012

Megan Irwin, National Program and Expansion Director, Stand for Children, January 20, 2012

Jeremiah Kittredge, Founder and Executive Director, Families for Excellent Schools, April 25, 2012

Marc Porter Magee, President and Founder, 50CAN, May 15, 2012

Rayne Martin, Executive Director, Stand for Children Louisiana, January 23, 2012

Shree Medlock, National Advocacy Director, Black Alliance for Educational Options, January 12, 2012

David Pickens, Executive Director, DC School Reform Now, February 3, 2012

Nina Rubin, Director, Georgia Parent Advocacy Network, January 4, 2012

Jenny Sedlis, Cofounder and Director of External Affairs, Success Academy Charter Schools, February 3, 2012

Patrick van Keerbergen, Field Director, Democrats for Education Reform, February 8, 2012

Joe Williams, Executive Director, Democrats for Education Reform, February 6, 2012

Notes

1. See Patrick McGuinn's companion paper on this subject for an analysis of the ERAOs themselves.

2. Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 223.

3. Sidney Verba, Henry Brady, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 16.

4. Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010).

5. Jan Leighley, "Attitudes, Opportunities, and Incentives: A Field Essay on Political Participation," *Political Research Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (1995): 181–209.

6. *Voice and Equality*, 329.

7. Melissa Marschall, "Does the Shoe Fit? Testing Models of Participation for African American and Latino Involvement in Local Politics," *Urban Affairs Review* 37, no. 2 (2001): 227–48.

8. Steven Finkel, "Reciprocal Effects of Participation and Political Efficacy: A Panel Analysis" *American Journal of Political Science* 29, no. 4 (1985): 891–913, www.stevenfinkel.info/files/Finkel%201985.pdf (accessed July 10, 2012).

9. Rodney Hero and Catherine J. Tolbert, "Minority Voices and Citizen Attitudes about Government Responsiveness in the American States: Do Social and Institutional Context Matter?" *British Journal of Political Science* 34 (2004): 109–21.

10. Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (Longman, 1993), 175–76.

11. Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America, 239–41.

12. The strategic behavior of advocacy groups and political parties also helps explain the strong relationship between SES and participation. If the affluent are much more likely to be mobilized, then much of their participation advantage stems from the behavior of mobilizers, not their income or education.

13. For more information on busing, see Donald P. Green and Jonathan Cowden, "Self-Interest and White Opposition to Busing," *Journal of Politics* 54 (1992): 471–96. For information on school finance referenda, see Kent Tedin, Richard Matland, and Kent Weiher, "Age, Race, Self-Interest, and Financing Public Schools Through Referenda," *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1 (2001): 270–94. For information on smoking restrictions and cigarette taxes, see Donald P. Green and Elizabeth Gerken, "Self-Interest and Public Opinion Toward Smoking Restrictions and Cigarette Taxes," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1989): 1–16.

14. Andrea Campbell's study of Social Security beneficiaries finds that low-income seniors are more likely than their higher-income peers to participate in "Social Security-oriented" activities. See Andrea Campbell, *How Policies Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

15. Joe Soss, "Lessons of Welfare: Policy Design, Political Learning, and Political Action," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 2 (1999): 363–80.

16. Andrea Campbell, "Participatory Reactions to Policy Threats: Senior Citizens and the Defense of Social Security and Medicare," *Political Behavior* 25, no. 1 (2003).

17. Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider, *Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 242.

18. See James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). In a recent panel study of

parental choice, Cox and Witko found that parents in Catholic schools were much more likely to participate in school-level activities and that those parents whose children switched from a public to a private school experienced large increases in participation over time. See James H. Cox and Christopher Witko, "School Choice and the Creation of Social Capital Reexamined," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 1 (2008).

19. Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

20. Ibid, 37.

21. Ibid, 43. Emphasis in original.

22. Ibid, 47.

23. Ibid, 102.

24. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

25. Thomas Stewart et al., *Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas School Choice Demonstration Project, 2009).

26. Ibid.

27. Justine Hastings et. al., "The Effect of Randomized School Admissions on Voter Participation," *Journal of Public Economics* 91 (2007).

28. *Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?,* 232.

29. *Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?*, 271.

30. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes throughout this paper derive from personal author interviews.

31. Cox and Witko, "School Choice and the Creation of Social Capital Reexamined."

32. *Denver Post* Editorial Board, "Don't Ban New Denver Schools," *Denver Post*, March 18, 2010.

33. Sean Cavanaugh and Stephen Sawchuk, "Outside Advocacy Groups Target Local School Board Elections," *Education Week*, May 21, 2012, www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/23/32adv-local.h31.html (accessed July 10, 2012).

34. Colin Camerer, *Behavioral Game Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

35. James H. Fowler and Cindy D. Kam, "Beyond the Self: Social Identity, Altruism, and Political Participation," *American Journal of Political Science* 69, no. 3 (2007): 813–27.

36. Jamaal Nelson, the candidate supported by Democracy Builders, told the *New York Post*, "We did the unthinkable, we beat the machine." Ginger Adam Otis, "Harlem Slap to Big Dems: Newbies Upset Backed Foes," *New York Post*, October 2, 2011, www.nypost.com/p/news/local/manhattan/harlem_slap_to_dem_bigs_cc1USp5mElx3toLzSL595N (accessed July 10, 2012).

37. Chelsea Rose Marcius, "Huge Turnout over New Williamsburg Charter School," *New York Times* SchoolBook Blog, February 17, 2012, www.nytimes.com/schoolbook/2012/02/17/huge-turnout-over-new-williamsburg-charter-school/ (accessed June 28, 2012).

38. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, 60.

39. John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Longman: 1989).

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