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Parents, with the help of education organizing, are among those striving to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for children in low-income communities.

Summit offers lesson plan for improving teacher quality

BY DUANE M. ELLING

Now, more than ever, a child's educational experience shapes his or her economic and social future. And among the factors influencing that experience, the research is clear: Good teaching weighs in more than most factors.

Yet many large urban and small rural districts — which are often home to the most hard-to-staff schools — struggle to recruit teachers who are capable of creating inspiring and effective learning environments, and who will make long-term commitments to those underserved communities. Traditional approaches to recruitment often have been costly and, even more disheartening, unsuccessful.

Now, many residents from these communities are looking to themselves and their neighbors to bring high-quality teachers to their classrooms. Their grassroots-driven approach demonstrates the power of low-income people to address the concerns affecting their families and neighborhoods.

These were some of the lessons learned by an audience gathered in Chicago on a brisk January day as part of a community summit on the “Grow Our Own Teacher” alternative teacher education initiative. The program is designed to create sustainable pipelines of high-quality teachers for underserved communities by helping parents and other residents, as well as paraprofessionals already working in local schools, become certified teachers in their own neighborhood schools.

The summit focused on building public awareness and support for the creation of seven model Grow Our Own programs within the metropolitan Chicago area and elsewhere in the state. Action by state policymakers on a proposal for \$10 million in state support for the programs is expected later this year.

Understanding the role of education organizing in achieving meaningful school change was a fundamental goal of the almost 30 guests of the Working Group on Education Organizing (see box, page 3) who attended the meeting and related activities.

These representatives from philanthropy saw how the strategy engages parents and other community members in public decisionmaking on issues of schools and education. They also learned how the resulting networks of relationships among communities, schools and public officials can lead to successful collaboration on needed reforms, including improvements in teacher quality. (See sidebar, page 8.)

Also among the more than 100 people present at the summit were representatives from Chicago’s public school system and area institutions of higher education; participants and leaders from other alternative teacher education programs; several Illinois legislators; and members of the Chicago Learning Campaign, the community-based partnership that is leading the call for the Grow Our Own programs.

The learning campaign’s partners are the Chicago-based Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a national network of urban school reform leaders; Designs for Change, an educational research and advocacy organization in Chicago; Illinois Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a network of neighborhood-based community organizations; and Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), a community organization of low- and moderate-income residents living in a northwest neighborhood of the city.

Madeline Talbott, executive director at Illinois ACORN, told the audience the summit was part of a long-standing grassroots



Nueva Generación participants joined the summit’s call for Grow Our Own-style programs.

Working Group guests attend summit

The opportunity for representatives from the field of philanthropy to attend the Chicago Learning Campaign's "Grow Our Own Teachers" summit — as well as participate in several learning activities related to education organizing and issues of teacher quality — was coordinated by members of the Working Group on Education Organizing.

The working group helps staff members of foundations and other philanthropic institutions educate themselves about education organizing and school reform. It is sponsored by Grantmakers for Education (GFE), a national network of nearly 200 foundations, corporate-giving programs and individual donors working to strengthen philanthropy's capacity to improve educational outcomes for the nation's students.

Funding and technical support for the working group's attendance at the summit were provided by the Ford,

Edward W. Hazen, Walter S. Johnson and Mott foundations, and the Woods Fund.

The working group's attendance and activities were planned by Lori Bezahler (Hazen Foundation), Susan Cahn (UJA-Federation of New York), Cris Doby (Mott Foundation), Cyrus Driver (Ford Foundation), Mary Heidkamp (Dynamic Insights International), Regina McGraw (Wieboldt Foundation), Chris Tebben (GFE) and Susan Adler Yanun (Steans Family Foundation).

This report, produced by Mott, reflects the Foundation's longstanding belief in the importance of quality educational opportunity and organized social action as strategies for helping low-income individuals and communities lift themselves out of poverty. Mott grantmaking in the areas of education organizing and reform — via its Pathways Out of Poverty program — has totaled more than \$27 million since 1990.

campaign in Illinois to strengthen educational opportunities, particularly for children of color and those living in low-income communities.

"We know that teachers who develop the right tools and right approach to the classroom can have a tremendous impact on kids and their desire to learn. The data also tell us that teachers who have a deep respect and commitment to the community where they work are much more likely to stay. Grow Our Own graduates succeed on both counts."

Efforts to recruit and retain high-quality teachers for underserved and hard-to-staff schools in Chicago reflect a rising national tide of community action on issues of school performance, access and equity, and the critical need to improve the capacity of all children to succeed in — and beyond — the classroom.

TEACHER QUALITY AND RETENTION

The members of Illinois ACORN are well acquainted with issues of teacher quality and retention, and the resulting impact on the education of young people. A 2003 report by the organization found a 23 percent turnover rate among new teachers at public schools in five low-income Chicago neighborhoods during the 2001-2002 school year.

The summit's audience learned that while the economic costs of such turnover — including expenses for the recruitment, hiring and orientation of new candidates — are significant, of much greater concern are the educational and social prices paid by students demoralized by a "revolving door" of teachers passing through their schools.

Denise Dixon, a member of Illinois ACORN and past president of the organization, said in a pre-summit workshop that even before that report's release, parents and residents in the neighborhoods studied had expressed growing doubt about teacher quality in local schools.

They began visiting their children's classrooms and, based on their first-hand observations — including the use of outdated teaching methods, the prevalence of an uninspiring learning environment and a general sense of resistance to parental involvement — they concluded that the quality of classroom instruction was an urgent concern.

They decided the community needed to play a role in the selection of new teachers if a more effective and relevant academic culture was to evolve. Residents — with the help of Illinois ACORN — then met with school officials and worked out a plan for joint participation in the teacher selection process.

However, a new set of concerns soon surfaced. Numerous teacher candidates turned down interviews after learning they would be working in low-income neighborhoods, and many of those who did accept teaching positions soon left for communities more culturally and economically similar to their own hometowns. Even intensive efforts by residents and the schools to help new teachers feel welcomed and needed seemed to have little impact on turnover rates.

Dixon noted that, instead of focusing on issues of blame or frustration, residents held neighborhood "listening sessions" to explore possible solutions. They also studied existing



Susie Huizar

alternative teacher education programs — such as Project *Nueva Generación*, a Grow Our Own-style initiative in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood — as possible models.

Nueva Generación (New Generation) helps local Latino adults work on the necessary educational and certification requirements to become bilingual teachers. The program, launched in 2000, is a collaborative effort of LSNA and the bilingual education program at Chicago

State University (CSU).

Thirty-seven participants are enrolled in the program, each with the goal of teaching in Logan Square's hard-to-staff schools. Several — like Susie Huizar — attended the Grow Our Own summit and offered compelling stories of their desire to improve educational opportunities for local children.

Huizar began *Nueva Generación* in 2000 after working several years in her children's classrooms as a parent mentor. The mother of three, who currently is employed as a teacher assistant while she continues her studies, noted that many parents know she is a *Nueva Generación* participant and ask when she will be finished.

"I tell them that I'm working on it and they say, 'Come on, we need you, we want you to teach our kids!' That makes me feel really good, because it shows that they have confidence in me and trust me. And I also feel that I'm helping them to see that they can do it too."

Huizar hopes to complete her studies and certification by 2006.

Stories like Huizar's led Illinois ACORN members to an important realization: The individuals prepared to make a commitment

to neighborhood schools and students already existed among local parents, residents and school paraprofessionals.

“The people we needed were living in the community; they knew the community and were invested in it,” Dixon said. “We also realized that if we wanted to improve teaching in our schools, then we had to invest in the people who wanted to be those teachers. That’s when we decided to ‘grow our own.’”

Even as the Grow Our Own concept was taking root in Chicago, another similar program was in full operation more than 600 miles away.

The North Carolina Model Teacher Education Consortium, launched in 1989, has helped more than 600 school paraprofessionals — including substitute teachers, clerical employees, teaching assistants and other non-certified staff — obtain degrees and licenses in teacher education. It also has provided “lateral entry” assistance to nearly 250 individuals who had obtained their degrees prior to

entering the program, but were in need of licensing.

Jean Murphy, executive director of the consortium, attended the Chicago summit to share lessons learned from the North Carolina program, including the challenges and benefits of Grow Our Own-style programs.

She reminded the audience that the purpose of such initiatives is to create an alternate path for qualified individuals from low-income and underserved communities to gain entry into college and university-level teacher education and certification programs. They are not detours around such programs, she emphasized.

Furthermore, before graduates can be certified, they must meet the same educational and training standards as any other teacher candidate. The emerging success of that approach, Murphy noted, is evident in the quality teachers now working in low-income communities served by the North Carolina consortium.



WGEO guests, parents and teacher candidates discuss issues of teacher quality.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND EDUCATION REFORM

Traditional approaches to education reform often suggest that change is best coordinated through the decisionmaking authority of school or public officials, that field research yields the most consistently effective reforms, and that providing schools with improved resources and strategies leads to a culture of change.

However, Jeannie Oakes, presidential professor in educational equity at the University of California-Los Angeles, said after the summit that those models — largely adapted from the business world — offer a prescribed set of solutions without accounting for unique local needs. Furthermore, she noted, they fail to consider the intimate, and often delicate, relationships between schools and the communities they serve.

Education organizing, Oakes said, not only accounts for such factors, but also calls upon the community to identify both its education-related concerns and the appropriate reforms to address them. This “social movement” approach, she said, helps the community become the driving force behind the reforms and leads to changes that are significantly more genuine, effective and sustainable.

“As organizers and community members engage each other and the local school system in dialogue, and as they gather research,” Oakes said, “they frequently come up with reform alternatives that are quite different — and often more relevant — than what educators or policymakers are likely to develop on their own. The organizing then helps shape the substance of the reform.”

Finally, by helping residents of low-income neighborhoods create, direct and achieve sustainable school reforms, education organizing illustrates the legitimate



Community members outline the importance of Grow Our Own-style programs in recruiting committed, quality teachers.

role and power of those communities in tackling issues that affect them.

“By affirming that legitimacy, the traditional deficit assumptions about poor people — what they care about, what they’re capable of, what they want for their children and how hard they’re willing to work — are significantly challenged,” Oakes said.

Such lessons were illustrated when several presenters noted the important role that organizing activities in Illinois — such as the Chicago Learning Campaign — have played in calling attention to issues of teacher recruitment, quality and retention.

As early grassroots interest in Grow Our Own program expanded, Dixon and other Illinois ACORN organizers realized that transforming the idea into a functional — and fundable — strategy required buy-in from the Chicago school system, the teachers’ union, institutions of higher education and state legislators.

Bringing that support to the table, while

maintaining a strong community-driven agenda, eventually resulted in the Grow Our Own summit.

PARTNERSHIPS LEND STRENGTH

The role of community-based partnerships in achieving progress on issues of teacher quality was a significant theme throughout the meeting.

Elizabeth Skinner, *Nueva Generación's* coordinator at CSU, pointed to LSNA's dedication to bringing the voices of parents and other residents to the decisionmaking process, as well as its reputation for building relationships based on trust and mutual respect, as key reasons the university decided to join that collaborative.

Jan Booker, an ACORN leader from the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago and herself a retired teacher, said the success of *Nueva Generación* — and of the supporting partnership — offered an important reference point for the emerging Grow Our Own collaborative.

"They each came to the table with a belief in the Grow Our Own program and with the support of parents and the communities," she said. "But they also knew that many other partners were needed to make the agenda work. Their success in bringing those partners together is evident here today."

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was one of those partners represented at the summit.

Albert Bertani, chief officer for professional development at CPS, noted that Chicago school officials recognize the importance of working on teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in low-income communities.

He said school system administrators view the situation with particular concern, given the anticipated retirement of many "baby boomer" teachers, as well as federal No

Child Left Behind legislation, which mandates that the nation's public schools hire only highly qualified teachers and instructional support staff by 2006.

Bertani described the powerful case made by the Chicago Learning Campaign for the Grow Our Own program. He also pointed to the determined but open manner in which the collaborative approached school officials, noting that such a strategy was critical to spurring the productive discussions that followed.

"Working together on this project has given each of us the shared role and responsibility for improving learning and teaching in classrooms in schools across the city. And that is our collective goal, to ensure that all the children of Chicago receive the best education possible."

Talbott, in a post-summit debriefing, said the collaborative's success in bringing partners like CPS on board can be attributed to the community's identification of a proven, viable and relevant solution, and its commitment to sitting down with decisionmakers and discussing the actions needed.

"Once that commitment was there, we helped them organize and get ready to call on the decisionmakers. And because they were prepared, because they knew their issue and the solution they wanted — and were committed to both — they gained the decisionmakers' respect. And that respect is key to educating and bringing them to your side."

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Understanding the nature of sustainable, meaningful education reform — and the reasonable expectations for emerging teacher education programs like Grow Our Own — was another set of important lessons that emerged.

Discussion explores relationship of education

When asked what basic lesson the nation's grantmakers should know about education organizing, Madeline Talbott, executive director of the Illinois Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), appeared thoughtful for a moment.

"I think it would be the relationship between power and community change," she said.

"If you have the power of a lot of money, then you can buy the change. If you have the power of a lot of people, then you can push for the change. In organizing, we generally don't have much extra money, so we focus on the pushing."

Her response elicited laughter from the nearly 30 people, many from the philanthropy field, in the room. Each was either a member or guest of the Working Group on Education Organizing — sponsored by Grantmakers for Education — and had gathered to discuss the next day's Grow Our Own Teacher summit.

Cristine Doby, a program officer at the Mott Foundation, said that in order for grantmakers to grasp fully the nature of

education organizing, they first must evaluate their own views of influence, power and expertise — including who possess them — and their theories of how social change occurs and becomes sustainable.

"We have to be clear that community residents are the only ones who can decide what is important to them and what they will invest time and energy in. We can't point to something that is working in another community — no matter how great it might be — and say, 'This is what you should be doing.' People will take action and stay engaged if they name the problem and help design solutions that incorporate their own unique needs and strengths."

Lori Bezahler, program officer for the public education program at the Edward W. Hazen Foundation in New York City, said that if funders hope to support sustainable educational reforms, they must be aware of the long-term investments in relationship- and resource-building that precedes them.

"Ultimately we need to pay attention to the difference between funding a short-term fix and supporting the development of a

Chris Brown, director of the Schools and Community program at Cross City Campaign, noted in a pre-summit presentation that much of the progress on issues of teacher quality in Chicago is not the result of a sudden burst of community interest and involvement. Instead, it is one product of a long-standing effort by organizers, parents and concerned residents to build a foundation of community-based research, analysis, power and change.

Brown said organizations like Illinois ACORN and LSNA have spent years working with residents to identify education-related concerns and explore relevant solutions. For

some in the community, those issues are as simple as posting a crossing guard at a busy street or serving healthier school lunches.

But as residents take up those issues, many find themselves — for perhaps the first time in their lives — involved in a coordinated effort to bring about change in their schools and neighborhoods. And as they experience those modest wins and realize their potential for turning concerns into solutions, they gain the confidence and capacity to take on more substantial issues, such as teacher quality.

"You really empower people when they can win something," Dixon said. "It doesn't

organizing, philanthropy

constituency that is engaged and that has the power to change the system," she said.

Regina McGraw, executive director of the Wieboldt Foundation in Chicago, said helping organizers forge meaningful partnerships is just one area where funders can be of great assistance.

"We can also help build their capacity to create forums for the voices of their members, places where they can take their anger and frustration, and translate it into energy for positive change. And we can help them develop the leadership and civic participation that can sustain that change for years to come."

Cyrus Driver, deputy director for the Ford Foundation's Education, Sexuality and Religion unit, remarked on the significant rise in recent years of new education-organizing initiatives, including many that focus on issues from the perspective of a specific population, such as youth, rural communities or people of color. He pointed out that such growth offers increased opportunities for a broad range of grantmakers to become involved in education organizing.

"If funders explore the many types of education organizing that are under way, the various organizations that are doing the work and the geographic regions where the work is taking place, there is a very good chance that they will find a grantmaking opportunity that matches their own priorities."

Talbott agreed with Driver and said funders interested in supporting education organizing, but uncertain if it is a good organizational fit, might consider its alignment with a basic goal of many grantmaking institutions: building public will. She illustrated her point via the summit's planned call for legislative action on the Grow Our Own campaign.

"The idea is that tomorrow we will have created a real buzz among the decisionmakers and people will be saying, 'Have you heard about Grow Our Own? What a great idea!' If that happens, then we'll have people who are thinking on the same page, wanting the same thing and ready to make it become a reality. That's building public will and that's what organizing is all about."

matter how small that win is, because if they have done it for themselves, then they are like, 'OK, what are we going to do next?' And now they're engaged in their community, sharing their stories and serving as role models for their neighbors, who then want to become involved. And then, just watch their power grow!"

Brown pointed to the Grow Our Own campaign and the summit itself as evidence of this changing paradigm in school and community relationships. Prior to that, he said, parents and residents were often angry and frustrated over issues of teacher quality, but

they didn't feel that school officials would offer them a listening ear, much less a helping hand.

"Now, educators are beginning to see the community as a part of the solution to improving teacher quality, and the community is recognizing that it has the power to bring those improvements forward. The entire conversation has been turned on its head, and the potential for meaningful change is incredible."

Several presenters also noted that long-term investments are needed to achieve sustainable and relevant school reforms, and that the impact of those reforms on issues of



Barbara Eason Watkins, chief education officer for Chicago Public Schools, was one of the many to support the Grow Our Own initiative.

teacher quality and student achievement may take time to emerge.

Murphy said communities and collaborative partners on such interventions as Grow Our Own must allow the appropriate relationships to mature and strengthen, and participants to begin working their way through the programs.

“They have to realize that it may take several years for your first teaching candidates to graduate with a degree, particularly if they are starting from scratch,” she said.

“But what is equally important for them to remember is that once you get that pipeline flowing, there will be a steady stream of people going through the program and becoming teachers each year. And if you are patient and stick with it, those rewards will start to appear.”

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

As Talbott and other supporters of the Grow Our Own campaign spoke at the summit, a sense of growing momentum filled the room. A large cardboard panel placed near the speakers’ table read: “I support the principles of the Grow Your Own program and will work to pass Grow Your Own legislation” and “I will work to implement a Grow Your Own program at my institution.”

A steady flow of individuals from the audience began approaching the microphone

amid growing applause to offer their support for the Grow Our Own initiative and to sign their names under one — or both — commitments.

Prior to offering her signature, Barbara Eason Watkins, chief education officer for CPS, said she and other Chicago school officials are “proud to partner with our community-based organizations. We will work with them to support legislation and policy changes to facilitate implementation of Grow Our Own programs and to ensure that we have high-quality teachers in our schools.”

“We cannot fail in this mission,” she said as members of the audience cheered. “But we cannot succeed if we don’t work together.”

Likewise, Illinois State Sen. Miguel del Valle declared that the region’s need for programs like Grow Our Own had been well documented, and he pointed to the *Nueva Generación* participants as emerging evidence that community-based interventions offer significant hope.

“We have many talented individuals who, if given the opportunity, can become certified and highly qualified teachers. But it takes commitment and partnerships with community-based organizations and making sure that the necessary support from all levels — local and state — is there in order to convert this into a reality.”

For Talbott, such commitments from key officials, as well as from parents, residents and other community members, foster not only an air of excitement, but also a foundation of accountability for future action. She explained that while the Grow Our Own model is relatively new and its long-term impact on teacher quality and student achievement still a matter of study, each person who spoke up for the program that day made a public promise to support quality educational experiences for all children in Chicago's public schools.

And as advocates look for the Grow Our Own legislation to be acted upon this year by the state, Talbott notes it is the power of the community — harnessed through education organizing — that will ensure such promises are kept.

“When we are developing high-quality teachers from the community, we will be developing people respectful of the students, community and families and who know how to build relationships and a relational culture. That’s what organizing is and does, so who better to accomplish it?” ■

Related Resources

ON THE WEB

Brief profiles of five participants in two current and potential alternative teacher education programs are available online at mott.org. In addition, an interview with Jeannie Oakes, presidential professor in educational equity at the University of California-Los Angeles, on the field of education organizing soon will be available at mott.org.

Other resources providing information on alternative teacher education programs, education organizing and school reform on issues such as teacher quality include:

- Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now: www.acorn.org
- Cross City Campaign: www.crosscity.org

- Designs for Change: www.designsforchange.org
- North Carolina Model Teacher Education Consortium: www.ncmtec.com
- Working Group for Education Organizing: www.edfunders.org/about/wgeo.asp

PUBLICATIONS

Mott Mosaic, Vol. 1, No. 2 (December 2002). The cover article in this magazine discusses the use of community-driven school reform, with an emphasis on what is happening in Miami. The publication also features a profile of the Future Minority Teachers Initiative, a Flint, Michigan-based program designed to encourage minority youth to consider teaching in local schools as a career. Available at mott.org for downloading or ordering.

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