

Ernesto Cortes, Jr.

Ernesto Cortes, Jr. is the Southwest Regional Director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, IAF, a non-profit organization founded in Chicago by the late Saul Alinsky. The southwest region includes over 23 community-based organizations, stretching from New Orleans to Des Moines to Los Angeles.

A native of San Antonio, Texas, Cortes is a graduate of Central Catholic High School in San Antonio, and Texas A & M University, where he majored in English and Economics and graduated at the age of 19.

Cortes studied Economics at the post-graduate level at the University of Texas at Austin under Professors Vernon Briggs, Ray Marshall and Dan Morgan. However, his interest in social justice through community organizing, coupled with the death of his father, led him away from scholarly endeavors. As a student activist on the board of the University YMCA, he organized the statewide support group for the farmworkers union, and initiated the successful statewide caravan in support of striking farmworkers at La Casita farms in the Rio Grande Valley.

Between 1969 and 1972, Cortes served as deputy director of economic development and housing for the Mexican American Unity Council in San Antonio, Texas. During this period he was also on the Board of Managers of the Bexar County Hospital District.

Cortes' affiliation with the IAF officially began in June of 1972 after he attended the organization's leadership training institute in Chicago. After training, Cortes worked with IAF leaders in Wisconsin and Indiana for a year developing his skills as a community organizer.

In 1974 Cortes moved to San Antonio where he put together a sponsoring committee and then organized the San Antonio Communities Organized for Public Service, COPS, the well-known and highly successful church-based grassroots organization of San Antonio's west and south side communities. In 1977 he moved to Los Angeles, California, where he organized UNO, the United Neighborhoods Organization, another broad-based, church-sponsored community organization in East Los Angeles.

In 1978, Cortes founded The Metropolitan Organization, TMO, in Houston. In 1982 he founded Valley Interfaith in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Together with COPS in San Antonio, these organizations were the beginning of what is now called the Southwest IAF Network. Cortes was also instrumental in founding and supervising the other organizations that have since joined the network: El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization, EPISO; Allied Communities of Tarrant, ACT, in Fort Worth, Texas; Metro Alliance in San Antonio; Austin Interfaith Sponsoring Committee; Fort Bend Interfaith; The Border Organization of Eagle Pass and Del Rio, Texas; Dallas Area Interfaith; Pima County Interfaith Council, PCIC, in Tucson, Arizona; Valley Interfaith

Project in Phoenix, Arizona; East Valley Interfaith Organizing Effort in Tempe, Arizona; Albuquerque Interfaith in New Mexico; Omaha Together One Community, OTOC, in Nebraska; The Jeremiah Group in New Orleans, Louisiana; Triangle Interfaith Project in southeast Texas; A Metropolitan Organizing Strategy, AMOS, in Des Moines, Iowa; and the West Texas Organizing Project. The organizations of the Southwest IAF Network are estimated to have a combined leadership of over 25,000, and represent over a quarter of a million families.

The IAF organizations work together, on regional as well as state-wide levels, to revitalize local democracies and thereby bring change to poor and moderate income communities. The organizations help ordinary people develop the competence, confidence, and leadership to be, as Thomas Jefferson said, "participants in the affairs of government". As leaders in their communities, these ordinary people identify and take action on issues of importance to their neighborhoods, such as the equalization of funding for public schools, school restructuring to improve student learning, indigent health care, job training, and economic development for high wage jobs.

In particular, the leadership of the Texas organizations led to the approval by Texas voters of \$250 million in grants and low-interest loans to build water and sewer systems in the 400-plus unincorporated rural communities, called *colonias*, along the border. The colonia legislation was initiated and promoted by the Texas IAF Network in collaboration with the elected leadership of the state, the Texas Water Development Board, and local providers. The IAF organizations in south Texas have used the state's initial investment to leverage another \$200 million in local and federal funds, for a combined investment of over \$450 million in infrastructure improvements in the colonias.

The IAF's organizing in Texas has also produced results in the area of jobs and job training. The San Antonio organizations pioneered a model job training program in 1993: Project QUEST, Quality Employment through Skills Training. Project QUEST represents a collaboration between the San Antonio IAF organizations, the business community, the City of San Antonio, the State of Texas, and the San Antonio Works board. Together these entities pledge high skill, high wage job opportunities, several million dollars in annual operational funding, and the sweat equity of hundreds of leaders from San Antonio's working families, all of which has helped almost 600 previously unemployed or underemployed adults obtain high-skill, high-wage jobs or prepare to pursue higher education full-time at the bachelor's level. The success of Project QUEST has led other organizations in the network to pursue similar job training strategies: Valley Interfaith created the Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA), Dallas Area Interfaith created Workpaths, ACT in Fort Worth created Synergy, and the organizations in Tucson, Phoenix, Austin and El Paso are currently developing strategies.

Public school reform has been another successful area for Cortes and the organizations of the IAF in the southwest. For Cortes, public education has always been a particular passion because of the vital role it plays in creating and maintaining a vibrant civic culture.

In 1984, the organizations in Texas were instrumental in passing state legislation in support of reforms to improve public education and to raise new funds for poor schools. This legislation increased public funding for schools by \$2.8 billion, with poor school districts receiving the largest increases.

In addition, Cortes envisioned and launched an innovative education initiative to engage communities in public education. The goals of the initiative were to identify and train parent and community leaders to change the culture of schools, and to build a broad constituency of support for education reform both locally and statewide. Initially serving 12 school districts and 27 schools in Texas, the initiative has expanded to include approximately 35 districts and 250 schools in four states, including New Mexico, Arizona and Louisiana. In Texas, the initiative, called the Alliance Schools, has developed into a partnership between the network organizations, community and business leaders, school district officials, the Texas Education Agency, and school campus teachers, staff and parents. The Alliance Schools' impact has been evidenced by a substantial and sustained increase in student achievement, as measured by higher scores on Texas' standardized skills assessment test and improved attendance records.

The successful efforts of the IAF Network have been recognized in numerous books, including *Who Will Tell the People* by William Grieder (1992), *Community is Possible* by Harry C. Boyte (1984), the *State of Families, 3* by Ray Marshall (Family Service America, 1991), *Thinking for a Living* by Marc Tucker and Ray Marshall (1992), and *A World of Ideas, II* by Bill Moyers (1990). Several recent books highlight the success of Alliance Schools initiative: *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* by Dennis Shirley (1997) and *Teaching the New Basic Skills* by Richard Murnane and Frank Levy (1997). The network's work also has been featured in several PBS documentaries, including *The World of Ideas* series and *Surviving the Bottom Line* by Hedrick Smith. *Cold Anger*, a book by Mary Beth Rogers, provides a history of the IAF and Cortes' development as an organizer and leader in the southwest. Cortes and the work of the network also have been featured in numerous magazines and newspapers including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Texas Observer*, *Texas Monthly*, *The Boston Review*, *Education Week*, and *Educational Leadership*.

Cortes has been awarded several fellowships in recognition of his accomplishments in the field of community organizing. In 1984 the MacArthur Foundation named him a fellow. In 1993 he was a fellow at the John F Kennedy School of Government, Institute of Politics at Harvard University. Most recently he completed a year-long fellowship as a Martin Luther King Jr. Visiting Professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Cortes also has received numerous awards for his work, including: The Common Cause Public Interest Achievement Award (1990); Texas Catholic Conference Award (1991); Frankie Randolph Social Justice Award (*Texas Observer*, 1990); Esquire Register Honoree (1988); Excellence in Organizing Award (IAF, 1990); Tom Harris for Community Service Award (Corporate Fund for Children, 1995); George I. Sanchez

Memorial Award (National Education Association, 1997); Human and Civil Rights Award (Texas State Teachers Association, 1997). Most recently, Cortes was awarded the H. J. Heinz Award in the category of Public Policy.

Cortes currently serves on a variety of commissions and boards, including: the Aspen Institute Domestic Strategy Group, the Public Education Network, the National Commission on Civic Renewal, the Task Force on Reconstructing America's Labor Market Institutions, the Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy Advisory Board, the Economic Policy Institute Board of Directors, and the Union Theology Seminary Board of Directors. He is a past member of the Pew Forum for K-12 Education Reform, Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, and National Board for Progressive Teaching Standards, and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

Cortes is married to Oralia Garza and is the father of three children: Ami, Alma Ester and Jacob Josue.

(May 1998)

Reweaving the Social Fabric

Ernesto Cortés, Jr.

MORE THAN 50 years ago, Saul Alinsky founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Currently directed by Ed Chambers, IAF is now the center of a national network of broad-based, multiethnic, interfaith organizations in primarily poor and moderate income communities. These organizations are renewing their local democracies: fostering the competence and confidence of ordinary citizens so that they can reorganize the relationships of power and politics and restructure the physical and civic infrastructure of their communities. To that end, IAF provides leadership training for nearly 40 organizations representing over 1,000 institutions and one million families, principally in New York, Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nebraska, Maryland, Tennessee, and the United Kingdom.

The San Antonio-based Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) is the oldest of these 40 IAF institutions. It is also the most established, and so provides an especially striking illustration of IAF's organizing techniques. To explore those techniques, though, we need first to understand some fundamentals about the terrain on which IAF and COPS operate.

Why a New Democracy?

The quality of urban life has deteriorated sharply over the past 20 years. The problems — hunger, homelessness, unemployment, violence — are overwhelming and many well-intentioned people have tried to address them in isolation. Such piecemeal approaches, though, cannot get at the mutually reinforcing and cumulative impact of these problems. Instead they contribute to our political incompetence and lack of political imagination.

Because our political system has failed to address urban decay seriously and effectively, much of our adult population is convinced that politics is largely irrelevant to their lives. And this alienation has impoverished public discourse itself.

At first glance, a discussion about the decline of our political institutions and public discourse may seem out of place in a description of more tangible social and economic decay. Yet one of the most important causes of American poverty is the inability of working people to absorb the costs of contemporary economic and political change. A dynamic economy always imposes such costs, and those who are the least political — the least articulate, least connected, least

well-organized — invariably bear an inordinate share of the burden. While the free market has an important place in society, it must be kept in its place by civic institutions. When those institutions fail to buffer citizens from the market, the effects show up at the bottom line: real income in the United States has been declining since 1973, with the most serious effects visited on the incomes of the less well-educated.

The federal government has done little to alleviate these troubles. Federal support for cities declined dramatically in the 1980s while changes in tax policy overwhelming-

of income. They are a crushing burden on the soul, and people who suffer under their weight often view themselves as incapable of participating in the civic culture and political community. This sense of self makes broad-based institutions extraordinarily difficult to create. But no transformation of the human spirit can proceed without the development of practical wisdom and meaningful collective action through the practice of collaborative politics.

True politics is not about polls, focus groups, and television ads. It is about engaging in public discourse and initiating col-

are political beings — that a part of us emerges only through participation in public life — Wolin emphasizes our capacity to initiate action in collaboration with other human beings. Such action often has an element of public drama. But in the IAF, political action is more than drama. It combines the symbolism of active citizenship with real political efficacy, creating the opportunity to restructure schools, revitalize neighborhoods, create job training programs, increase access to health care, or initiate flood control programs.

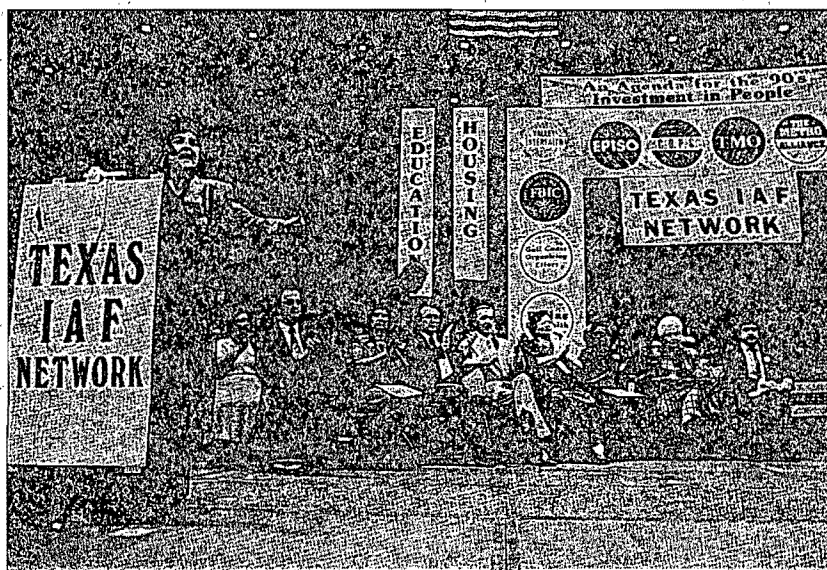
In addition to tangible improvements in public services, such politics recreates and reorganizes the ways in which people, networks of relationships, and institutions operate: it builds real community. As social beings we are defined by our relationships to other people — family and kin, but also the less familiar people with whom we engage in the day-to-day business of living our lives in a complicated society. But when people lack the organizations that enable them to connect to real political power and participate effectively in public life, these social relationships disintegrate. We learn to act in ways that are not responsive to our community. There is no time and energy for collaboration, no reciprocity, no trust — in short, no social capital.

To reverse the current dissolution of community, we need to rebuild social capital, to reinvest in the institutions that enable people to learn, to develop leadership, and to build relationships; to become, in Jefferson's phrase, "participants in the affairs of government." What IAF has found is that when people learn through politics to work with each other, supporting one another's projects, a trust emerges that goes beyond the barriers of race, ethnicity, income, and geography: we have found that we can rebuild community by reconstructing democracy.

COPS in San Antonio

For decades the city of San Antonio "managed" the demands of the poorer sections of the city by successfully splitting the population geographically — making secret deals with one neighborhood in order to prevent it from joining forces with others. The IAF developed COPS to provide an alternative strategy and an alternative public space. The idea was to give people in San Antonio the opportunity to have conversations away from the city government, to negotiate and deliberate with each other based on a larger framework of shared values, vision, and a commitment to agitation for change.

As lead organizer, I conducted more than 1,000 individual meetings during the initial months of the COPS organization. Through this first round of meetings, we



The Network of Texas IAF organizations held its first convention in 1990

ly benefited the rich. In part as a consequence of those policies, the after-tax income of the richest one percent of American families grew 75% during the last decade, while the bottom 60% of families actually experienced a decline in income. The purchasing power of the minimum wage has plummeted, too, falling from its 1968 peak of \$6.13/hour (in 1993 dollars) to today's \$4.25/hour. This development has pushed more people below the poverty line, and left those above it without time or energy for their children or families, let alone their communities.

So the distribution of the costs of change is a matter of politics, not simply economics. Political and social renewal, however, are rarely discussed as means for alleviating these costs. We focus on results rather than causes. But while the resolution of broader crises does require attention to immediate issues, short-term solutions will have only limited success without corresponding long-term changes in our social and political institutions.

Politics, Community, and Organization

The IAF approach to institutional change recognizes that problems such as poverty and unemployment are not simply matters

of collective action guided by that discourse. In politics it is not enough to be right, or to have a coherent position; one also must be reasonable, willing to make concessions, exercise judgment, and find terms that others can accept as well. So politics is about relationships that enable people to disagree, argue, interrupt, confront, and negotiate, and, through this process of conversation and debate, to forge a consensus or compromise that makes it possible for them to act. The practical wisdom revealed in politics is equivalent to good judgement and *praxis* — action which is both intentional and reflective. In *praxis*, the most important part of the action is the reflection and evaluation afterward. IAF organizations hold "actions" — public dramas, with masses of ordinary people moving together on a particular issue, with a particular focus, and sometimes producing an unanticipated reaction. This reaction in turn provides the grist for the real teaching of politics and interpretation — how to appreciate the ensuing negotiations, challenge, argument, and political conversations.

In *The Presence of the Past*, Sheldon Wolin describes our birthright as our political identity. Echoing Aristotle's idea that we

Carrie Laughlin, a member of the Texas Interfaith Education Fund research staff, made significant contributions to this article.

Photograph: Alan Page

identified potential leaders and invited them to participate in a second and third round of "one-on-ones." This group was then asked to hold a series of house meetings. As it turned out, the leaders in the congregations were also the leaders in the youth organizations, PTAs, and unions. And they began to agitate not only their fellow congregants, but their neighbors and co-workers.

Congregation and university. COPS, like all IAF organizations, is primarily a federation of congregations, connected to institutions of faith and agitated by their traditions. In this context, "faith" does not mean a particular system of religious beliefs, but a more general affirmation that life has meaning. Congregations convey traditions which connect people in the present and hold them accountable to past and future generations. These institutions — churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples — are built on networks of family and neighborhood. Tragically, they are virtually the only institutions in society that are fundamentally concerned with the nature and well-being of families and communities.

The root of the word "religion" is *re-ligare*, which means to bind together that which is disconnected. The best elements in our religious traditions are inclusive — respecting diversity, and conveying a plurality of symbols which incorporate the experiences of diverse peoples. The mixed multitudes in Sinai and Pentecost are central to the Judeo-Christian tradition; they represent the constant incorporation of different traditions in our social and political fabric.

Religious faith, history, and tradition are important because they embody the struggles of those who have gone before — their struggles, both, to understand and to act. Others have made efforts, and with mixed results. Reflecting on those efforts, one learns not to take oneself too seriously, and to recognize the limits of what can be accomplished in a lifetime or in a generation. Moreover, traditions — to the extent that they are meaningful and useful — provide a framework for dealing with ambiguity, irony, and tragedy.

In addition to their connection with communities of faith, IAF organizations such as COPS also serve as "mini-universities." Our organizations have multiple agendas, traditions, independent dues-based financing structures, and include a wide variety of individuals. Like universities, broad-based organizations provide arenas in which people can engage in constrained conflict, opening the historical contradictions within and among our traditions to inquiry and reflection.

A common error in teaching history is to present conflicts as having been fully reconciled — either through war, the threat of war, or compromise. In the IAF, we teach people to understand the strains of controversy within our traditions and history — strains which must be managed, but are unlikely ever to be resolved. While repressing controversies can lead to war, acknowledging and welcoming them within a framework for debate helps us to temper conflict to a manageable level. In short, COPS provides a civic education, as well as a philosophic one, enabling people to conduct their lives effectively and to build and sustain their communities.

Delivering goods. For 20 years, COPS's focus has been on developing a strategy to re-build the infrastructure of its inner city

community. With its sister organization, the Metro Alliance, COPS has brought over \$800 million of streets, parks, housing, sidewalks, libraries, clinics, streetlights, drainage, and other infrastructure to the poor neighborhoods of the inner city. San Antonio's Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG), organized by COPS and the Metro Alliance into an effective, accountable entity, has been recognized nationwide as a model CDBG project.

The federal government's CDBG program — instituted in 1974 to replace numerous federal categorical programs with a single, flexible grant to cities — has been a steady, though small and diminishing, source of funds for the redevelopment of inner cities across the country. COPS and the Metro Alliance have ensured that funds in San Antonio are used carefully and effectively, maximizing expenditures for durable capital improvements and minimizing the demands on CDBG for ongoing operating expenditures of city and private agencies. During the last two decades, only three percent of San Antonio's CDBG funds have been spent for administration and planning.

COPS leaders organize the annual CDBG process, in which residents of eligible neighborhoods meet in homes, schools, and churches to draw up lists of potential projects. The cost of the projects is always three or four times their neighborhood's CDBG allocation. So people begin their bargaining, trimming some projects and delaying others in exchange for mutual support. They proceed from house meetings concerned with one street or drainage issue, to neighborhood meetings proposing a package of projects, to meetings in each City Council district to shape a proposal with the Council member. Then, in collaboration with the Council member, community leaders finalize the selection of the year's projects. COPS leaders have incorporated into the organization's collective culture the expertise not only to plan projects, but to negotiate and facilitate the bargaining among neighborhoods.

By leveraging both public and private moneys, IAF organizations in San Antonio have helped working families build more than 1,000 units of new housing, rehabilitate 2,600 existing ones, and purchase 1,300 more. Beyond these new homes and infrastructure, however, the most important accomplishment of the IAF organizations is the development of non-traditional leaders in historically disenfranchised communities.

Leadership. IAF leaders begin their development in one-on-one conversations with a skilled organizer. These conversations represent an exchange of views, judgements, and commitments. IAF organizers see themselves as teachers, mentors, and agitators who constantly cultivate leadership for the organization. Their job is to teach people how to form relationships with other leaders, and develop a network, a collective of relationships able to build the power to enable them to act. Leaders initially learn politics through conversation and negotiation with one another — as in the CDBG process. As they develop a broader vision of their self-interest, they begin to recognize their connections and their responsibilities to each other and to the community.

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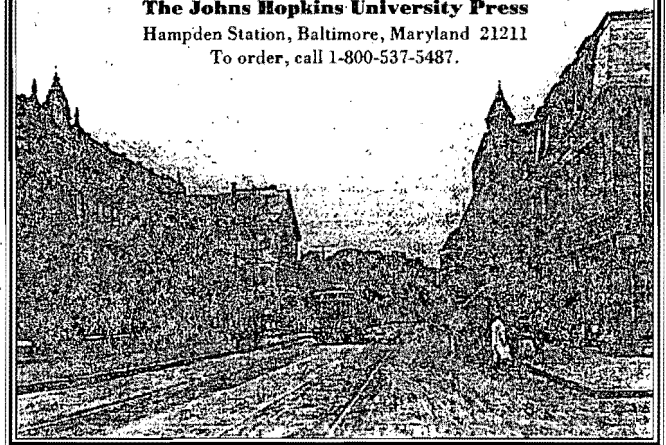
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small, winnable issues — fixing a streetlight, putting up a stop sign — they move carefully into larger problems — making a school a safe and civil place for children to learn. And then to still larger issues — setting an agenda for a municipal capital improvement budget, strategizing with corporate leaders and members of the City Council on economic growth policies, developing new initiatives in job training, health care, and public education. When ordinary people become engaged and shift from political spectators to political agents, when they begin to play large, public roles, they develop confidence in their own competence.

Virginia Ramirez is one of those leaders. She was angry at the injustice in her neighborhood — at watching a neighbor die because she did not have heat in the winter — but was afraid to speak out because she felt she wasn't educated. COPS taught Mrs. Ramirez to tap into her anger and forge it into a tool. She learned to speak publicly, to lead, to take risks with herself, and to guide others. The IAF process taught her to develop relationships within which she could challenge the indifference and apathy of corporate and government officials. She learned how to negotiate with the powerful: to compromise, to confront when necessary, and to rebuild collaboration. She gained the confidence to negotiate with the City Council and mayor. She went back to school at age 44, earned her General Equivalency Diploma, and entered college.

Virginia Ramirez — now president of her parish council and a co-chair of COPS — represents her community at the negotiating table with San Antonio's corporate, financial and municipal government leaders. She is a mentor for young leaders, some of whom are the sons and daughters of COPS founders.

Power and the Iron Rule. Most people have an intuitive grasp of Lord Acton's dictum about the tendency of power to corrupt. To avoid appearing corrupted, they shy away from power. But powerlessness also corrupts — perhaps more pervasively than power itself. So IAF leaders learn quickly that understanding politics requires understanding power.

A central element of that understanding is that there are two kinds of power. Unilateral power tends to be coercive and domineering. It is the power of one party treating another as an object to be instructed and directed. Relational power is more complicated. Developed subject-to-subject, it is transformative, changing the nature of the situation and of the self. The IAF has spent 50 years teaching people to develop

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such relational power, mastering the capacity to act, and the reciprocal capacity to allow oneself to be acted upon.

Relational power is both collectively effective and individually transformative — think again of Virginia Ramirez. The potential of ordinary people fully emerges only when they are able to translate their self-interests in issues such as family, property, and education into the common good through

an intermediary organization. Each of the IAF's victories is the fruit of the personal growth of thousands of leaders — housewives, clergy, bus drivers, secretaries, nurses, teachers — who have learned from the IAF how to participate and negotiate with the business and political leaders and bureaucrats we normally think of as our society's decision-makers.

Living by the Iron Rule — "Never do for others what they can do for themselves" — COPS and the IAF have won their victories not by speaking for ordinary people but by teaching them how to speak, act, and engage in politics for themselves.

The Role of Government

Reinvigorating urban life requires a new vision of civil society, appropriate to contemporary challenges. To be sure, government has an essential role to play in democratic renewal. After two decades of neglect, we need more public investment in housing, education, infrastructure, health care, and job training. But we also need to learn to think differently about the public sector and its relationship to the civic culture.

Government can no more create political entrepreneurship than it can create economic entrepreneurship. It cannot "empower" people, because power cannot be bestowed. Government can facilitate, encourage, and recognize grassroots organizing and local initiatives with an institutional base rooted in people's imagination and values, but it cannot and should not create organizations and initiatives. When the government funds local organizing, those "grassroots" efforts will continue only so long as the public dollars continue to flow. And no organization funded by the government is going to be truly agitational about using public funds more effectively. (The government is not going to fund a revolution against its own status quo.) To ensure ownership of broad-based organizations by the community, those organizations must be self-supporting. The Iron Rule applies to institutions as well as to individuals.

The IAF has developed an innovative proposal for a more constructive role for government in fostering effective local initia-

tives that are grounded in grassroots, democratic institutions. We propose that the federal government structure a grant-making strategy to leverage the commitments of states, local municipalities, private sector corporations, and communities. Centered in the White House, the initiative would make a significant block of money available to communities over and above their categorical allotments for major public investment. Essentially, the federal government would provide matching grants for local investments of money, resources, and "sweat equity." To be eligible, a city would have to develop a strategic plan demonstrating effective collaboration with a truly broad-based organization, and developing innovative training programs to prepare and employ the poor and working poor in jobs connected to both the private sector and public investment. Additional money would be available for strategies grounded in sustainable development, and that have environmentally sensitive foundations. But the funds must not go to the broad-based organization itself.

Granting additional money to cities in which such strategic organizing is taking place should generate interest in other places, thus facilitating the diffusion of a new institution-building process. It is important, however, not to repeat the mistakes of past strategies designed to promote social renewal — either expanding too quickly or spreading funding too thinly. An initial target of 15 to 20 moderately large cities, with a smaller second tier made up of sections of the largest urban areas (e.g. boroughs, recognized communities, unincorporated areas) would be optimal. Despite IAF's presence in some of the largest urban areas of the nation, it would be a mistake to tackle entire cities such as Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago before establishing a record of success. As with any organizing strategy, it is best to begin with smaller, more winnable issues before moving to the most complex, comprehensive, and daunting ones.

The Democratic Promise

To rebuild our society, we must rebuild our civic and political institutions. Under conditions of social fragmentation, it is a daunting challenge. People in modern industrial societies are atomized and disconnected from each other. And far too much of the American search for "fulfillment" is centered on the individual, encouraging utilitarian and narcissistic relationships. Such fragmentation leaves people increasingly less capable of forming a common purpose, much less collaborating in its implementation.

The rehabilitation of our political and civic culture requires a new politics, with authentically democratic mediating institutions — teaching, mentoring, and building an organized constituency with the power and imagination to initiate change. The work of IAF is to establish a public space in which ordinary people can learn and develop the skills of public life, and create the institutions of a new democratic politics. With organized citizens and strong mediating institutions, our communities can address structural inequalities of the economy for themselves, restore health and integrity to our political process, mitigate the distortions created by organized concentrations of wealth, and — in the end — reclaim the vision and promise of American life.

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DEMOCRATIC PROMISE

The maldistribution of power in American politics—embedded in the governing processes, reinforced by inequalities of private wealth, protected by the existing relationships—is not the last word. In scattered places, a vibrant minority still believes in the idea of democracy and acts as though its promise is still possible to fulfill. Where would one find these faithful? In the most unlikely places.

Some are in the drug-ridden neighborhoods of Queens and the South Bronx or the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Some are in the Mexican-American neighborhoods of East Los Angeles. Others live in the west side wards of San Antonio and the black neighborhoods of Houston and the border towns strung across south Texas. Some are in Jersey City and Baltimore, Memphis and Prince Georges County, Maryland, suburb to the nation's capital.

They are not running anyone for public office or even thinking about doing it. For them, democracy means building their own political organizations, drawing people together in a relationship that leads to real political power. In a sense, they are reinventing democracy from the ground up, starting in their own neighborhoods.

In Brooklyn, people first came together in 1978 as East Brooklyn Congregations, sponsored by Catholic and Protestant churches, a synagogue and

two homeowners' associations. After years of patient conversations and thousands of meetings, they were, among other things, building homes for real people. Their Nehemiah project has built two thousand moderately priced houses in Brooklyn. Their accumulated political clout arranged a patchwork of public and private financing that provided low monthly mortgage payments for the buyers.

In Southern California, three allied organizations turned out seven thousand people to lobby Sacramento in a successful campaign to push up the state's minimum wage.

In Texas, a statewide network of ten such organizations has won state legislation for health care for the indigent and \$100 million in financing to build sewer and water systems for impoverished migrant-worker settlements in the Rio Grande Valley.

In Baltimore, a citizens' organization called BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development) canvassed neighborhoods on their political priorities and drafted its own agenda for the city—education, housing, jobs—then collected endorsements from seventy thousand citizens. One political candidate embraced BUILD's agenda as his own and he became the first black mayor of Baltimore.

These victories and many others, though real and substantial, do not quite capture the essence of what these people are attempting: the reconstruction of democratic values in their own lives. Jan Wilbur, a leader in a multiracial Houston organization known as TMO (The Metropolitan Organization), expressed the idea at a meeting of the ten allied Texas groups:

"While the Founding Fathers spoke those values, they did not live out those values. What we're trying to do has never been done before. We're trying to make those values that we've heard all our lives into something real. That's radical and new."

Father Leo J. Penta, a priest who is active in the East Brooklyn organization, described the organizing process as "weaving a network of new or renewed relationships" among alienated and powerless people. The undertaking begins, he said, with "the wounded and struggling institutions which mediate relationships: families, congregations, churches, workers' organizations, civic and cultural associations." The objective is "to establish islands of political community, spaces of action and freedom in the sea of bureaucrats, political image mongers and atomized consumers."

Skeptics, of course, dismiss this sort of politics as hopelessly old-fashioned and impractical in the age of mass media and high-tech campaigns. But what these people from different parts of America have come to understand is a basic idea nearly lost in American democracy: Politics begins in personal relationships. Indeed, without that foundation, politics usually dissolves into empty manipulation by a remote few. People talking to one an-

other—arguing and agreeing and developing trust among themselves—is what leads most reliably to their own political empowerment.

That is the core of what's missing. In an earlier era, the kind of community organizing these people have undertaken would have aroused immediate suspicion and probably hostility from existing political parties. But that no longer happens. Arnold Graf, an organizer who helped to launch several of these organizations, described the reality:

"When I'm out organizing in a community, I always feel like I'm in a vacuum. There's nothing to hook up to. There's no political party or labor movement. We're trying to imagine what all those organizations would do for people because none of them exist. People are just out there—lost.

"In places like San Antonio or Baltimore, we are as close to being a local political party as anybody is. We go around organizing people, getting them to agree on an agenda, registering them to vote, interviewing candidates on whether they support our agenda. We're not a political party, but that's what political parties used to do."

All of these organizations and a number of others are linked by a national organization and a common heritage—the inspiration of Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation. Alinsky created a national team of organizers in 1940 to help low-income communities discover their own political power. He is another important model for contemporary citizen politics, like King or Nader. The community-organizing approach to politics lost favor after the 1960s, partly because the federal government borrowed loosely from Alinsky's ideas and corrupted them in the "community action" programs of the war on poverty. The notion that the government could sponsor citizen organizations in opposition to itself—or that entrenched power would allow them to succeed—was a doomed concept from the start.

A University of Chicago sociologist, the charismatic Alinsky developed his own version of "rude and crude" politics during the 1930s and, for several decades, showed poor people in Chicago and other industrial cities how to use confrontational strength against City Hall and the political establishment. Alinsky-style organizations multiplied for a time but many did not endure, especially after his death in 1972.

The Industrial Areas Foundation lived on, however, and contrary to popular impressions, it has flourished, though its methods are now quite different. During the two decades when conventional politics was atrophying, the IAF organizations began to grow rapidly as its conception of democracy spread to more and more communities. IAF organizers launched a dozen or so organizations between 1973 and 1985, then doubled that number in the next five years. It now has twenty-four organizations in seven states, encompassing twelve hundred congregations and associations with nearly two million mem-

bers, plus another five or six communities that are in the formative stages. By 1996, it hopes to be operating in fifteen or sixteen states.²

Alinsky's radical conviction is still the core premise. He believed that the ignored and powerless classes of citizens are fully capable of assembling their own power and leading their own politics. But the modern IAF has transformed Alinsky's fractious style into a deeper and more patient understanding of human nature. It does not start out with a "policy issue" or political purpose. It starts with conversations in people's homes. It does not spring itself on a city or town, but begins by establishing relations with the enduring community institutions that people rely on—churches and synagogues and civic associations, from Catholic bishops to black Baptist ministers. The modern IAF, unlike Alinsky, espouses a political doctrine that is rooted in the language of the Gospels.

Edward T. Chambers, an Alinsky protégé who is now IAF executive director, explained the approach to the *Texas Observer*:

"Our culture is very simple. We start with family, a congregation. We start with the teachings of the Bible. We start with basic values that are given us. Then we try to practice a genuine democracy—not the artificial democracy of the sound bite."

What exactly does that mean? "You believe that men and women are the most precious treasure this country has," Chambers said, "and the most important thing we can do is to develop them, let them grow, let them flower, let those talents flourish."³

This version of democracy still makes house calls—thousands of "house meetings" held in private homes—where organizers get to know people and their ideas for the community and, in passing, scout for those who will become the community's leaders. The organization, as it develops, gives the people a regular place to meet and discuss their ideas with others—a place that belongs to them, not to someone else. Conventional politics no longer fulfills either of these functions, but then neither do most of the prominent organizations in citizen politics.

In other words, this politics starts with people—not scandalous revelations or legislative crusades, not candidates or government agendas, but ordinary people. The overriding political objective, whatever else happens, is to change the people themselves—to give them a new sense of their own potential.

One Alinsky principle, known to all IAF members as "the Iron Rule," is frequently invoked during their meetings: "Never do anything for someone that they can do for themselves: Never." The organizations, for instance, are launched with financial aid from the sponsoring parishes and churches, but the members must immediately develop their own capacity to be self-sustaining and financially independent.

Their concept of the political arena echoes the theology of Paul Tillich—a realm ruled by both power and love. "The world as it is—that's power," said Ernesto Cortes, Jr., the lead organizer for the IAF Texas network. "The world as it should be—that's love."

A citizen schooled in democracy understands that he or she must live comfortably with both forces. "We learn that power and love go together," Cortes explained, "that they are conjugal, that they both come of the need to form relationships." In a sense, that is a more erudite way of saying that self-interest and competing moral claims must become fused in order to produce effective political action. The definition also provides a way to escape the confinements of "purity" that the modern political culture has taught citizens to accept for themselves.⁴

This language has a resonant quality for contemporary America because, in general, Americans are obsessed with the question of "relationships." The bestseller list is dominated by how-to books on the subject; television talk shows and popular experts endlessly examine the dimensions of personal loneliness, alienation, addiction and the frayed bonds of kinship. The popular obsession with relationships, however, is usually grounded in a narrow and egotistical context—repairing one's relationships with husband or wife or lover, with children or parents, even with one's own true self.

The IAF theology of politics asks people to think of relationships in a context larger than themselves. Politics, after all, was originally understood as a process through which people would work out the terms for living with one another—the shared rules and agreed-upon commitments of the social order. A successful family that is bound together by trust and loyalty and mutual purpose can be thought of as an intense microcosm of a larger society that has developed the same capacities. If families are wounded and struggling in modern America, so too is the political order.

The two realms—the personal and the political—are, in fact, intimately related, since much of what decimates contemporary family life originates in the matters that are decided by the larger political realm. The isolation that haunts Americans in their social lives is not really very different from the alienation that also undermines American politics. It is possible that Americans will be unable to repair their damaged personal relationships without eventually facing their deteriorated political relationships too.

"What we're trying to do," said Ernie Cortes, "is to draw people out of their private pain, out of their cynicism and passivity, and get them connected with other people in collective action."

On a weekend in June 1990, 150 community leaders from across the state of Texas met for a day and a half in a San Antonio hotel to discuss and refine what they called their "vision paper" on public education. The first draft had

been written a year earlier, based mainly on experiences in Fort Worth, Houston, Austin and other places where IAF groups were working with school systems and particular schools on various self-improvement projects. The San Antonio meeting was one in a series of continuing deliberations, intended to sharpen the document further.

The meeting had a second purpose, which was to ratify plans for a huge statewide convention in October when the Texas IAF network would turn out ten thousand people and formally declare itself "a new power in Texas public life." It had taken sixteen years to reach this point, starting in 1974 with a feisty San Antonio organization called COPS (Communities Organized for Public Service). COPS endures and is now the largest and most experienced among the Texas network's ten organizations. The rally would also mark the fiftieth anniversary of Saul Alinsky's creation, the Industrial Areas Foundation.

Statewide candidates from both parties would be invited to attend the celebration and experience an "accountability night." This is an IAF ritual in which the politicians are required to sit and listen, while citizens stand at the rostrum and do most of the talking. The network's agenda, including the education "vision paper" and others on jobs and housing, would be made public. Both Republican and Democratic candidates would be asked to endorse it.

"You really feel empowered when you see the politicians come to our accountability night," Marilyn Stavinoha of San Antonio explained to some women from Dallas. "Instead of politicians talking to us, we talk to the politicians."

At the planning meeting at San Antonio, community leaders would talk earnestly about these matters for many hours, but not in a manner likely to excite much outside interest. Democracy at this level is simply not very newsworthy. It lacks the sense of conflict that makes "news" in other political arenas, the stories of winning and losing. No angry voices are ever raised. The people arrive at a consensus on things, yet there are never any votes taken—no climactic moments or soaring orations, no drama whatever. That is not what these people come for nor what they take home.

Before the community leaders convened, Ernie Cortes gathered the seventeen other IAF organizers, who are each responsible to specific communities, for a premeeting meeting to critique the preparations. Afterward, the organizers would meet again to critique the meeting's outcome. In IAF doctrine, the organizers submit to a self-conscious process of arduous accountability. Where are people? Do they understand? Do they really agree?

Are the organizers comfortable, Cortes asked, with the quotas assigned to each organization for getting people to the October rally? As he went down the list, the quotas elicited some groans and sarcastic asides, but no dissent. Transporting thousands of citizens across the vast state of Texas is itself a

formidable task, but IAF would have to fill the arena in San Antonio (or make it seem full) for its rally in order to make its point.

"The question is how much do we want to put in this," Cortes said. "It means raising money. It means building momentum. It means this would be our big political event of the year, where we literally use all of our political capital to get the candidates to the meeting." An organization-by-organization tally of what seemed doable produced a total of eighty-eight hundred. "Okay, that's short," he said, "but that will be hard to do."

What do the organizers think of the new draft of the "vision paper" on education? Sister Pearl Caesar, a nun who is an organizer for the Metro Alliance in San Antonio, thought it was very good. "It tells you where we want to go," she said. Others were mildly critical. Too wordy, too repetitious, too specific.

Cortes explained the purpose once again. "The reason we're doing this document is to have a tool to build a constituency at the local level," he said. "The audience is you, the key leaders in the organizations, educators and others around the state, legislators and editorial writers. None of these are original ideas. It's a synthesis, but it's an implicit attack on some things."

Ernie Cortes, one might say, is a mellower, Mexican-American version of Saul Alinsky. He has the same charismatic quality—a mixture of the cerebral and the tough—but Cortes seems less brusque and manipulative than the legendary Alinsky. His manner is more patient with other people and, indeed, more democratic. A few years ago, Cortes was awarded one of the MacArthur Foundation's "genius" fellowships and he has become a minor legend among political activists because of his brilliant organizing work in Texas. Slightly balding and pot-bellied, with stringy gray hair, he often has a scowling expression that can seem, oddly, both menacing and sweet.

Ernie Cortes likes to think of himself as a teacher. He dropped out of graduate school at the University of Texas to become a political organizer among migrant workers in the Rio Grande Valley, but he lives for ideas as well as action—a rare type in politics who devours books on an awesome scale (history, economics, philosophy, politics). Cortes sees the IAF organizations as a university for the people—a school for democracy where they learn how the world around them really works.⁵

Politicians in Texas probably see the organization in a less benign way. The IAF network is a strange new force in their midst—potentially capable of disrupting their own power relationships because it includes so many real people. Something is being built in Texas politics that does not respond to the usual alignments of money and influence. The politicians may not understand the theological talk about "love and power" but, when IAF speaks to power, they listen respectfully. After all, those are live voters going to all those IAF meetings.

When IAF started in San Antonio in 1974, its style was by necessity hard-nosed confrontation. Andres Sarabia, a computer technician at the local Air Force base who became the first president of COPS, described the anger felt by the powerless Mexican-Americans on the west side of town. The city was run by the anglos on the north side and the west side's most modest pleas for public service—street lights or decent drainage—were ignored by City Hall. "I'm not a Republican or a Democrat," Sarabia still likes to say. "I'm Angry with a capital A."⁶

"The issue then was recognition," Sarabia recalled. "We were considered Mexicans. There was a statement made: 'Leave them alone, they're Mexicans. They'll be dead in six months because they'll get drunk and kill each other. They can't organize themselves.'"

To get the establishment's attention, COPS organized "tie-up" actions at banks and department stores—overwhelming clerks and tellers with a flood of Mexican-American customers. "People would try on clothes and fur coats and not buy anything—even the sisters," Sarabia remembered. "They had fun. People used to have fun at these actions. It struck me as tragic—here we are doing this to have fun."

The local business elite eventually got the message and, sure enough, City Hall did too, but only after some brutal conflicts. The people who held power accepted that the Mexican-Americans on the west side would have to be given a share too. Over the years, COPS has won many issues and lost some, but its presence fundamentally redirected the flow of political power in the city.

As the people won tangible victories through their new organizational power, they also recognized the connection with electoral power. The voter turnout among Mexican-Americans in San Antonio has risen steadily ever since—a fact that contrasts with those campaigns of empty exhortation mounted periodically by national foundations to encourage voting.

"You have to teach people at a very local level that voting makes a difference right in their own neighborhoods," Cortes said. "In that sense, we are doing what a political party used to do—giving people a reason to vote." In 1981, for the first time, the inner-city wards of San Antonio outvoted the anglos on the north side.

The other IAF organizations that developed later in Texas were usually less confrontational than COPS because the word spread among Texas politicians that it was easier to talk with these people than ignore them. "When somebody is willing to deal with you, for you to be confrontational, you're being a bully," Cortes explained. "We're trying to teach people politics. Politics means negotiating and being reciprocal and thinking about the other person."⁷

Nevertheless, entrenched political power usually does not yield recognition without a fight, whether in San Antonio or East Brooklyn or El Paso.

When Ernie Cortes was organizing along the border, someone fired a shot into his home one night. Utility companies warned their employees not to mess with these new-fangled political organizations. The *Houston Post* ran a series of stories "exposing" the dangers of these agitators.

"We go right for the center of power—governance—and there's always someone in power who fights you very hard and they get nasty," Arnie Graf explained. "Once you fight for three or four years—and I mean really fight and things get really tense and polarized—then it's easier to get to the table and negotiate things. Once you have that fight, then they look at how to accommodate you."

Of the 150 community leaders who gathered in San Antonio to discuss the "vision paper" on education, many had already been through such "fights" to establish their own presence in local politics. Others were still learning the rudiments of power. The hotel conference room was nearly filled with IAF people who had come from all over Texas. They are known simply as "key leaders" in their community organizations—black, white, Mexican-American, middle class and working class and poor. There appeared to be more women than men, with a few priests and nuns and black ministers scattered among them. After the greetings, Cortes immediately called a fifteen-minute recess so the groups could caucus their own members. When the meeting resumed, a roll call of the organizations followed—a procedure that used up most of the evening.

City by city, town by town, leaders introduced their delegations and designated members delivered progress reports on local projects. Fort Bend Interfaith had persuaded local school superintendents to let them do a school-by-school assessment and so far they had talked with forty principals. El Paso reported good news (a higher number of students who achieved a B average) and bad news (the business community was very slow in raising the money promised for scholarships).

Valley Interfaith, representing border towns such as Brownsville and Harlingen, had raised more than \$10,000 from member dues—twelve dollars a family. Dallas Interfaith, still in the formative stages, had signed up fifty-one sponsoring congregations, with financial commitments of more than \$100,000. Port Arthur, with seven black delegates present, was just beginning the same arduous groundwork and eager to learn from the others.

Jean Marcus gave a more detailed account of the "parental empowerment" project that ACT (Allied Communities of Tarrant) had pursued in Fort Worth schools for four years. "We've become active on eight campuses," she said. "We have schools with a lot of very low-achieving students and we have schools with high levels of violence. Without parental involvement, we aren't going to be able to turn those schools around."

At the middle school where ACT first concentrated, the children's achieve-

ment scores had already risen from last in the school district to third. "We help the parents to identify their self-interest," Marcus explained. "They already know more than they think they know about what's wrong with the schools. As they become more active in the schools, parents become more active in the community at large."

The organization is also a university, as Cortes said, and the next day the 150 leaders were taught a succinct history of public education in America, from Horace Mann's "common school" to the "factory model of schools" that has prevailed in the twentieth century. Sonia Hernandez, a former leader of COPS and now a national education consultant, was the teacher, providing a larger framework for people to think about their own schools and the troubling questions about whether their own children are being prepared for the work of the future.

Schools are also about political power, Hernandez explained. "If teachers don't have power," she said, "guess who else doesn't have power—parents. So we wind up in conflict with each other and neither of us has the power to change things."

The review of the education document was, above all, orderly and good-natured. Each delegation was given responsibility for a particular section and they studied it overnight, then came forward the next day to comment and lead the discussion. The contents of the "vision paper" were a collection of old and new ideas about school reform, ranging from school-based management to greater parental involvement to new methods for accountability.

Some people wanted a stronger "moral statement" in the preamble. Others worried that the emphasis on "competitiveness" sent the wrong message to kids. A spirited exchange developed on the nature of work in the future and whether schools were preparing children for the next generation of jobs.

Father Rosendo Urrabazo, a key leader from San Antonio, brought the discussion back to its central purpose—political action. "We have people trained now so they feel comfortable going into City Hall and talking to the officials," he said. "But they don't feel comfortable going into the schools. What we did in City Hall, we have to do now in the schools."

The only discordant note was quickly smothered by Cortes. A priest rose to speak in behalf of the "school voucher issue"—a means of providing public financing for struggling parochial schools—and one mother seconded his plea. The public schools are hopeless, she said, and parents need help getting their kids out of them. Cortes responded with a soliloquy on Thomas Jefferson and the need for a unifying "common culture" in America—a diversion that seemed to close the subject.

Outside in the lobby later, Cortes bluntly warned the priest to back off, lest he provoke an argument that might break up the multid denominational coalition. "I told the monsignor it was not in his interest to push the voucher

issue," Cortes said, "because we would have to fight him on it. The first thing we have to do is demonstrate our commitment to the common school, to preserve the common culture, or we're going to wind up with a fractured, two-tiered country and that won't be good for any of us."

The "voucher issue" was not mentioned again. Strange as it might seem to anticlerics, an organization that is greatly dependent on the Catholic church was deliberately deflecting a political issue that is most important to the church—in order to preserve its broader political purposes. Such trade-offs are the natural consequence of collective conversation.

When the education discussion concluded, Cortes reminded the delegates: "This paper is not finished. Go back to your communities and review it. Form an education committee and critique it and come back to us. Are we on the right track in developing a teaching document for ourselves to use?"

Meetings, then more meetings, hours and hours of talking and listening—the process of building political relationships can be almost as exhausting as tending to personal relationships. But the IAF's procedures for fostering deliberation clearly succeed for these citizens. The San Antonio meetings posed a tantalizing question: Is this what the dialogue of a genuine democracy would sound like?

The discussion certainly did not resemble the fractious debates of a town meeting, where everyone pops off on whatever subject moves them. There was no debate to speak of. The format was highly structured and, ultimately, designed to avoid random digressions and encourage consensus. Ernie Cortes was the principal teacher, but also essentially the leader. One could imagine that an audience of hyperactive citizens, full of strong opinions and personal agendas, might rebel impatiently.

Yet it seemed to work. At least, the process worked for the people who were in the room, who had come great distances to join this discussion and dozens of other meetings like it. What did they get from the exchange? A sense of participation and also a sense of sharing in power.

The format, for one thing, is subtly but rigorously all-inclusive. One way or another, before the discussions were over, literally all the people in the room—even the most awkward and shy—were required to be on their feet, facing the entire assembly to make some small contribution to the dialogue, if only to give their names and express solidarity with what their own community leaders had said. For the inexperienced and least articulate, the meeting itself was the teacher.

Beyond the personal transformations, the dialogues also yielded the feeling that something important had been accomplished. Agreement had been reached on important matters. The participants knew that they had collaborated in developing a consensus with very different people from many different places and that the consensus would be put to political use in the future.

The "relationships" that have formed around a set of political ideas will be more important than the details, for as these people understand, the relationships are the source of their political power. It was the desire for this consensus, not a thirst for conflict, that brought these people to the meeting. Year after year, it is why they keep coming back.

On October 28, the months of meetings and countless hours of talk came together in an impressive demonstration of political purpose. The arena in San Antonio was filled with ten thousand people, the newspapers reported, and respectful politicians attended to hear from the people. "Coalition Jells into New Force," one headline declared. "Meeting Signals New Texas Politics," said another.

Clayton Williams, the Republican candidate for governor, did not show (though he met separately with the network's leaders). Ann Richards, the Democratic candidate and the eventual winner, did appear and enthusiastically endorsed the IAF network's agenda on education, housing and jobs. Richards promised, as governor, to consult them regularly (and, once in office, she has).

Were the headlines right? Was this new political force for real? Ernie Cortes demurred slightly.

"If I believed my press clippings, I'd say we are a major political factor," Cortes said. "Off the record, I'd say we're not quite there yet. But I believe we're on the threshold. It's in the interest of the political establishment to let us look strong, so they don't look too greedy. It's not in their interest to let us be so strong that we can stop them from doing what they want to do. We haven't got that kind of power yet. But I think we can get it."

The resonant language of love and power, the earnestness and dedication of the IAF organizations, tempts some to romanticize these citizens into something more than they are. The IAF organizations, from East Brooklyn to East Los Angeles, are succeeding on their own terms, but they are still a long, long way from the centers of power. Their politics delivers on its promises to people and that is why these organizations survive and flourish. But there are still many, many obstacles before them.

These citizens have not overcome all of the barriers to democracy but, one by one, they are at least trying to confront some of them in a straightforward way. They may reasonably be regarded as a living model for the democratic promise not yet realized in America. It is also not unreasonable to imagine them as the vanguard, perhaps one of many, for the restoration of American democracy.

The skeptical questions about a politics that originates with people are obvious. Door-to-door politics takes time, for instance, years and years of it, but established power does not wait for citizens to get themselves in motion.

This tension is felt by the IAF members themselves: Their organizing processes cannot be rushed without subverting the integrity of the human relationships, yet political events are deciding important questions right now.

In a society conditioned by technology to expect instant responses, the IAF methodology assumes that human development requires patience. Their strategy for gaining political power requires, above all, heroic patience and an abiding optimism about the country—a belief that gradually, community by community, the public's voice can be reconstructed in American politics.

In the media age, that approach is widely regarded as obsolete—even reactionary—since it ignores the reality of mass-communications technology and its supposed blessings. But the IAF groups stubbornly insist that the only way to overcome the alienation fostered by the modern political culture is by doing politics the old way—face to face, precinct by precinct. But can the politics built on personal relationships ever make itself heard in the clamor of mass communications? The IAF has not, as yet, found a way nor has it really tried, since it does not wish to dilute its deeper purposes by getting drawn into "sound bite" politics.

The quality that makes the IAF organizations so distinctive is their relentless attention to the conditions that ordinary people describe in their own lives. Their authority is derived from personal experience, not from the policy experts of formal politics. Most other varieties of citizen politics start at the other end of the landscape—attaching to the transient storms of "public opinion" or "policy debate" that play out abstractly on the grand stage of high-level politics. IAF gives up short-term celebrity on "hot issues" in order to develop the long-term power of a collective action that is real.

In fact, because of its obvious strength, IAF is frequently invited to join the coalitions assembled by other citizen groups for campaigns on major national issues, but it nearly always declines, partly because of what IAF leaders see as hollowness in many of those campaigns: Real people are absent from the ranks. The IAF leaders are also wary of using their people as fodder in someone else's crusade. Other citizen groups typically try to form working alliances with the politicians in power and generally define their own goals in terms of what seems possible within the reality of Washington politics. These practical compromises, IAF leaders believe, effectively cut out the "unreasonable" voices of people at the community level.

"We have to build a strong constituency of people who care about things that are important and who free themselves, both spiritually and practically, from either party so that both parties will want them," Cortes said.

Like all other citizen politics, the IAF organizations face the daunting barriers of class conflict and racial differences, but at least they are confronting those obstacles in different ways. The organizing successes to date confirm Saul Alinsky's original conviction—that the poor and powerless can be drawn

out of their passive anger and mobilized into effective political action—but it is not yet clear that the same techniques would succeed with other kinds of communities. The process, after all, mainly teaches racial minorities or low-income neighborhoods the sense of political entitlement that already comes naturally to the white middle class and upper middle class—a belief in one's right to be heard on public issues, the self-confidence to speak for oneself.

By itself, the personal enhancement of the disaffected classes is valuable, but insufficient. Alinsky himself conceded, late in life, that "even if all the low income parts of our population were organized—all the blacks, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Appalachian poor whites—if through some genius of organization, they were all united in a coalition, it would not be powerful enough to get significant, basic, needed changes."⁸

Unless an organization can learn to build bridges across the class divide, it will never attain the kind of political girth that might threaten the status quo. In various places, IAF organizations are already at work on the bridge building. Some of the Texas organizations, for instance, are truly diverse, with memberships that leap across the usual lines of race and class. Many white middle-class members, drawn by their Christian or Jewish faith and progressive civic values, have a conscience-driven commitment to their communities and a sense that this is the only politics that produces anything meaningful.

Cortes does not think the IAF Texas network will achieve full status as a major power in the state until it succeeds at creating a presence among the white blue-collar workers in East Texas and elsewhere—people who have common economic interests but are in social conflict with blacks and Hispanics. The organizers are looking for such openings.

In Phoenix, Arizona, the IAF organization (Valley Interfaith Project) was deliberately founded across class lines—bridging both sides of town. It encompasses Hispanic neighborhoods on the south side of the city and white working-class and professional neighborhoods on the north side. Many white people are drawn to participate, organizer Peter Fears explained, by a sense of the deteriorating quality in their lives—crime and pollution, overdevelopment, traffic jams and the rest. The good life is crumbling and, unless citizens mobilize themselves, the political order will do nothing to stop it.

Such organizing ventures will seem wildly idealistic to cynics who are familiar with the present context of racial and class antagonism in American politics. Still, American political history suggests that this kind of politics, difficult as it is, is the only kind that leads to genuine change. Eras of great reform usually began with the emergence of new political demographics—either newly arrived immigrants who finally found their voice in American politics or large sectors of citizens who had been held down by the system. Their political strength crystallized when they bonded with others unlike themselves with shared political goals.

In history, it is the least powerful, the outsiders, who have often been the principal agents for democratic growth. Therefore, if democratic regeneration is to occur in the years ahead, it is likely to be led by people such as these—women and men who are now the weakest and most disregarded citizens, the politically orphaned—rather than by middle-class reformers with professional skills. Mexican-Americans or blacks, Asian-Americans or working-class whites—these are the people most injured by the decay of democratic representation and the people who have most to gain by restoring equity to politics. It is perhaps the case that the democratic promise waits for them.

One other crucial barrier stands in the way of groups like the IAF: They cannot at present reach beyond their own boundaries. Vibrant democracy has always been easier to accomplish in localized settings, closest to the people, but that is not sufficient to address the present breakdown. In order to imagine a restored democracy, one has to imagine a politics beyond cities and states that can speak convincingly to the national government in Washington.

In other words, how can people create a political presence that links them to large and complicated issues like taxation or the savings and loan debacle? The IAF organizations, like almost everyone else in America, are a long way from establishing that kind of link to power, though they are taking small, careful steps toward the higher realms of politics.

This is absolutely essential. The harsh fact is that the fundamental well-being of San Antonio or East Brooklyn is not determined at City Hall or even ultimately at the state legislature in Austin or Albany. The fate of these communities, their families and parishes, is embedded in a web of distant governing decisions in Washington where elite influence is concentrated.

In their cautious, deliberate manner, the IAF organizations are trying to develop channels with which to speak in unison on larger national or regional questions. For the last couple of years, Andres Sarabia and key leaders from the other cities have been meeting regularly in Washington with their congressional delegations, exploring the landscape of national legislative politics, trying out modest proposals and establishing relationships with those in power.

These contacts are only a first step and IAF now intends to expand its national base more rapidly. Cities in virtually every region of the nation have urged the organization to come in and help repair local politics: The pace of growth depends partly on recruiting able organizers who truly grasp the human dimensions of this politics. Arnie Graf, who is recruiting for the expansion, explained the strategy:

"Generally, our hope is that by 1996 we would be in twice the strategically located states as we are now and that would give us the capacity to develop either the regional or national base to look at national policies. If we were in the right fifteen or sixteen states, we wouldn't have to be in all fifty

states. That would give us enough clout to be able to affect policies, whether it was through political parties or corporations."

With Texas, Arizona and Southern California already well launched, for instance, when IAF adds a presence in Colorado and New Mexico, it will have the beginnings of a common regional base—one that can talk collectively to the region's congressional delegations and also to economic enterprises based in the Southwest. At the very least, it will have a platform larger than the boundaries of communities or even states. Coherent and authentic citizen politics takes time.

What would the IAF communities talk about if they develop a strong voice in national politics? Organizers already know the answer, because the same concerns arise again and again in community dialogues. These are: the terms of work and wages, the precariousness of family incomes.

"In some areas, where there is no hope, we've brought people a certain measure of hope," Arnie Graf reflected. "However, we're not bringing them better incomes. It's our feeling it's all going to be short-lived if we can't do something about getting people a family wage that's livable. What is the wage that a family needs to survive and live well? We have to aim at the incomes of families. We know this about ourselves: We have to look at the large issues and we can't do that from a seven-state base."

Ernie Cortes envisions that, as the Texas network develops a stronger presence, it can begin addressing large economic issues from the perspective of workers. Some of the ideas may be small and pedestrian, some may be large and radical.

"We can then raise questions about work, which raises questions about investment patterns," Cortes said. "Can we create some fundamental institutions that allow reinvestment in communities? If we all come to a conclusion that the cost of capital is a serious impediment to economic development, then we're going to have to have a new institution to provide low-cost capital.

"People also ought to have some say-so about the conditions in which they work. One of our ambitions down the road is to create some workers' associations that would deal with issues like job safety and workmen's compensation. We don't want to get under the NLRB, but we think we're in a position to negotiate with corporations about an American *perestroika*. We are talking now to a major company about restructuring work, with schools in the plant. Workers need to be paid in accordance with the things they control. They get demoralized when they have no control and produce lousy products. If you have intelligent management of the economy, these things are possible."

These political ideas are all cast well into the future, not tomorrow or next month, not even next year. But they exist as possibilities—a political program

that goes to what most people would say is the heart of the matter, work and family and incomes. The fact that some citizens are getting a handle on politics in order to force these matters into the political debate is perhaps the most hopeful evidence of all.

If they succeed, they will inevitably confront the underlying power relationships in government and, thus, provoke stern resistance. But what makes these ideas plausible, if they do someday invade the narrow national debate surrounding government, is that they will not enter as abstract policy prescriptions. They will have originated from the experiences of real people and real people will be gathered behind them.

The tragic quality of contemporary democracy is that circumstances have alienated the most conscientious citizens from the principal venue for speaking to power—elections. Even the most active citizens' groups have lost faith in the idea that elections are the best means for making government accountable or advancing the public's aspirations.

American democracy is thus burdened with a heavy irony: The nation is alive with positive, creative political energies, yet the democratic device that grants citizens their sovereignty is moribund. Elections exist like a vacuum jar at the center of the political disorder; the most interesting and important action flows outside and around them.

When citizens set out to influence governing decisions, they usually begin with the assumption that electoral politics is inoperable or a trap. The three popular models for citizen politics—Saul Alinsky, Ralph Nader, Martin Luther King, Jr.—all began by distancing themselves from the most direct and legitimate source of political power. This is a fundamental handicap.

Most of the barriers to electoral politics are well known: the daunting cost of entry, the disconnectedness of mass-media political messages, the manipulative marketing techniques of campaign strategists and, above all, the gargantuan flood of money that pays for all these. Mere citizens—even if they recognize a plausible motive for participating in this contest—will find very little they could afford to contribute. Political power, as Ernie Cortes likes to say, comes from either "organized money" or "organized people." In the electoral arena, the money is organized, the people are not.

The citizens who do exert important influence on elections are usually organized around the most narrow objectives and often then in a defensive crouch. The National Rifle Association is famous for exerting negative influence because the issue of gun control arouses deep emotions and class resentments that mobilize its members. The NRA can frighten incumbent representatives, with both its votes and its money, though it cannot legislate much in a positive manner. The antiabortion forces, likewise, rallied crucial swing votes on the margins of close contests and that was intimidating to many

elected representatives, until the tide turned against them. The League of Conservation Voters and other environmental groups exert some electoral influence by targeting their campaign contributions on worthy contestants. The pro-Israel lobby works its will much more powerfully in the same manner.

The entry points for citizens, in other words, are quite narrow: either through money, the more the better in order to compete with other interests, or through an intensely organized focus on a single issue. Elections do not work for those who are unwilling or unable to squeeze through those gates. For those who wish for a broader dialogue between the governed and the governors, the electoral route seems barren.

All the electoral barriers are real and formidable, yet they do not fully explain the vacuum. In many instances, it is not simply that active citizens are shut out, but also that they have deliberately chosen to stand apart. The formal handle exists for citizens who wish to share in the governing power, yet many shrink from using it. Why do they turn their backs on the lever that is available and potentially the most powerful?

The blunt answer in some instances, of course, is that, if they participated in elections, they might lose. For some frail causes, it is wiser to stand aloof, claiming to represent the people's unrealized political aspirations, than to submit those claims to an up-and-down vote by secret ballot. Opinion polls, whose results are easily manipulated, have become the surrogate elections for groups that do not wish their true strength to be tested with the voters.

In other cases, the investment of time and energy in the tedious mechanics of the electoral process itself often seems counterproductive—not the best use of people and limited resources. In San Antonio, for instance, COPS put together the equivalent of a full-scale precinct organization in order to campaign for a citywide referendum on reforming city council districts. It won the referendum, but the organization was exhausted by the effort. "It's very mechanical," said Arnie Graf, "and it doesn't get at what politics is really about. It doesn't allow people to talk about the broader issues."

A less tangible, but possibly more important factor that separates citizens from electoral politics is their own sense of purity—the conviction that elections are corrupting (or at least perceived as corrupt by the general public) and that righteous causes will lose their glow if they become entangled in the fortunes of mere politicians. For years, people have implored Ralph Nader to run for office—if only to provide a substantive alternative to the dross of party candidates—but he never took the suggestion seriously. Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, explained why:

"Ralph's presumption is that, if he runs for office, he would lose power because he would then become dependent on the political processes and so forth. So he's willing to rely on less resources and be called a 'national nanny' and lose some battles in order to remain independent."

Sister Christine Stephens, an IAF national organizer and a leader in the Texas network, expressed a similar reluctance: "We think the work of being a citizen is too important to be corrupted by [electoral] politics. Once the person gets in there, they can be corrupted. Even the best people will lose their soul. The most we can do is keep a countervailing force to keep the balance even."

Nader, nonetheless, took a first, exploratory step into electoral politics in the early presidential primaries of 1992—offering voters in New Hampshire and Massachusetts a chance to protest the regular order by voting for him. "I am campaigning for an agenda, not for elected office," he said. Many more such ventures, led by many different insurgents, would be needed to restore the public's voice in elections.

Electoral politics, in its present format, reduces the role of citizens by attaching them to a single candidate's fortunes, not to a political program they helped develop. "I'm not interested in teaching people how to be appendages in anybody's movement," Ernie Cortes said, "because, in the final analysis, a political campaign is a movement. It's built around a single candidate. It will evaporate when he or she gets elected."

On a local level, the IAF groups move deftly around the edges of elections with their "accountability nights" and politicians usually get the message: These are real voters facing them. IAF does not run candidates or endorse them, but it does register people to vote and those voters do not need a TV commercial to learn that a candidate has ignored the community's agenda. If citizen organizations create a new framework for how people think about politics, Cortes argues, then electoral results will follow, not the other way around.

The objections all have practical validity to those citizens struggling to generate an authentic politics. To working politicians, however, the reluctance of citizens seems overly precious—people who want to have it both ways. They wish to influence government, but not to get soiled by the muck of politics. They want to become powerful in the public arena, but without themselves being responsible for the awesome machinery of government. A purified citizen who is above electoral politics, one might say, is someone who has not yet come to terms with the psychological burdens of accepting responsibility for the government's coercive powers.

The disjunction between voters and elections is itself a central element of the democratic problem—another expression of the damaged relationship between people and authority. Elections are the most visible, most legitimate means of maintaining those relationships and the only sure way to establish accountability to the governed and to develop a general trust in those who are given the power to govern. People who want responsible government are

bound to be disappointed so long as they turn away from this central mechanism of power.

A genuine democracy will not likely develop until the two realms are reconciled—the irregular citizens and the formal structure of power. After all, like the two-way mirror, democratic accountability runs both ways—between those in power and those who put them there. This requires a reliable organizational framework that at present does not exist—a viable political party that provides the connective tissue between the people and the government.

Conceivably, the steady development of citizen organizations like IAF may eventually create a workable substitute and heal this breach. It is not far-fetched, for instance, to imagine that a decade hence a broad alliance of citizen-based political organizations may have formed that can effectively exercise the power of "organized people" once again in elections. The vanguard is visible now. In the best circumstances, this enterprise will take time—years of patient rebuilding by people everywhere.

In the meantime, the machinery of power is held comfortably in other hands. The principal political institutions that dominate conventional politics—the two major parties and the media—once provided the connective tissue that linked citizens to government but, in different ways, each has abandoned that responsibility. It is to those familiar structures of politics that we will turn next—the main institutions that surround both the electoral process, where the power to govern is legitimized, and the governing process, where the power is exercised. Each of these, in different ways, has lost its connections to ordinary citizens and each has gravitated toward the powerful elites that dominate the politics of government.

The models of democratic politics that some citizens at large have already created may or may not succeed someday in salvaging democracy. But, in the meantime, they exist as a living rebuke to the important political institutions that have failed.

Alliance Schools Concept Paper

Interfaith Education Fund

Fall 1998

Draft

"Parental involvement" has become a term of indistinction, rivaling "social capital" for vagueness. We know its good; everybody wants it. But what exactly is it? And more importantly, how do you get it? Does selling popcorn in the cafeteria to raise money for a new playground qualify? Attending a parent-teacher conference? Or maybe it requires only insisting that a child complete the day's homework.

Rice University Professor Dennis Shirley makes an important distinction in his book Community Organizing for Urban School Reform between *accommodationist* forms of parental *involvement* and *transformational* forms of parental *engagement*. Shirley defines parental involvement as passive maintenance of the existing school culture. In contrast, he cites the work of the Texas IAF organizations and the Interfaith Education Fund in the Alliance Schools Initiative as parental engagement. Shirley writes, "Parental engagement views parents as citizens in the fullest sense--change agents who can transform inner city schools and neighborhoods."

Thus the Alliance Schools Initiative, which currently includes over 115 campuses in Texas, is not just about improving the existing system of public education, but is instead about changing the culture of schools and of entire neighborhoods. Similarly, the Alliance Schools Initiative is not just about parental engagement, but is also designed to engage all of the stakeholders in public education. We are not merely trying to engage parents as agents of change, but also teachers, principals, and other members of the community. We are no more interested in educators passively maintaining the existing school culture than we are in having parents "participate" on those grounds.

In changing the culture of a campus, organizers working with the Alliance Schools Initiative begin by teaching parents and educators the art of *conversation*. In contrast,

public schools like most other institutions are focused on *communication*. The emphasis on communication, which is the unilateral transmission of information from subject to object, is a reflection of the bureaucratic, hierarchical culture of the public education system. Conversation, which involves a reciprocal exchange of ideas, debate and compromise, is relational and operates subject to subject. Conversations involve leaving oneself open to change, both acting and being acted upon.. Conversation is central to the organizing strategies utilized in the Alliance Schools Initiative which are described below.

In addition to being the key tool for a relational culture of collective leadership and accountability in a public school campus, conversation is also the basis for what we call **Civil Society** in a community. The concept of Civil Society is an important one with respect to the Alliance Schools Initiative because in order for a public school to be most effective, it must have the support and resources of the entire community. The stakeholders in our public education system go beyond parents and educators; public education is intimately connected to the economic and societal success of the entire community. Unfortunately public schools are increasingly hard-pressed to garner support from the broader community, whether it be for reform or fiscal support. In many areas people are actively organizing against public schools, with calls for vouchers and privatization. People are no longer connected to public schools as one of the central broad-based institutions in their community, as the institution of the “common school” which not only teaches academics but also creates strong citizens. And in fact, in many communities public schools are no longer able to play that role.

Broad support for public schools will be in place only to the extent that there exists an organized **constituency** that is connected to the campuses. Therefore one of the most important aspects of the Alliance Schools Initiative is the building of that constituency. In connecting the campuses to the congregations and the broad-based IAF institution, the Alliance Schools Initiative builds a broad-based constituency which will not only support the public schools financially, but also tangibly in terms of developing a collective leadership both within the school and the surrounding community. This constituency will create the public space for schools to explore innovative teaching strategies and other

reform efforts. However this constituency will also hold the public schools accountable for results.

Unfortunately, schools can no longer accomplish what is necessary for long-term student success without the active support of such a constituency. Because, although by most accounts educational indicators are improving in this country, the requirements for successful entry into the workplace have been increasing at a still more rapid pace. In their book *Teaching the New Basic Skills*, Professors Frank Levy and Richard Murnane describe in detail the frustrations of mid to high-wage employers seeking a “mix of hard and soft skills” in their potential employees. What Levy and Murnane define as “soft” are skills such as the ability to work in groups and to make effective oral and written presentations. Interestingly, these are the kinds of skills we teach in the IAF organizations and the Alliance Schools Initiative; we describe them as part of the skills of public life. It is particularly difficult for schools to teach these kinds of skills to students when in fact most of the adults associated with a school may not have the skills themselves. People are more familiar with the importance of “hard” skills, such as reading, math, analysis, and problem solving, and many schools have improved their capacity for teaching these fundamentals. However the requirements for these hard skills continue to increase at levels “much higher than many high school graduates now attain” (Levy and Murnane, 9).

Throughout most of the life experience of today’s adults, post-secondary skills were not required to get a job with wages sufficient to raise a family. Schools were not supposed to be preparing more than a small fraction of their students for higher order learning. Unfortunately, the economy has changed so dramatically during the last two decades that without these skills, our students are doomed to a life of struggling to keep their families at or barely above the poverty line. In 1979, a 30-year-old man with a high school diploma earned an average of \$27,700 (1993 dollars). By 1983, a 30-year-old man with the same educational background earned an average of only \$23,000 (1993 dollars). By 1993, that wage had fallen to \$20,000. As Levy and Murnane point out, the significance of this decline becomes still more dramatic when coupled with the information that in 1993, half of all 30-year-old men had not gone beyond high school (3).

Thus the leaders of the IAF organizations and the Alliance Schools Initiative do not merely see their work with public schools as a way for children to feel better about themselves and improve their standardized test scores. Instead, this work is about securing the economic future of their families and communities. Conversations and research actions with employers in our communities indicate that the quality of the available local labor force is as much of if not more of an incentive for economic development than tax abatements, union status, wage levels, and other popular notions surrounding the creation of good jobs in today's economy. Several employers in San Antonio have indicated to our leaders that they currently turn down contracts for more work because they do not have the necessary workforce. In other words, if they could find people with the right skills they could create more jobs.

Lessons and Future Plans

The Texas IAF organizations and the Interfaith Education Fund formally began the Alliance Schools Initiative in 1991 with less than twenty campuses. However the IAF organizations had been working on statewide public education issues such as standards and financing since the early 1980s. Work with individual campuses began in 1987, at the request of a middle school principal in Fort Worth. As the local IAF organizations developed relationships with a growing number of campuses around the state, the statewide collective leadership decided to formalize the strategy as the Alliance Schools Initiative and invited the Texas Education Agency to join as a partner in 1991. Since that time, first the Education Commissioner and, beginning in 1993, the State Legislature have provided supplemental funding for the Alliance Schools to support activities such as professional development and leadership training for parents and teachers, as well as enrichment activities and classroom innovation for students.

Over the last six years, participation has increased to over 115 public school campuses in Texas, with an additional 40 to 50 campuses in the process of becoming Alliance Schools. These populations of these schools are predominantly low-income, and

African-American or Hispanic. Within the 139 campuses participating in 1996-1997, over 83% of the students were classified as "economically disadvantaged."

The IAF organizations in Arizona, New Mexico and Louisiana have also begun working with public schools in their communities to develop similar strategies. Teachers, parents and principals from the campuses outside of Texas have been participating in the annual regional education conference organized by the Interfaith Education Fund for two years.

In large part the expansion of the strategy can be attributed to the increases in parental engagement, teacher morale, and student success at Alliance School campuses. Between 1993 and 1997, the original twenty-six Alliance Schools increased the percentage of students passing the state standardized achievement tests by an average of 26%. Increases of 30 to 40 percent are common among individual schools who have been a part of the initiative since 1993. Between 1996 and 1997, the average percentage of students at the original Alliance Schools passing the math section of the state test increased by 8.3%, exceeding the state average increase of 5.9%. Increases within the reading section were similar at 6.1% for the Alliance Schools compared to a state average increase of 4.4%.

However it is important to recognize that the expansion of the Alliance Schools Initiative has gone beyond curiosity about success into the deliberate and active recruitment of new campuses by the principals, teachers and parents whose children attend school at another point within the same feeder pattern.

For example, success at a middle school prompts teachers and administrators to actively recruit the elementary campuses which send students to the middle school. The development of the Alliance School culture teaches middle school faculty that it would be valuable to have relationships with the faculty preparing students to enter secondary school. Parents begin to understand that their children cannot wait until middle school to be taught by innovative, talented faculty at a campus that serves as the center of their community.

The reverse is true as well. Parents at an Alliance School elementary often see their children excelling only to lose ground again in secondary school. As a result, parents begin to organize the next school their child enters, while faculty and administration from the elementary schools recruit their colleagues farther up the feeder pattern. Within the Alliance School Initiative, leaders and organizers have come to believe that a feeder pattern strategy (and ultimately a district-wide strategy) is the only way to demonstrate sustainable, long-term success over the entire life of a child in public education. It is also the only way to create a systematic cultural change in the manner in which public education is organized and implemented.

Alliance School leaders working together across grade levels create the relationships necessary to agitate and challenge one another to learn from a variety of experiences with public education and the broader community. These relationships create the opportunity for parents and educators to learn from one another and think collectively and creatively about acting on behalf of their children. And finally, these relationships, connected to the relationships of the local IAF organization, enable the leaders to organize the broad-based constituency necessary to build the power to act.

The statewide and regional networks of relationships operate in a similar fashion, connecting leaders to one another at events such as the annual regional education conference and a week-long training session for Alliance School leaders. In terms of building a constituency, the statewide network of Alliance Schools in Texas has been successful during each Legislative Session since 1993 in securing and increasing the financial support of the State Legislature. The Legislature first committed \$1 million to the effort, then \$5 million, and in 1997, \$8 million. As outlined above, these funds go directly to the school campuses to support the innovations they develop through their work with the IAF organizations and the Interfaith Education Fund organizers.

In addition to expanding to meet the request of an increasing number of public school campuses both in Texas and around the Southwest, the Interfaith Education Fund is also preparing to launch a more systematic professional development strategy for

educators connected to the Alliance Schools. As our teachers become skilled both in terms of classroom strategies and in leadership, many develop the potential to become principals. In fact, four teachers from a single Alliance School were promoted to assistant principal positions in a single year. Anxious to take the Alliance School culture to their new campuses, these teachers literally became educational leaders as they engaged their senior principals and teaching faculty in the Alliance School process.

While the IEF organizer was able to work closely with these assistant principals as they entered their new positions, it is unlikely that our current resources could sustain the work with more than a small number of teachers at any one time. Yet we have come to recognize that a more systematic approach to this type of professional development would both provide better support for the faculty and perhaps enable more teachers to advance along these lines. Therefore IEF is exploring the possibility of organizing training sessions and retreats specifically for teachers and their leadership development.

These sessions would be similar in design to the Alliance Schools Principals Institute. Although resources have limited sessions to an annual basis, the Principals Institute has become a genuine training ground for principals to become educational leaders rather than administrators. With a more intensive focus, we believe that the Principals Institute could become a mechanism by which principals actually become the primary organizers of their own schools. A reorganized Principals Institute would include the opportunity for participants to receive stipends for organizing during the summer months as a way to further develop their skills and understanding of the process.

In the Alliance Schools, one of the most important questions we ask our teachers and principals is "What are you learning about learning?". This question is important because only if *they* are learning can they model that behavior for their students. Teaching and learning must be reciprocal activities if students are to develop the capacity to learn throughout their lives. In the Alliance Schools we are interested in creating what Seymour Sarason terms "a productive context for teaching *and* learning." The issue is also important in considering questions of retention. If education is a matter of one-way

communication, teachers and principals are constantly expending energy without being energized themselves by learning through interaction with students and other adult stakeholders. This situation often leads to either a departure from the profession or a minimalist style of teaching and a top-down model of administration.

Conclusion

Our leaders, after years - and in some cases decades - of organizing in communities throughout the Southwest, have developed an understanding of what we call social capital. For our purposes, this social capital is the network of relationships not only among adults (as described by James Coleman) but also among institutions. Social capital is developed when institutions such as congregations, schools, unions, neighborhood associations, and so forth are not only connected to one another but also organized as a powerful network of institutions around the interests of families and communities. In order to build this kind of social capital, there must be patient financial capital available to invest in the training and development of professional organizers who are also investing in the development of community leaders. At least three to five years are required to identify, test out and develop the talents of a high-quality professional organizer.

Unfortunately, even social capital is not always enough. If the member institutions of the Alliance Schools Initiative are going to exercise genuine, sustainable change within the public education system, then they also have to be prepared to organize for power, the Spanish translation of which is *poder* = the ability to act. This is the work of building a broad-based constituency, a constituency of organized people who understand their own self-interests as well as their birthright as members of a free and democratic society.

Attachment A

The Organizing Process

In reality the organizing process is multi-dimensional and takes on a plurality of forms. For example, individual meetings are organized throughout the process as the organizer works with a potential leader to continue his or her development. House meetings are organized in differing ways and for different purposes depending on where the collective leadership is in its development. However all of the steps outlined below are designed to carry a campus and a community closer to the development of a genuine culture of democratic education or what we call a "Community of Learners."

Organizers working with the Alliance Schools Initiative teach leaders and potential leaders how to use the art of conversation in **individual meetings**. The individual meeting is a "one-on-one" conversation, our most basic and important organizing tool. These are not interviews, nor are they focused on a specific issue or project. These conversations represent an exchange of views, judgments, and commitments. They are about uncovering issues, developing relationships and cultivating leaders.

Newly identified leaders at the school and in the community are then asked to organize **house meetings**. These meetings may actually take place in someone's home, or possibly in the school library or in a nearby church or synagogue. Inviting ten or fifteen people to the first meeting broadens the conversation and brings some depth to the developing agenda. Organizers conduct training sessions on how to hold effective house meetings. We have learned that a house meeting cannot deteriorate into a "gripe session," and we have developed organizing skills to avoid that. The concerns of educators and families must be transformed into issues, which are then developed into an agenda with a vision of the future. Through these conversations leaders gain clarity about their vision and their values. House meetings allow people to discuss the issues of most importance to them and to learn that they do not face problems in isolation.

Neighborhood walks, or **"Walks for Success"** as they are often called, are another important part of an Alliance School's culture of conversation. In a Walk for Success, teachers, parents, church members and administrators spend a Saturday walking the streets of the neighborhood around the school, knocking on doors and engaging parents and other members of the community in conversations about the school. In conversations of twenty to thirty minutes a two-person teams asks questions such as "What do you think about the elementary school? Do you have children attending? Do you know any children who go there? What are your concerns about the school? What do you think are its strengths?" The strategy behind these meetings is similar to that of a more traditional "one-on-one" in that the team is trying to surface issues of concern and identify potential new leaders. At the end of the conversation, the team invites the individual or family to participate in an upcoming meeting at the school where the community and the campus will begin to collaborate on taking action on the issues identified through conversation.

TEACHING THE NEW BASIC SKILLS

PRINCIPLES FOR EDUCATING CHILDREN
TO THRIVE IN A CHANGING ECONOMY

RICHARD J. MURNANE
FRANK LEVY

MARTIN KESSLER BOOKS
THE FREE PRESS
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY SINGAPORE

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE

AGREE ON THE PROBLEM

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF PARENTS

The world is full of challenging problems: eliminating stopped blower nuts, implementing the Underwriters' Workbench, getting a sixth-grade girl or boy to turn off the television and do homework. Neither presidents nor principals can solve the problems by themselves. Solving each problem requires the initiative and skills of all frontline workers, the persons closest to the situation. In the case of homework, frontline workers include parents. But parents can't help to solve a problem they don't know exists.

T. A. Vasquez and her husband, Albert, live around the corner from the Zavala Elementary School in East Austin, Texas. Austin has a reputation for good public schools, but the reputation comes from other parts of the city. Zavala serves poor children. The average family income is \$12,000, and until recently the school's academic reputation was weak. All four of T. A. and Albert's children have gone to Zavala. Their three oldest children got good grades, but none was advised to enter the college-prep track in high school. The Vasquezes found this puzzling. Now their youngest daughter, Dorothy, was getting A's and B's in the first grade and seemed to face a similarly puzzling future.

The missing link was test scores. T. A. and Albert did not know that their older children all scored in the bottom quartile on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the set of standardized tests taken by all children in Texas public schools. None of Zavala's teachers took it upon themselves to tell T. A. and Albert about these scores. The Vasquez children were scoring no lower than other children at Zavala. Besides, what could be expected of children from poor families in which few many parents spoke English or seemed to care about schooling?

The absence of parental involvement with their children's academic skills extends beyond the poor neighborhoods of East Austin. Similar stories can be told about schools in every state. Consider again three facts presented in Chapters 1 and 2.

- In 1979, 30-year-old men with a high school diploma earned a yearly average of \$27,500 (in 1993 dollars). By 1993, 30-year-old men with a high school diploma earned a yearly average of \$20,000.
- In 1992, the math and reading test scores of half of all 17-year-olds across the nation were too low to get a job in a modern automobile plant.
- In 1995, 65 percent of U.S. parents gave their oldest child's school a grade of A or B, an approval rating that has remained relatively unchanged since the Gallup pollsters began asking this question in 1985. More probing questions detected parental concerns about educational quality, but awareness of a skills problem was only beginning to emerge.¹

Parents care deeply about their children's future. Their

misplaced confidence in their children's education reflects out-of-date experience. In the 1970s, when most parents of today's high school students were coming of age, a high school diploma was still a ticket to the U.S. middle class. Many parents have failed to see the subsequent rise in skill requirements for a good job. Other parents have seen the rise but only as an indication of a need to attend college. Few parents have seen it for what it is: an urgent signal of the need to teach a set of New Basic Skills from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Until very recently, this out-of-date knowledge has gone along with a paralyzing explanation for low U.S. skills. Why do children in Asia know so much more math and science than children in the United States? U.S. parents attributed the achievement gap to differences in ability rather than differences in student effort. By contrast, Asian parents believe that effort is the more important factor. Attitudes toward learning translate into attitudes toward schools. Asian parents are relatively dissatisfied with their schools. They believe, despite their children's achievement, that their schools should require more hard work. U.S. parents were generally satisfied with their schools, in part because they believe that making students work harder would not produce much learning.²

In the most recent poll data, this explanation—an excuse, really—is beginning to dissolve. A Public Agenda poll conducted in the summer of 1995 indicates that three times as many parents now believe that good grades come more from hard work than from being born with strong intellectual abilities.³ The trick is to translate these attitude shifts into action.

It is not an easy trick to accomplish. Even among parents

who see the need for higher skills, many feel powerless to change the schools. These parents have a mirror image in the many teachers who begin careers resolving to teach effectively, to make a difference in their students' lives. Over time, they retreat because they recognize that schools cannot teach more rigorous skills without strong parental support, support for the idea that mastery of the New Basic Skills is more important than winning sports teams and important enough to turn off the television to do homework.

The details of energizing parents and teachers vary from one school to the next. But recounting the story of one school that is struggling to change shows what is involved: how long it takes, the inevitable false starts, the need for outside help—not to do things for parents and teachers, but to help them to learn how to do things for themselves. The story of Zavala Elementary School in East Austin, Texas, illustrates what it means to Agree on the Problem.

THE ZAVALA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN 1991

Twenty years ago, Austin was known as the capital of Texas and the home of the University of Texas Longhorns. Today Austin is also home to Dell Computer and many other high-tech firms. With the university and the high-tech firms come many well-educated parents who understand the importance of skills.

Most of the high tech rings the perimeter of the city; Zavala Elementary School is located in the core of East Austin. The original building and 18 portable classrooms sit on Robert Martinez Jr. Street between Santa Rita Courts and Chalmers Courts, two public housing projects. For 60 percent of the Zavala families, Spanish is the first language.

In 1991 the percentage of Zavala students who passed the state-mandated TAAS tests was about half the district average. Among Austin's 63 elementary schools, Zavala ranked thirty-third in school attendance. It was a school where most teachers did not want to be. At year's end, 16 of Zavala's 38 teachers left for other jobs.

T. A. Vasquez, Anna Aquino, Lourdes Zamarron, and Rachel Gonzalez had watched their older children go through Zavala. They were disappointed when their children not admitted to middle-school magnet programs, but they were not sure of the cause because their children's grades had been good. They knew it was not a good sign that teachers didn't stay long at Zavala, but they did not know the reasons. As Lourdes Zamarron asked, "Why don't these teachers want to stay here and teach my child?" T. A. Vasquez recalled parents' attitudes in previous years: "I could walk in here on a PTA night and there'd be maybe five, ten parents here . . . parents didn't have an inkling of what was going on at the school, how their kids were being taught."

Zavala's problem was not a lack of money. As part of the settlement of a school desegregation suit, the Austin school district had designated Zavala and 15 other low-achieving, minority elementary schools as "priority schools." Beginning in 1987, the 16 priority schools had received an additional \$300,000 per year—enough money to make a difference.

Nor was Zavala's problem an indifferent principal. Todd McDowell, a science teacher who had been at Zavala six years, said: "You would've thought [the principal] was a strong leader. He spent a lot of time [at Zavala], he worked real hard. But it was subtle the things he didn't do, and the things he didn't do were some of the things that we needed."

Samantha Bednarski, a young first-grade teacher in her fourth year at Zavala, viewed the principal similarly: "a real nice, easygoing principal . . . very concerned about the Hispanic community. [He] tried to do some different things, but he didn't get a lot of support."

Change had to come to Zavala from the outside.

THE TEXAS INDUSTRIAL AREAS FOUNDATION

Short, stout, with long gray hair and a briefcase full of new books to read, Ernesto Cortes loves ideas and loves to argue. He has spent his adult life finding ways to help the poor to help themselves. After graduating from Texas A&M, Cortes worked in Chicago under the radical community organizer Saul Alinsky. He then returned to Texas in 1974 to head the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (TIAF), an organization committed to helping poor families to gain the power to improve their lives.

From the beginning, TIAF followed the Iron Rule that Alinsky had preached: Never do for others what they can do for themselves. A TIAF organizer, supported by local churches, would begin by identifying issues of common concern—the lack of paved streets, the need for sewers. Next the organizer would identify neighborhood leaders and help the community to build organizations with the political power to get the problems fixed. In this work, the dusty streets of East Austin were like the offices of NML and the Honda factory floor. In each place, progress depended on broad-scale participation, and participation required broad-scale agreement on the nature of the problem.

When TIAF organizers had focused on schools, they had

organized around passing bond issues to get more money for schools serving poor children. They reasoned that lack of money was a major obstacle to better schools and that a combination of teachers who loved kids and the smaller classes money could buy would lead to higher achievement. Their greatest victory of their first decade was the passage of Texas House Bill 72, in which the state legislature authorized more than \$1 billion in additional funding for schools, much of which would go to schools serving poor children.

During the late 1980s, events led Cortes and the TIAF community organizers to rethink their approach. The collapse of the Texas oil industry reduced state tax revenues and led to underfunding of the school aid authorized by HB 72. With less money, TIAF's goal of better schools through smaller class size became increasingly less viable. TIAF also saw that few of the schools that had received extra money under HB 72 had shown consistent gains in student achievement.

The basis of a different approach came from Allied Communities of Tarrant (ACT), the TIAF group in Fort Worth. In the early 1980s, ACT had achieved remarkable success in transforming Morningside Middle School, a low-income, minority school with low achievement scores. ACT had focused on building a Morningside parent organization that could demand change and could work with teachers to change the school's culture. During ACT's first four years at Morningside, students' average achievement scores rose from last among the district's 20 middle schools to third.⁴

ACT's success at Morningside, shrinking funds, and the realization that money alone did not always create good schools led Cortes and the TIAF organizers to develop a school improvement strategy that focused on building

"communities of learners." The strategy would have three components:

Getting parents to recognize that low achievement is the problem

Getting parents in a position to participate in school governance

Getting the extra money, where needed, to provide a quality education

Parent-teacher-administrator teams with greater autonomy concerning use of resources would play a key role in bringing about change. But school-based management was not to be an end in itself: its purpose was to create the incentives and opportunities for frontline workers—teachers and parents and students—to make and carry out decisions that would result in greater student achievement.

Ernie Cortes knew that a community would adopt this strategy more readily if it knew others were using it too. He sought to build a network of schools working to change with TIAF assistance. In 1992 he convinced Skip Meno, the recently appointed state commissioner of education, to commit the state department of education to join with TIAF to form the Alliance Schools Network, whose members would include parents and teachers working with TIAF organizers to improve individual schools. Starting with 32 schools, the Alliance has grown to more than 60.

These numbers, displayed on a chart, would make a bright picture of success. Behind the picture would be hours of gritty one-on-one work. NML, Honda, and Diamond-Star screen for workers who agree that quality improvement

is their problem. The average U.S. school can't screen for its parents. It has to work with those it has—men and women, half of whom have not gone beyond high school, many of whom are uncertain that weak skills are a problem. More often than not, they lack the language to lobby schools to raise their standards.

AN INITIAL SETBACK

In 1990 Austin Interfaith, TIAF's group in Austin, chose its first school project. Blackshear Elementary was a poor, largely black school located close to two of the churches supporting Austin Interfaith's work. The project began with a mistake. Before choosing Blackshear, Interfaith had talked to Blackshear's principal, but only on a superficial level. They had offered to help with "parental involvement." The principal had agreed. Little more was said.

Interfaith's lead organizer was Joe Higgs, young, softspoken, polite to all, and dogged. He spent a year trying to organize Blackshear's parents to participate in their children's education. Nothing happened. The obstacle was the principal. To the principal parental involvement meant that parents would come to PTA meetings and take greater responsibility for their children's behavior and homework. Parental involvement did not mean discussing changes in the curriculum or how it was taught. With these issues off the table, it was hard to get Blackshear parents interested, and education could not improve.

After a year, Interfaith gave up on Blackshear. It had learned a sobering, but valuable lesson: agreement on the problem meant just that—agreement by *all* participants.

Organizing parents around achievement would be impossible unless the school leadership was committed to change.

CRISIS AT ZAVALA

In December 1990, the Zavala principal resigned. The school board appointed as acting principal Alejandro Mindiz-Melton, Zavala's assistant principal for the previous five years. When he was appointed, Al Melton's résumé provided few clues that in three years he would appear on "Good Morning America" as one of three "Heroes in American Education" chosen by the Reader's Digest Foundation.

Melton was born in Youngsport, Texas, a ranching community 60 miles north of Austin. Because of his father's career in the military, his family moved often and he attended public schools in many parts of the country. After two years at Santa Monica College in California, he completed his bachelor's degree with a major in science education at the University of Texas, earning extra money by working part-time as a teacher's assistant. He taught for three years in Killeen, Texas, and moved to the Austin schools in 1981.

A stocky, informal man of medium height, Melton was popular with Zavala parents even though he had not grown up speaking Spanish. He quickly learned the names of students and parents and worked hard to improve his Spanish. Unlike his predecessor, Al Melton realized that improving education at Zavala required many changes. In his words, "The staff was dispirited, and there was low achievement, had been for a long time. We needed to really change, and we had not been honest with the community or ourselves

about student performance. Huge percentages of students were on the honor roll. You know, most kids were taking home A's and B's on their report cards. We were not accurately reporting student progress to parents. There was grade inflation."

One of the first things Al Melton did was to ask a parent, Albert Soto, to read aloud at a PTA meeting the achievement test scores of Zavala's students. When Soto realized how low Zavala children were scoring, he became enraged and accused the teachers of failing to educate his children and other children in the community.

It was the start of a bumpy ride. Soto immediately withdrew his three children from Zavala. Other parents were upset. Teachers were angry and hurt. Claudia Santamaria, a young bilingual education teacher in her second year at Zavala at the time, described the teachers' response to Mr. Soto.

Mr. Soto pretty much ran the meeting. He kept talking about the TAAS tests. . . . [He said], "These people are telling us that our children can't learn."

The teachers were sinking in their seats. This had never been said. . . . The parents started talking out. It was hard; a lot of the teachers were almost crying, especially the teachers who had been at Zavala for a long time. We felt it was an attack on us. Mr. Soto said that the best teachers must be at other schools. We wanted Mr. Melton to get up to defend us, and it did not happen.

The meeting was about an hour. . . . It was depressing, man.

Al Melton's beginning left Joe Higgs and Austin Interfaith with a tough decision. Unlike the principal at Black-

shear, Melton was committed to change at Zavala. But his first steps had demoralized teachers and worsened relationships between teachers and parents. Melton was willing to lead, but Higgs was uncertain that Zavala would hold together long enough for parents to participate. Ultimately, Higgs was impressed by Melton's enthusiasm and his willingness to stake his reputation on improving Zavala's education. He asked if Melton would support Interfaith's efforts to organize Zavala parents. Melton invited Higgs and Kathleen Davis, a lawyer with grown children who had recently joined the Interfaith staff, to begin talking with Zavala's parents and teachers. They reached an agreement that later in the year the faculty would vote on whether to establish a formal relationship with Austin Interfaith.

Higgs, who spoke Spanish well, spent the fall of 1991 meeting with individual Zavala parents. He was following TIAF's first and second steps: Find issues that many parents care about, and find potential leaders among the parents. In numerous conversations, he asked parents:

Why didn't they attend PTA meetings? (The most common answer: they were useless.)

What did they want from the school? (They were surprised to be asked.)

What were their greatest needs? (They had many, but found it difficult initially to articulate them.)

Joe Higgs's meetings sound like baby steps. But this is where we are as a nation. Schools can't get better unless parents want them to get better and know how to participate in making them better. Higgs and his co-workers understood

this. They knew there were no quick fixes in developing parental commitment for the changes needed to give every child the skills to get a good job.

ZAVALA GETS HEALTHY

By the end of the fall of 1991, Joe Higgs and Kathleen Davis had come to know several women who cared deeply about what happened to their children at Zavala and seemed interested in helping to organize other parents. T. A. Vasquez was one of these women. Rachel Gonzalez, Anna Aquino, and Lourdes Zamarron were others.

The meetings also helped to identify three issues of concern to a great many Zavala parents. The first was inadequate health care: their children were often ill, and there was a two-month waiting period for an appointment at the nearest city health clinic eight blocks away. The second concern was neighborhood security and crime: the housing projects in which the majority of Zavala families lived were infested with drug dealers, and theft and violence were all too common a part of daily life. The third concern was the lack of jobs and constructive activities for teenagers and the consequent significance of gangs in their lives. Parents cared about achievement in a general way; some had heard about Albert Soto's meeting. But Zavala was one of the schools described at the end of Chapter 1 in which education could improve only if other problems were addressed as well.

During the first half of the 1991-92 school year, Joe Higgs also met individually with Claudia Santamaria, Todd McDowell, and the other Zavala teachers to ask them about their concerns. The teachers, remembering Mr. Soto's outrage, emphasized the low achievement of Zavala children.

When asked why it was so low, they often mentioned the children's poor health: 35 percent had not received all of the state-required immunizations; 14 percent had untreated hearing or vision problems. Poor health, the teachers felt, contributed to poor attendance.

In the early spring of 1992, the Zavala teachers, with the support of the principal, voted to enter a formal relationship with Austin Interfaith aimed at improving the lives of Zavala's children. For Al Melton, it was not a difficult decision:

I'm not exactly sure how [Austin Interfaith] came here. Someone sent them, I don't know who, maybe God, because they were a godsend as far as I'm concerned. . . . What I liked about them was they were not talking about a new program or a new system or a new curriculum, but they were really talking about systemic change in the community, and that's really where, I felt, the change had to come from. The community had to change for the school to be successful. And they talked about organizing parents to be involved in the governance of schools, and I found that very attractive, and so we entered into a partnership. It's the wisest decision this faculty ever made. We spent many months discussing it.

For some of Zavala's teachers the decision was not so easy. Claudia Santamaria described the teachers' questions and fears:

I think it was a lack of knowledge on our part. Who were they? What did they want? What was in it for them?

Austin Interfaith was so political, and teachers are not political; they tend to be subservient, flexible, nurturing. . . . [Austin Interfaith] would ask, "What's bad about East Austin? What's good about East Austin?" and this [questioning] intimidated some teachers; it made a lot of waves.

What if we get fired? What if we get in trouble? It is easier just to go with the flow. . . .

It took a lot of talking among the staff. It took a lot of asking ourselves where we wanted to go; where we were. . . . The expectations were so low. Austin Interfaith turned this around. There were eight or nine of us that had only been at Zavala for one or two years and we were more accepting. . . . The few teachers who were really against Austin Interfaith—they are gone.

By the spring of 1992, Higgs and T. A. Vasquez and the other potential parent leaders had compiled a short list of issues. First on the list was the health of the children, something important to parents and teachers alike. Their next step was to organize a walk through the neighborhood to develop broader support.

On a warm sunny Saturday morning in May, 20 teams consisting of Zavala teachers, the potential parent leaders, and members of congregations supporting Austin Interfaith knocked on the door of every apartment and house in the neighborhood. At each door, they requested a few minutes to explain the agenda for change. The walk conveyed information but it also began to heal the rift between parents and teachers. As Samantha Bednarski, a young first-grade teacher, put it: "It was really neat as a teacher because when you're walking through the projects, all the kids see you and recognize you and they think it's neat that you want to go to where they live, and even the little ones are saying hi . . . most of the people who were home were very open to us . . . they might have wondered why we were there, but I think, deep inside, it kind of made them probably feel important . . . that we were coming to their house and wanting to know their opinions."

As T. A. Vasquez saw the walks:

That's where it started, just by talking to each other. . . . The parents talking with the teachers, the teachers willing to get out of [the school] and going out to the parents' homes and visiting with them for five or 10 minutes in the house. And when the teachers came back from a lot of those walks, they were saying, "You know, a lot of these parents, some of their homes are so poor, yet they invited us into their houses, they wanted to know if we wanted a Coke or coffee, a donut, a taco, and you could tell they didn't have much, and that made a big impression on the teachers because some of these teachers, the majority of these teachers, all they did was just come to the building and go back home. . . . They were doing their work, . . . but they didn't really relate to the people outside until they started going on these walks, and it kind of opened up a lot of things with the parents starting to feel more comfortable with the teachers, and the teachers likewise.

Building on the walk's momentum, Higgs and Davis began to organize a Rally for Zavala to formalize the partnership among parents and teachers. The rally was built around the goals developed in the fall: improved health care for Zavala children, better neighborhood security, jobs for teenagers, and improved student achievement. Three hundred people attended the rally, including Austin's mayor, the school board president, the superintendent, and the head of Austin's health department. Only 50 of the people were Zavala parents, most of whom still believed that nothing would change. Most people at the rally were representatives of the 25 congregations supporting Austin Interfaith.

The Rally for Zavala failed to energize parents but it made progress on the issue of health: the mayor committed

the city government to bring the immunizations of all Zavala children up to date. He also formalized the goals of the partnership.

After the rally the Interfaith organizers and the more interested parents continued to work on the rally's four goals. They focused first on security in the housing projects. Higgs, Davis, and Lourdes Zamarron, a Zavala parent, got the Austin police drug task force to target the two housing projects serving Zavala families for several weeks. They discussed with the director of Austin's housing the possibility of identifying the apartments out of which drugs were sold openly. But as the summer progressed it became clear that however disturbed the residents were by drug selling, they were too scared to identify dealers.

Recall that the last of the Five Principles is perseverance. Perseverance seems obvious but it requires constant reinforcement. In August 1992, Austin Interfaith's attempt to create a Community of Learners was like NML's Underwriters' Workbench in 1990—a good idea that was two years old and had borne very little fruit. Earlier, Interfaith had tried to organize Blackshear Elementary and had given up. Now, after a year at Zavala, it had only one concrete gain: a mayor's promise to bring immunizations up to date. There were other less tangible gains: a growing trust between teachers and some parents. But without perseverance—without a deep sense of how long things can take—Joe Higgs and Kathleen Davis could have given up and quit.

Rather than quit, the Interfaith organizers returned to the issue of health and the mayor's promise. Again they encountered an obstacle: during the summer, the Austin health department announced that it could not fulfill the mayor's commitment on immunizations because the health clinic

nearest to Zavala needed to be closed for removal of asbestos and mold. The organizers then asked: Why couldn't health services be provided at Zavala? After considerable discussion the health department agreed that this was possible, if approved by the school board.

Parents were afraid to finger drug dealers, but they were willing to turn out for health care at Zavala. In October, 200 parents came to a meeting to discuss strategies for obtaining the school board's permission for a clinic. Teachers also came to the meeting, and for the first time many parents and teachers saw one another working for the same concrete goal. After meeting individually with school board members and explaining their proposal, the Zavala partnership got the health services proposal on the agenda for the November school board meeting. Parents and teachers began preparations for making the case to the school board.

But the school board grew cautious. Earlier, the board had appointed a task force to develop a sex education curriculum for the public schools. Some members of this task force argued that the introduction of school-based health services would lead to condom distribution and abortion counseling. Anxious to avoid confrontation on a highly charged issue, the school board postponed action on the Zavala clinic until the December meeting.

Attending Austin school board meetings was something new for most Zavala parents. The meetings are held across town in the school district's central offices—the White Castle, as T. A. Vasquez calls it. Meetings begin at 7:30 p.m. and tend to run into the early hours of the morning. For a Zavala parent, attending a meeting means arranging for baby sitting, a fairly long bus ride, and losing much of a night's sleep. Despite these obstacles, 60 Zavala parents

came to the December 8 meeting and four delivered short speeches advocating health services at Zavala. Twenty Zavala teachers came as well.

In a series of three-minute talks, the four Zavala parents explained why it was important to have health services at Zavala. Anna Aquino spoke "about my children and how I was caught in between the system. I was not on welfare, so I did not have Medicaid and I was a single parent and ... couldn't afford health care."

To address condoms and abortion counseling, Sister Theresa, a physically imposing, 65-year-old nun, came to the podium. She told the school board that she knew Zavala families well after working with them for 15 years. They did have a great need for health care services at the school, she said. What the parents wanted were immunizations and care for hearing and vision problems. They did not want, nor would they accept, condom distribution or abortion counseling. She read a letter from the pastor of the Christ Rey Church, located a block from Zavala, emphasizing his support for health services at Zavala. Resistance evaporated. By a unanimous vote, the school board approved health services for Zavala.

WHAT ABOUT EVERYPLACE ELSE?

By this point, the Zavala story raises an obvious question: What about the more than 80,000 schools that don't have Joe Higgs? What are the parents in these schools supposed to do?

Fortunately, the question has an answer. Joe Higgs, good as he is, is not unique. At various schools around the coun-

try, organizations are building parental involvement just as Austin Interfaith was doing.

Working in a small basement office in Somerville, Massachusetts, furnished with 40-year-old desks and chairs and several phones, Dan Rothstein, Ana Rodriguez, Luz Santana, and Krystal Robinson design workshops that help low-income parents become advocates for their children's education. The Right Question Project (RQP), like Austin Interfaith, begins from the premise that low-income parents care deeply about their children's education, but do not know how to monitor quality or push for improvement. As Ana Rodriguez commented, "Many parents, especially immigrant parents, have no clue about how the system works. They don't even know whether they can ask questions of teachers."

Unlike most attempts to involve parents with schools, the Right Question Project does not provide parents with information. Instead the workshops focus on helping parents to ask and make use of the answers to questions like "What is my child learning?" "What does my child need to learn?" "Is the teacher teaching what my child needs to learn?" "Is my child learning what he/she needs to learn?" "If the teacher is teaching what my child needs to learn, what else can I do?" "If the teacher is not teaching what my child needs to learn, what do I do?" Recognizing that parents can learn these techniques only if they have seen them practiced, the workshops, facilitated by parents, teachers, or community organizers trained by the RQP staff, use simulations, role playing, and discussion to convey the message.

In a workshop on tracking, the facilitator gives some parents a packet that includes a sheet stating: "The full curricu-

lum is 100 pages long. Your child will be taught the entire 100 pages." Other parents receive a packet with a sheet stating: "The full curriculum is 100 pages long. Your child will be taught only the first 50 pages." The facilitator then asks volunteers to state what information they received. When parents who received the information that their child will be taught only 50 pages learn that other children will be taught more, they ask: "Why? What does it mean that my child is taught only 50 pages? Who made that decision?" This exercise is followed by another in which parents are told that their child received a grade of A. Parents then ask: "What does the 'A' mean? Does it mean the same for the 100-page and 50-page curriculums?" The staff of the Right Question Project know that parents asking hard questions does not always lead to change. But it is a critical first step.⁵

The Right Question Project focuses on helping parents to advocate successfully for their children wherever they go to school. More numerous are networks that work with groups of parents on a school-by-school basis. Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools is one of these networks. Robert Slavin's Success for All Schools and James Comer's School Development Project are others, as are many community-based organizations that are part of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students.

These networks differ in their specifics but they agree on the parents' role. Parents in the network schools know their children's achievement matters, and they believe their children can achieve. They visit their children's schools and they know about their children's schoolwork. They learn about homework policies, and work with their children to see that assignments are completed. They work with teachers rather than revert to mutual suspicion.

Most of these efforts are relatively new. The quality is sometimes uneven. But enough activities are underway to ensure that parents don't have to live in East Austin to get help in improving their children's education.

FROM HEALTH TO SKILLS

Getting the school-based health services was a milestone in the relationship between Zavala teachers and parents. As teachers saw parents taking the bus to come to the school board meeting, they began to view Zavala families in a different way. Hearing T. A. Vasquez and Anna Aquino speak articulately to a large group about the importance of health services at the school gave teachers a new sense of what such parents might accomplish. As Zavala parents watched the teachers come to the school board meeting and stay late into the night, they began to realize that the teachers cared about their children. For both groups, the victory was a powerful indication that by working together they could improve the lives of Zavala children.

It was time to address the issue of student achievement.

In January 1993 Austin Interfaith held a workshop for Zavala parents on the meaning of achievement test scores, with one session in English and another in Spanish. Fifty parents attended and came away with three messages:

- In the first grade, Zavala children scored about as well on the TAAS as other Austin children. These first-grade scores supported parents' belief that their children were capable of learning.
- Each year they were in the school, Zavala students fell further behind citywide averages. The parents began to

discuss why this should be so and came up with a range of explanations, from Zavala's curriculum and instruction to how children spent their time outside school.

- By the fourth grade, Zavala children scored so low on the TAAS that they were effectively eliminated from the competitive middle-school program and from Austin's high-quality high school magnet programs.

Learning these details was harder than learning about school-based health care. In the words of Lourdes Zamarron, "We did not realize the importance of the test score for our kids. . . . It was an eye-opener for us . . . we realized in this workshop that the report card might tell us one thing, and the test scores tell us another different story about our kids." For T. A. Vasquez, the workshop provided a similar message: "At that time, I thought things were fine. . . . If your kid's on the A-B honor roll, then everything must be hunky-dory, . . . but we weren't getting the full picture."

Joe Higgs, who led the workshop, argued that its timing was critical. Had the workshop been held before the health clinic victory, it would have set parents and teachers against each other. With the trust established by their success in winning the health services battle, parents and teachers could confront the children's low achievement without blaming each other. To the contrary, the two groups ended the workshop by agreeing that low achievement was a serious problem that they must solve together.

Backed by parents, Al Melton and the Zavala teachers took a number of steps to raise student achievement. They participated in training designed to change the organization of instruction and take better advantage of the small class sizes made possible by priority schools funding. The cooper-

ative-learning training emphasized techniques for grouping together more able and less able children, for encouraging peer tutoring, for designing activities that encouraged children to learn from one another, and for making every child feel responsible for learning. Projects in which children learn from each other are typically not undertaken in schools. Yet, as the example of the Sharpshooters illustrates, the ability to work productively in groups is one of the New Basic Skills demanded by high-wage employers.

Zavala introduced a new language arts and mathematics curriculum that had a track record of improving achievement for disadvantaged children. In Austin, this curriculum had been restricted to children designated as gifted and talented, but Melton obtained a waiver, allowing Zavala to use it with all its children.

Melton and the teachers integrated all special-needs children into regular classrooms, freeing up resources that had been restricted to special-needs classes. The move contributed to a spirit that Zavala was committed to raising the achievement of all its children.

The teachers met to coordinate instruction across grade levels. The teachers in the upper grades explained the skills that they felt all the children needed, and the primary-grade teachers negotiated the grade levels at which each type of skills would be taught. At a firm like Honda, such conversations are routine: they are how production associates learn from each other to improve performance. In the typical U.S. school, such conversations are rare; teachers work in isolation and practice suffers accordingly.

Change continued. In September 1993 Zavala opened an afterschool program with more than 30 different course offerings, including a math club, an author's club, karate,

sewing, and a very popular magic class. Three hundred of the 450 students at Zavala participated, and the program provided a variety of new roles at Zavala for parents.

The crown jewel of these efforts was the Zavala Young Scientists Program. The best of Austin's magnet programs is the LBJ High School Science Academy. For a Zavala child, getting to the Academy was a very long road. Zavala ended in the fifth grade. All students were then bussed to sixth grade at Murchison Middle School in affluent northwest Austin. Sixth graders who excelled there could transfer to the seventh- and eighth-grade science magnet program at Kealing Junior High School and finish at LBJ. Kealing Junior High is only one mile from Zavala—a short, easy trip. But Zavala students did poorly at Murchison, and in the last 10 years only one student had made it to Kealing.

Todd McDowell, the young science teacher, had an idea for improving the access of Zavala's students to the Kealing magnet program. He proposed that Zavala develop a sixth-grade science-intensive program that would prepare students for admission to the Kealing magnet program. As he said:

Since my second year here, I was looking for something . . . to put Zavala on the map. . . . It occurred to me that what happens to our kids [after] fifth grade is that they go to northwest Austin, . . . probably the most affluent neighborhood in our city. Our kids are bussed over to that school for sixth grade, and the actual science program in the city is right over here around the corner at Kealing, but it starts at seventh grade. . . . There's this one-year gap where our kids go to the other side of the moon, and we lose them. . . . So it occurred to me that if we had a sixth-grade class here of the kids that were really interested in the stuff, and then got them . . . qualified to get into Kealing, it would make everybody's life a lot easier and it would be a lot more beneficial

to the children. So all the kids [in the Zavala sixth-grade science program] would go to Kealing, and the kids who didn't make it into the magnet classes would be put in honors classes, . . . and if they did well, then in eighth grade they could apply for the magnet.

Since the program could serve only some of the 50 students in Zavala's three fifth-grade classes, it was not obvious that Zavala parents would want it. Al Melton and the Zavala teachers asked Austin Interfaith to explore parents' reactions to the proposal. Joe Higgs and Kathleen Davis organized several meetings at which parents discussed the program and issues related to admission criteria if the program was developed. Out of these came strong support for a sixth-grade science program. As Rachel Gonzales described the meetings: "I can almost speak for most of the parents that . . . it was okay if our child was not selected . . . as long as Zavala gave the opportunity to one of our children's classmates."

Obtaining school board approval for this program was not easy. The board had a policy of promoting grade 6 to 8 middle schools and the Zavala proposal ran counter to it. Once again Zavala parents, with the support of Austin Interfaith, united to pressure the school board to support a community goal. Again the bus rides to the school board meeting and the carefully orchestrated speeches explaining why the program was critical to the Zavala community paid off, and one sixth grade, which became known as the Zavala Young Scientists Program, started in the fall of 1993.

Once established, the program attracted outside support: computers from Dell Computer and funds for extra resources from the National Science Foundation. The University of Texas provides supplies, a mentor for each participating student, and field trips to the University. In a high-income sub-

urb, McDowell's program would be good but not unusual. In schools like Zavala, it is very rare: the kind of program parents don't think teachers will offer and teachers don't think parents care about. In 1994, six of the 17 children in the Zavala Young Scientists program were admitted to the Kealing magnet program. In 1995, seven were admitted.

LASTING CHANGE AT ZAVALA?

In the retrospective glow of success, change at Zavala doesn't seem so hard. Sixteen teachers left Zavala at the end of 1990-91. No one left at the end of the 1993-94 or 1994-95 school years. In 1990-91, Zavala ranked 33 in attendance among 63 Austin elementary schools. In 1993-94, it tied for first in attendance, and in 1994-95 it was undisputed champion with 97.8 percent attendance. In both these years, the percentage of Zavala students who passed the TAAS in reading and mathematics was higher than the citywide averages.

In the course of these changes, all of the Five Principles had been implemented. The story began with the First Principle: by parents and teachers and children agreeing that Zavala was bad and that Zavala could be good. This first principle was essential; agreement on goals was necessary for progress. But progress toward these goals required the other principles as well. The new governance structure gave parents and teachers opportunities to contribute to solutions. Teachers got the training they needed to change how children spent their time in classrooms. Attendance records, TAAS scores, and admissions to Kealing were measures of progress critical to demonstrating that the efforts of parents, teachers, and students were making a difference. Persever-

ance and learning from mistakes were necessary to sustain the change effort in the face of a variety of initial setbacks.

Ten years ago, Zavala belonged to the Austin school department. Today it belongs to the teachers and parents, too: T. A. Vasquez walks into the teachers' room, grabs a cup off the shelf, and pours herself coffee; Rachel Gonzalez hugs one of the school's janitors in a chance meeting in a Zavala hallway; Anna Aquino works with teachers on the school's health committee to be sure that all children are immunized; Lourdes Zamarron interviews candidates for a teaching position, knowing that only an applicant receiving the unanimous support of the hiring committee, including parents, will be hired.

With this support, teachers can ask more of the children. City government has to take the school more seriously. But the most important aspect of parental support is that it didn't exist five years ago. It had to be nurtured to the point where parents could visit Zavala for positive reasons, not just because their child was in trouble.

Will Zavala's improvements last? Al Melton typically arrives at Zavala at 6:30 A.M. and stays until 7:00 P.M. He works all day Saturday and often part of Sunday. How long can he sustain this pace? Most of the parents who were central to the changes at Zavala will turn their attention to other issues after their children move into higher grades. Is it reasonable to expect Zavala's progress will continue?

The question has no simple answer, but two initiatives give some hope of continuity. The first is Austin Interfaith itself. Joe Higgs and Kathleen Davis are working to build support for Austin Interfaith into the core activities of its member parishes. If successful, their work will provide con-

tinued financial support for full-time organizers to work with successive generations of Zavala families. It would also link Zavala with the constituencies of churches and with their political clout.

The second initiative is the Alliance Schools Network, the network begun in 1992 by Ernie Cortes, of which Zavala parents and teachers are an active part. Every year, parents and teachers from the Alliance meet to discuss successes and setbacks and to reaffirm their commitment to change. The Alliance meetings are rare events in this country: hundreds of low-income parents, most of them Afro-American or Hispanic, meeting with public school teachers and administrators to discuss how they can work together to improve their schools. The meetings along with local forums are attempting to build institutions that will outlast the individuals in each school.

Earlier, we described how people are slowly building parent organizations committed to skills for all children well beyond the state of Texas. This is good news, since roughly half of the nation's 17-year-olds now lack mastery of the New Basic Skills (Chapter 2). Since the economy's pressure will continue, most U.S. schools need to change. But change is unlikely in any school until the First Principle is applied: Get the frontline workers—beginning with the parents and the teachers—to agree on the problem.

PUBLIC POLICY AND COMMUNITY

ACTIVISM AND GOVERNANCE IN TEXAS

Robert H. Wilson, Editor



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Community Organizing for Parental Engagement

The Educational Collaboratives of the
Texas Industrial Areas Foundation

Dennis Shirley

IS IT POSSIBLE TO IMPROVE U.S. SCHOOLS in a political vacuum? For over a decade, U.S. educators have attempted to do just that. For the first five years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, a wave of reforms raised standards and teachers' salaries but did little to change the internal structure of the public school, imagining that "add-ons" were all that our schools needed to reach their full potential. When the research results from that first wave were disappointing, a second wave ensued, which placed an emphasis on "restructuring" rather than "reform," intending to change patterns of teaching, curriculum development, governance, and assessment in public schools. Both waves, however, kept their distance from staggering new social trends: the greatest surge of income inequality in U.S. history, the doubling of crime rates in the central city, and the weakening of the family. Although each wave was marked by the politics of the moment, neither wave had an explicitly political dimension.

In 1991 Jonathan Kozol began *Savage Inequalities* with an indictment of the apolitical, fragmented nature of the efforts to improve public schooling in the 1980s. After touring the nation from coast to coast, Kozol commented:

In many cities, what is termed "restructuring" struck me as very little more than moving around the same old furniture within the house of poverty. The perceived objective was a more "efficient" ghetto school or

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one with greater "input" from the ghetto parents or more "choices" for the ghetto children. The fact of ghetto education as a permanent American reality appeared to be accepted.

In Kozol's account, the maddening reality of school reform in the 1980s—regardless of whichever "wave" of reform one intended—was its staggeringly *introspective* quality. U.S. educators appeared to believe that one could abandon the larger deterioration of young people's lives in civil society and simply focus on changing their schools with felicitous results.¹

Assume for a moment that Kozol's analysis was correct. From one vantage point, educators were responding as best they could to a difficult situation. Friends of public schools found themselves placed on the defensive in the 1980s, suffering stinging attacks from both the Right and the Left. Theoreticians on the conservative, liberal, and radical ends of the political spectrum promoted the idea that our inherited public school system was so dysfunctional that it needed to be scrapped altogether. Privatization, vouchers, and "autopsies" of public education were the tonics that captured policymakers' imaginations and media headlines. Blended together with a heady mixture of "total quality management," information superhighways, and rote memorization of lists arbitrarily codified as "cultural literacy," the brave new world of education looked very different from the ragged old rhetoric of common schooling for children from all social classes and ethnic backgrounds.²

U.S. traditions, like virtually all forms of cultural inheritances, are based on a complex blend of arguments and agreements that we have had with one another. In spite of variances, one strong democratic thread has animated U.S. education for over three centuries. Beginning in the seventeenth century in New England, and spreading west and south throughout the following centuries, Americans have come almost universally to embrace the idea of public schooling for their children. Opposing tendencies always existed: aristocratic obscurantism, or the premise that the poor should be kept ignorant, in seventeenth-century Virginia; codes that prohibited slaves from learning to read and write in the antebellum South; cultural expectations that women should know less than men and that, even if they did know more, it was improper to show it; segregated schools for African Americans and Mexican Americans up to the early 1970s. Many problems have existed along the way, which have wrecked numerous lives; many blessings have also been conferred, which have uplifted and ennobled others. In spite of many obstacles, the broader national and historical trajectory has been toward

inclusion. Both as an aggregate, and within ethnic groups, along gender lines, and within social classes, greater percentages of Americans are graduating from high schools than ever before.³

Public schools in the United States were born out of the conviction that education is not an individual affair but a public matter, one of deep import for the cultivation of social order, civic liberty, and democratic vitality. In spite of phenomenal obstacles—not the least of which is the lack of any provision for public education in the Constitution, an anomaly among industrialized nations—the United States now has over one million public schools scattered from the Atlantic seaboard to the extremities of Alaska and Hawaii. Those schools reflect the ability of local and state governments to promote their own education with limited interventions from the federal government. Yet for a variety of reasons, some valid and many contrived, the vitality of those institutions, and the ideas that undergird them, have been under assault.

This essay is written to suggest that the “autopsy” of public schools is premature. Yet it will not do to suggest that the various attacks on public education, in and of themselves, are simply wrong. Rather, one must demonstrate that public education, even in inner-city neighborhoods, can be a source of academic achievement, community engagement, and civic renewal. It must be possible to do this not simply conceptually but descriptively. We must learn about forms of community self-mobilization and political action that attack not only the despair that haunts our inner-city schools but that also go beyond the school itself to address Kozol’s question about the political presence of the ghetto itself. Detailed, empirical description must show that the United States, which surpasses virtually every industrialized nation in the world in the richness of its voluntary associations, possesses the civic force to reclaim its urban spaces as a result of concerted, tenacious political action.⁴

This chapter describes the impact of community-based organizations in Texas that have revitalized inner-city public schools in one of the most dynamic, self-contradictory, and fascinating of U.S. regional cultures. The regional contradictions are manifold: the Texas myth of the frontier and the reality that since 1980, over 80 percent of Texans have lived in metropolitan areas; the Texas myth of openness and the persistent reality of some of the most intensely segregated schools and neighborhoods in the United States; the Texas myth of vast, unbroken prairies and the reality that, in 1994, Texas surpassed New York as the second most populated state in the Union. If one adds to the mixture the fact that conservative Texas would engender one of the few community-

organizing groups in the early 1970s that would not only survive to the current day but would recruit over 300,000 low-income individuals through the institutional matrices of their churches, one can appreciate just how tantalizing and incomplete the formation of cultural institutions and their diverse expressions in the Southwest remains—even at the dawn of a new century. Perhaps here, in the most unlikely of urban terrains, seeds for a regeneration of public schooling can be found that can provide but one source for a broader recovery of national nerve as to the purposes and promise of public education.⁵

In the presentation that follows, I focus on parents whose children attend inner-city schools and the civic action that those parents have created to radically improve their children’s education. Parents have not worked on their own; they have been assisted by principals, teachers, and local organizations of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (TIAF). That community coalition has increased students’ academic achievement, created innovative school programs, and designed bold new forms of urban renewal. This presentation will demonstrate that a theoretically and politically sophisticated citizens’ movement can help make democracy work, can regenerate urban public education, can reclaim the core civic institutions of our society to compel them to meet the needs of low-income citizens and their children, and can, in the process, inspire Americans to reflect anew about their own potentials and the benefits, rather than the threats, of social solidarity with low-income Americans.

THE TEXAS POLITICAL CONTEXT AND THE TEXAS INDUSTRIAL AREAS FOUNDATION

The Changing Political Economy

After decades of relative affluence compared to other states, Texas dropped from sixteenth to thirty-fifth among states in per capita income from 1983 to 1991, largely because of the unprecedented collapse of oil prices on the global market and the savings and loan crisis. In Houston, the state’s largest city and the fourth largest in the United States, the percentage of the population living below the poverty level rose from over one-eighth to over one-fifth between 1980 and 1990. The state’s failing economy in the late 1980s meant that many Texans were hard pressed to invest financially in their children’s futures, and many of the aspirations articulated in education reform bills passed in the 1980s were diluted to relieve the state’s struggling taxpayers. Even when communities voted to raise their property-tax rates, the drop in

property value often left the schools poorer than they had been before the oil bust. At the end of the decade, more than a quarter of all children in Texas were growing up in poverty.⁶

The economic distress visited upon Texas in the 1980s was accompanied by an intensification of social disintegration. Juvenile crime increased by 53 percent between 1980 and 1990, although the Texas population rose by only 6 percent in the same period. In a survey conducted in 1991 by the Association of Texas Professional Educators, three-quarters of the teachers surveyed stated that violence had increased in their schools. In major urban centers such as Houston, arrests of juveniles committing felonies rose from three thousand in 1985 to over five thousand in 1993.⁷

The negative social and economic trends observed in Texas in the late 1980s were part of a larger national decline of real incomes, the weakening of the middle class, and the polarization of society into a two-tiered economy marked by an increasingly affluent elite and a large disenfranchised segment of the working poor. Economic polarization has been matched with racial segregation; in urban Texas, "intensely segregated" schools with over 90 percent minority enrollment are common, while schools with a balance of European American and minority enrollment are rare. While trends toward economic polarization and racial segregation in schools have been noted by many observers on a national level, the weakening of the middle class in sunbelt states like Texas was particularly brutal because of the lack of a social infrastructure typical in northern states. For decades Texas has ranked close to the bottom of all fifty states in safety-net features such as the level of unemployment compensation payments, annual expenditures to students, aid to families with dependent children, and percentage of the population eligible for state welfare and actually receiving it. When oil prices collapsed in 1983, and the savings and loan crisis ravaged the state's economy, Texans living on the margin discovered just how punishing an economic collapse could be.⁸

It was thus possible to agree without hyperbole that civic institutions and civic culture in the United States in the 1990s were in critical condition. The "atomization" of society—the rise of a culture of possessive individualism unchecked by a correcting consideration of public good—was a condition that many Americans felt typified their society. At the same time that civic values appeared to be weakening, a changing global political economy dictated that Americans needed to reconceptualize education dramatically to enhance the development of ab-

stract analytical skills in the future workforce that would be of fundamental importance in a new "information age."⁹

The Texas Industrial Areas Foundation

In this context of economic polarization and social instability, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), with a heritage of over fifty years of community organizing and democratic participation in the United States, developed a vision and strategy of school and neighborhood improvement in Texas. The IAF's first organization in Texas was called Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), and its first effort involving education compelled the San Antonio Independent School District to make public its budget, action required by Texas state law but routinely ignored by the district. COPS' second foray into school politics was to defeat an initiative to commit \$1.6 million to a new administrative building at a time when thousands of children in the city were spending their days in temporary classrooms.¹⁰

COPS' first successes in education taught the Texas IAF (TIAF) that it could play a positive role in issues affecting public schooling. In the early 1980s, TIAF organizations became active in a movement to increase school funding and played an instrumental role in passing House Bill 72, legislation that increased per pupil funding, improved the student-teacher ratio, and increased academic achievement. The major contribution of TIAF organizations to public schooling, however, has not had to do with the passage of legislation but with the mobilization of parents. TIAF organizations have challenged low-income parents in Texas to break out of their disengagement from their children's schooling, to identify common areas of concern, and to work in a tenacious and focused manner on leveraging change from school boards, city council members, mayors, the state commissioner of education, and the governor. In the process, TIAF has itself matured from that of an outsider mobilizing for change to an insider negotiating with school districts, business leaders, and foundations to hammer out realistic, winnable strategies for improving education. In several cases, TIAF has been so successful in understanding the rules of urban politics that it has in effect turned into a de facto governing institution, used by governmental agencies to resolve their own intergovernmental conflicts and to facilitate solutions acceptable to disparate polities. As a result, TIAF has expanded its activities from partnerships with a handful of inner-city schools to a formal relationship with the Texas Education Agency. By 1992 TIAF had received state funding to enhance the academic

programs of twenty specially designated and funded "Alliance Schools" with which it had developed partnerships.¹¹

This essay describes TIAF educational collaboratives in Fort Worth, Austin, and El Paso that exhibit concrete, demonstrable successes in inner-city schools. The criteria for gauging success are drawn from quantitative data such as test scores, teacher retention rates, and the creation of special programs—as well as more elusive but vitally important cultural qualities such as school and community spirit. The method of organizing for school improvement is parental and community engagement in not just the school as an instructional institution but also the school as a community center with an explicitly political responsibility and potential. Since that political mission for school reform is grounded in a collaboration with religious institutions, we are dealing with the emergence of a novel and hybrid form of community organization on the U.S. educational landscape. At least four features distinguish TIAF educational organizing.

First, the overall trajectory of parental engagement in TIAF collaborations is *radically different* from the prevailing paradigms of parental involvement. Most paradigms are restricted to roles that parents can play in supporting their children's learning: parents learn how to support the school's curriculum or how to bake cookies for fund-raising for new curtains or computers. Parental engagement in these supportive roles is one part of TIAF collaboration, but it is inextricably interwoven with a larger agenda promoting the cultivation of political leadership in low-income communities. Political leadership, as understood in TIAF organizations, consists of a number of factors, including (1) the ability to identify social problems; (2) skill in translating grievances into concrete political issues; (3) skill in coalition building; (4) implementing change; and (5) evaluation. That praxis—defined by Ernie Cortés as "action that is aimed, calculated, and reflected upon"—merits a terminological distinction between accommodationist forms of parental *involvement* and transformational forms of parental *engagement*. Parental *involvement*—as practiced in most schools and reflected in the research literature—avoids issues of power and assigns parents a passive role in the maintenance of school culture. Parental *engagement*—as practiced in few schools but certainly in those that are described below—views parents as citizens, full participants in the codetermination of civic institutions such as schools, and as change agents who can transform inner-city schools and neighborhoods.¹²

A second distinctive factor characterizing the work of TIAF organizations in schools concerns the institutional base of TIAF in religious

congregations. Prevailing paradigms of parental involvement are atomistic: isolated parents confront the isolated teacher or the bureaucratic culture of the school. Religious institutions—seminal, foundational institutions in the lives of millions of Americans, which render life purposeful and beautiful—are fully absent from the prevalent discourse of parental involvement.

A third source of distinction for the kind of parental engagement demonstrated by communities working with TIAF organizations has to do with the driving philosophy of education that both grounds TIAF collaborations and gives them their conceptual edge. TIAF collaboratives tenaciously advance what I shall term the *new progressivism* in education. New progressivism is multifaceted and is more the result of a series of recent collaborations and newly discovered theoretical affinities than a coherent whole that has been articulated by a leading philosopher of education. As used here, the term designates several dimensions of public schooling. First, it advances a systematic critique of the *factory school*, that is, mass public education in the twentieth century, which is taken to task for bureaucratic centralization, top-down management, and the sacrifice of teaching and learning to the following of rules and guidelines that deflect the mission of the school away from its fundamental educational purpose. Second, it designates the effort to regenerate schools as places in which pupils can learn subject matter thoroughly, get to know their teachers well, and acquire habits of mind conducive to life-long learning and critical inquiry. Third, the new progressivism suggests that a reconceptualization of human intelligence as "multiple" rather than monadic, and as dynamic rather than inert, is central to the transformation of schools from locations in which memorization and rote learning dominate to sites of intellection and creativity. Fourth, the term conveys a tenacious dedication to the enhancement of schools as arenas of grassroots civic participation. Finally, new progressivism comprehends the transformation of the factory school resides more in a *change of culture* than a change of programs. Teachers, students, and the community must overcome their tendencies to fatalism and anti-intellectualism to cultivate the tripartite model of praxis advocated by Cortés—problem posing, action oriented, and reflective.¹³

A fourth distinguishing feature of TIAF educational organizing is the notion of social capital. Developed by economist Glenn Loury and elaborated by sociologist James Coleman, the concept, fundamentally, refers to the economic value that resides in human relationships, whether formal (membership in PTAs, labor unions, or religious institutions) or informal (a business owner who keeps a watchful eye on neighborhood

children).¹⁴ Coleman, comparing high school graduation rates, found Catholic high school rates to be higher than those for students in either public schools or nondenominational private high schools. This difference he related to the strong social ties that undergird the Catholic experience. He found that clergy, parishioners, teachers, and parents mentored young people in a more intensive way than occurred in other schools. In brief, the Catholic students benefited from greater social capital.¹⁵

Coleman's studies were to have a tremendous impact on TIAF organizations' school collaboratives. At times it can appear that the entire focus of the organizations' school work is to build social capital, and even the emphasis on developing community leadership can be seen as an extension of the drive to cultivate social capital in neighborhoods and schools where neighbors are isolated from one another, where parents and teachers do not meet and coordinate mentoring, and where clergy rarely venture beyond the confines of the church. Such an interpretation would be misconstrued, however, because it is possible that high levels of social capital could coexist with low levels of political participation. Properly understood, however, leadership development and the formation of social capital are not oppositional but mutually reinforcing. Human relationships in the family, the congregation, and the school in this case would enhance political participation, not eclipse it.

Questions of Method

The following account of TIAF organizations' school collaborations relies on naturalistic descriptions of schools based upon classroom observations and interviews with parents, teachers, students, clergy, organizers, and leaders conducted in schools, churches, and community centers. The descriptions fall into two parts. First, I present three case studies of school change as a result of work with TIAF organizations. The cases involve one predominantly African American middle school and two predominantly Mexican American elementary schools. In each case, I have been particularly interested in describing the politics of change with some attention given to the turning points that transformed the school from a culture of pessimism and low achievement to one of parental engagement and improved academic achievement.

The goal of the case studies is to capture the trajectory of TIAF school organizing as well as the rich variety entailed in changing the culture of schools. While there are patterns to be detected in each of the schools—including the use of home visits, walks for success, assemblies, coalition building, and so on—each school is unique in the point

of departure for organization, the nature of its coalitions, and the degree of its success. The choice of case studies was made to highlight the complex relationship of uniformity and variety in TIAF organizations' school collaborations.

The second part of the description that ensues is not based on single case studies but on evidence of systemic change. Two TIAF organizations in San Antonio have created systemic change throughout their city by organizing to fund free after-school programs that have completely transformed the experience of growing up in San Antonio for thousands of low-income children. In 1992 TIAF formed a high-stakes partnership with the Texas Education Agency, the state's department of education, to create twenty Alliance Schools with special funds and waivers to enhance parental engagement and academic achievement. Thus, both citywide and statewide changes have resulted from TIAF's school reform activities.

Whatever successes are cataloged here should be viewed critically. The politics of transforming the education of low-income Americans are complex, and the most victorious transformations of inner-city schools can be followed by debilitating defeats. Nonetheless, TIAF's organizing efforts have resulted in some striking triumphs. Consider the following case studies to be part of a first effort to describe the role that community-based organizations can play in changing schools and opening up a new terrain for research and debate.

FORT WORTH: BREAKING THE MOLD WITH A FIRST VICTORY

The Allied Communities of Tarrant (ACT) is a TIAF organization in Fort Worth, Texas. ACT is chaired by the Reverend Nehemiah Davis of Mount Pisgah Baptist Church, an African American church with 650 parishioners. ACT has twenty-two dues-paying congregations constituting a total of 14,000 families. In 1985 and 1986, Davis and ACT organizers became concerned about a number of low-performing schools in Fort Worth that were located in the black community. To determine if there was a contribution they could make, they began a series of meetings with key community and state leaders. First, they met with officials from a long-range planning committee of the Texas Education Agency to learn about the state's major concerns with school performance and the changing needs of the economy. Second, they met with business leaders in the Chamber of Commerce; Downtown Fort Worth, Inc.; and progressive local foundations (such as the Sid Richardson Foundation and the Tandy Burnet Foundation). Third, they met with

Superintendent Donald Roberts from the Fort Worth Independent School District to discuss ways in which ACT could play a role in improving inner-city schools in Fort Worth.

As a result of these meetings, ACT learned that all of the major players in education in Fort Worth—the school district, the business community, and the Texas Education Agency—had clear ideas about standards, curricula, and instruction, but that none of them felt informed about truly effective ways to enhance parental engagement in schools. As a consequence, ACT members felt emboldened to call upon its expertise in community organizing to prepare a document for the school board of the Fort Worth Independent School District proposing that ACT provide parental training in low-income communities on educational issues. As part of their preparation, they met with the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, to ensure that they would not in any way be violating the separation between church and state. The Fort Worth branch of the ACLU assured them that as long as there was no propagation of religious doctrine in the schools, ACT should feel free to play a positive role in any way that it chose in improving the schools. To test the business community's commitment to their engagement, ACT requested financial support to cover salaries and expenses for its initiative. Local foundations and businesses agreed to make the requested contributions. With clearance from the ACLU and business community support, ACT submitted a proposal to the school board that outlined a strategy for engaging the community to enhance educational achievement and was immediately approved.

The program that ACT advanced had two facets. First, it sought to use its institutional base in churches to influence schools throughout the city to develop an approach that would increase cooperation between churches, parents, and educators. Second, it wanted to identify a particularly troubled urban school for a major intervention, as a kind of pilot case in which it could gauge its success at transforming a school's culture.

In the past, churches in Fort Worth had often publicly recognized young people for exceptional academic achievement during Sunday morning services. ACT organizers and leaders worked with nearly twenty neighborhood churches, ranging from Baptist and Catholic congregations to Pentecostal denominations to broaden their recognition programs to honor the special strengths of all of the young people in the community. Fort Worth clergy and parishioners were receptive and formed education committees in their churches to make certain that the young people in the congregation received public recognition for their

achievements at a special recognition program held every six weeks. To learn more about the development of the children of their parishioners, educational committees asked the students to bring their report cards to church to identify areas of achievement. That simple act increased students' sense that their community held them accountable for their school work and enhanced communication about the situation of young people among teachers, clergy, and parishioners.

When the new emphasis on recognizing educational progress began, clergy emphasized many aspects of learning. If children had a grade of D in a course but had climbed out of failure, they were praised; if children missed ten days in a semester but had previously missed twenty, their rise in attendance was publicly appreciated; if children were unchurched, clergy and educators invited them to attend any service to be recognized. "We basically tried to recognize any child who had improved each six weeks," Reverend C. M. Singleton of the First Missionary Baptist Church recalls. "Sometimes there wasn't much to recognize them for in terms of academic achievement, but we might find something that they had done well in terms of citizenship, or that their school attendance had improved." Many clergy preached sermons emphasizing the importance of caring for the young; others made a special effort in their services to recognize parents who had visited or assisted in their children's schools; and others began expanding their mission to visit the children of their parishioners in school. Reverend Davis at Mount Pisgah recognized children who read books on their own during the summer and parents who were particularly active in reading to their children.

ACT's community organizing, the involvement of local clergy and relatives, the encouragement of teachers, and the heightened sense of pride among young people all came together to create a new awareness of the challenges and resilience of Fort Worth's inner-city youth. "What that started to do was change the culture," organizer Perry Perkins says. "We figured out a way, if only for attendance or citizenship, to encourage all kids." Significantly, this first action was based in the spiritual bedrock of the African American community—the church. Once the community felt a new unity toward the young within its congregations, "People started saying that 'we ought to be involved in our schools,'" Perkins says. "They now said, 'it really is the job of the church and the job of the community to be involved in the schools.'"

While ACT was working with its churches to create and monitor the new recognition programs, it simultaneously looked for a school to work with. One school that stood in strong need of assistance was

Morningside Middle School in the Morningside neighborhood in South Fort Worth. Morningside was "intensely segregated," with close to 90 percent of the pupils African American and another 7 percent Latino. Of the twenty middle schools in Fort Worth in 1985, Morningside had the lowest scores on a criterion-referenced test given throughout Texas called the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills, or TEAMS test. Half of the over seven hundred children at Morningside failed the writing component of TEAMS; half of the students failed at least one subject in the regular academic curriculum. Eighty-five percent of the students participated in free or reduced lunch programs; almost all of those came from families with incomes well below the poverty line. Few of the students came from traditional families with both parents living at home. The majority lived in single-parent, female-headed households; many were living with their grandparents or other extended family members.¹⁶

Odessa Ravin never wanted to be the principal at Morningside Middle School. She had first begun teaching social studies and English at Morningside in 1966 but had been sent to a predominantly white school in 1971 to comply with the school district's desegregation plan. Simultaneously, the school's student body was broken up, as white magnet school students came in and black Morningside students were bused to a white middle school where they were tracked to the lower level. "The community's view was that 'they took our school,'" Ravin recalls.

Ravin watched in dismay in the 1970s as drugs and gangs became increasingly visible in the Morningside community and morale crumbled. By the early 1980s, Fort Worth school officials persuaded the federal government that they had complied with segregation mandates, and Morningside Middle School reverted back to a predominantly black neighborhood school, albeit with white and Latino students bused in for ethnic balance in the magnet program. Ravin believes that the disruption that the students from the neighborhood had experienced in predominantly white Wedgewood Middle School, as well as the rise of gangs and drugs in Morningside, contributed to create an atmosphere in the middle school entirely un conducive to learning. Indicating just how tough the job of principal was going to be, Ravin discovered shortly after her undesired promotion in the summer of 1985 that her predecessor had had his jaw broken when he tried to break up a fight involving high school drop-outs who had attacked a Morningside student after a basketball game.

Ravin was not sure of how to approach her new job, but she was

certain of one thing: she would not be able to lead Morningside Middle School without rallying every conceivable community stakeholder to improve the school. Recognizing the strength of religious conviction and church attendance in the African American community, she decided to ask for help in Morningside's churches. Shortly after receiving word that she would take over the middle school, Ravin went to the Community Baptist Church, a few blocks down Mississippi Street from the school. Community Baptist was presided over by the Reverend Finnie Jenkins, whom she had known ever since she moved to Fort Worth as a young girl. When the Reverend Jenkins asked her as a visitor to his congregation to stand and be recognized, Ravin decided to speak out even though she was out of order. She said, "My name is Odessa Ravin; and I've just been assigned to be the new principal at Morningside Middle School. And I'll tell you, that school is out of control! I need help!"

Ravin received the respect and solace of Community Baptist's congregation, but she was not yet clear on how she should engage the community in the day-to-day work of the school. Then, as if in confirmation of her worst nightmares, the night before school opened in September the main office of Morningside was firebombed. The bomb was thrown into the nurse's office and the entire front office was blackened and reeking of smoke when children arrived for the first day of school the next morning.

Although Ravin was shaken, she insisted on holding the first day of school. Until the front office was repaired, she set up her office in the library and asked counselors to advise students in the cafeteria. When Ravin held her first parents' meeting a few days after the firebombing, only one parent attended, tracking soot from the main office into the library. "The place was out of control," Perry Perkins says. "People said you couldn't do anything at this school."

Odessa Ravin was not ready to give up. As part of her effort to alert the community to the problems in the school, Ravin continued her outreach to neighborhood churches. She spoke with many area clergy, and those whose churches were members of ACT informed organizer Mignonne Konecny of her quest for help. Inside Morningside, however, Ravin was so preoccupied with crisis management that she never got a chance to attend to issues of instruction and learning. "We had a fight every time classes changed," she recalls; in the worst weeks of the year, the police were called to school to arrest violent and disorderly youths on a daily basis.¹⁷

By the fall of 1986, ACT had met with Ravin on several occasions.

Most of ACT's member churches in South Fort Worth were in the Morningside Middle School attendance zone, and ACT clergy and parishioners had informed its organizers and leaders of Ravin's request, reaching out to the area's churches. While ACT had interviewed many inner-city school principals and found that they responded positively to the idea of a collaboration, Ravin impressed ACT leaders and organizers by her unusual depth of commitment. "Not only did Mrs. Ravin have a very positive attitude toward parental involvement," Reverend Davis recalled, "but she had already been out visiting churches in the community and beating on our doors asking us to get involved." Ravin's tenacity and risk taking paid off: fully aware that it would need a victory in its first foray into school improvement, ACT committed to a formal alliance with Ravin and Morningside.

Once ACT had entered into their collaboration with Ravin, the organization continued to involve community stakeholders in its work. Superintendent Roberts presented facts about the collaboration to the school board, and ACT met with the Fort Worth citywide PTA leaders and business leaders to inform them of their partnership and to ask for their support. Only after receiving that support did ACT initiate its first discussions with Morningside parents and teachers.

ACT's first step, according to Perkins, was to organize "visitation efforts, or walks, where we went door to door visiting the parents of students at Morningside Middle School." ACT designed a survey with questions for its leaders to use during the visits to acquire information about parents' sentiments about the school. Parents were asked what they liked best about the school, which areas they felt needed improvement, and what kinds of work they would be willing to do to improve the school. ACT relied on its parishioners and clergy to conduct the visitations, and Ravin encouraged her faculty to participate. Most homes were visited by an ACT leader and a Morningside teacher, who conducted the interviews together.

The labor-intensive, face-to-face, dialogical approach of ACT leaders and Morningside teachers changed the attitude of many parents toward their children's school. Reverend Davis recalls that "the parents were always very surprised to see us and very receptive." Many parents were young, unmarried, and had not completed high school, and Ravin observed that usually "they were threatened by people they felt had a lot more knowledge than they did." The fact that teachers and clergy were now making the effort to visit parents in their homes and seek their ideas on things that could be done to improve Morningside gave the parents a different sense of their role in relationship to the school;

they changed from being the unsolicited recipients of services to "co-laborers," a term Odessa Ravin uses to encourage parental engagement.

Visitations occurred throughout the fall of 1986. At the same time, Odessa Ravin began internal school discussions with her faculty about the low academic performance of Morningside students. She refused to blame the students for their achievement level and insisted that the faculty take responsibility for their role in students' low achievement. Many of her faculty were European American and, in spite of years of instruction with African American children, knew little about black American life outside of the classroom. Odessa Ravin helped to "train them in our culture" through everything from bus tours in the Morningside neighborhood to presentations by black clergy to cultural diversity workshops. As parents began to feel that Morningside genuinely sought their participation, they began visiting their children's classes with increasing regularity. With increased parental visibility, the quality of education began to rise correspondingly as teachers were less secluded in their classrooms and began to feel more accountable for their instruction.

Simultaneously, Ravin continued to maintain her visibility in the churches in her school's zone. Pastors gave her a forum in their churches to talk about the problems at Morningside, including the low academic achievement, the firebombing, and the high crime in the neighborhood. One of the churches she visited was the First Missionary Baptist Church, and Reverend Singleton observed that his parishioners were impressed with Ravin's forthright presentation of the problems at her school. "People were incensed about the firebombing, and they wanted to react," he recalls. To Ravin's delight, the combined effect of ACT's visitations and small group meetings and her outreach into churches was to recruit more and more parents into the school.

During the visitations throughout the fall, ACT organizers and leaders urged parents to attend small assemblies at Morningside Middle School to discuss ways that parents could engage with the school. Before the assemblies, they called parents to remind them of the meetings, provided transportation for those parents who did not own cars, and informed parents of follow-up meetings when their work schedules did not permit them to attend upcoming assemblies.

When the evenings for the small assemblies arrived, between fifty and one hundred parents came to four separate sessions. ACT had its own leaders and organizers to lead the sessions, and to maintain a positive relationship with the district, a facilitator from central administration was also invited to participate. The first assemblies were open-ended.

"We started first with sessions where parents could just vent," Perkins said. "Parents could just talk about what it was that was bothering them." According to Reverend Davis, simply providing parents with a forum to express their grievances changed many parents' attitudes toward Morningside, and they found themselves moving from a focus on blaming the school to addressing their own need to become more involved to help their children learn more effectively.

The increase in parental engagement created new opportunities for Morningside Middle School, but also new dangers. At this juncture, many principals have often delegated parents busy work—bake sales for cheerleader uniforms, fund-raising for science equipment, or filing books in the library—that helps the school but marginalizes parents' best resources. ACT and Ravin avoided that tendency and instead engaged parents in developing action teams to focus on the core issues confronting Morningside Middle School. In a school where the principal's office was firebombed and the police were called to the school several times each week, the sheer sense of impending danger was inimical to children's concentrated study. The parents formed one action team to focus on issues of school safety. Given the school's low performance on test scores, a second task force was formed to enhance academic achievement. Many parents did not understand the actual course of study for their children in the school or how their children were assessed. ACT organizers and leaders and Ravin and her faculty conducted small group meetings so that parents could understand what their children were studying, how they could set up a positive work atmosphere at home, and how to prepare for tests. At this stage, abstract debates about the legitimacy of the curriculum or the problems of Texas' standardized tests were completely avoided; the focus was on helping parents to understand the given realities of the school and how they could assist their children within that framework. A third action team would sustain the community's newfound momentum and interest in recruiting parents and other neighborhood stakeholders in upgrading the school.

All three action teams immediately began work on a whole range of issues at Morningside Middle School. One of the first issues that confronted the safety team concerned a neighborhood issue. In close proximity to the school, a convenience store called "Gents" openly sold alcohol to underaged Morningside students. Under Texas law, no alcohol should be sold within five hundred feet of a public school. Parents had observed the problem with the store for years, but did not know about the violation of state law or how to compel its enforcement. With care-

ful guidance from ACT, they now learned how to place concerted pressure on their city council representatives through a barrage of telephone calls and how to circulate petitions among themselves that demanded the enforcement of the law and that they presented to the Fort Worth school board. As a result of the pressure, Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission officers shut down the store. It was a victory that brought tremendous exhilaration to the community.

When the excitement over closing down Gents abated, Perry Perkins asked the parents, "OK, now what did you learn about what was needed at the school, about acting, and about getting other parents involved?" Using the first "action" around the grocery store as a "teaching tool," Perkins highlighted the sequence of "planning, acting, and evaluating" that the parents had moved through and emphasized that "the evaluation time is really the most important time because that's the time you learn." The parents then studied a twenty-page document entitled *The Texas IAF Vision for Public Schools: Communities of Learners*, a sophisticated yet accessible TIAF document that fuses democratic values, marketplace realities, and pedagogical principles into a dense manifesto of citizenship education for school change and community development.

By the fall of 1988, three remarkable events had occurred. First, Morningside had changed from a school with no parental involvement to a fulcrum of community activism. Parents had gained such a strong sense of ownership that over nine hundred parents attended an assembly with Odessa Ravin and Fort Worth Superintendent Donald Roberts in August 1987. But more important than that large turnout was the microlevel shift in the culture of the school, witnessed by the heightened participation of parents in all aspects of the life of the school, from classroom instruction to reading aloud in the library to attendance at staff development sessions: "Just being able to talk to a teacher; when one had never done that before, meant a lot to the parents," the Reverend Singleton recalls, "and it meant even more when the teachers made an effort to reach out to talk with them." Even the teachers most resistant to change found that they prepared for their classes a little bit better when they knew that a parent would be observing them. Teresa Chaney, who had taught at Morningside for nine years, was amazed at the transformation. "Parental involvement was almost nonexistent before," she said. "I've seen more parents this year than in all the years I've taught."

Second, Morningside parents won a palpable victory in shutting down a business with a long pattern of breaking the law by selling

alcohol to underaged pupils. The old passivity and reluctance to turn out for meetings in the school had been vanquished, and the neighborhood had mobilized itself to reclaim the right of its young people to a high-quality, democratic education. In the space of two years, over six hundred meetings had been held with ACT organizers and leaders to transform the culture of the middle school. For parents accustomed to feeling powerless about the high crime rates in their neighborhood, simply knowing that they could take one small step to curtail the flagrant violation of state laws was a tremendous victory. More important, they had learned skills as organizers that they would be able to utilize in battling similar problems in the future. The hard-won fruits were a vindication of ACT's wager that it could promote parental engagement to make a difference in urban schools.

Third, academic achievement at Morningside skyrocketed. On the TEAMS test, the school moved from twentieth out of twenty middle schools to third in Fort Worth. From 1986 to 1988, the percentage of students passing the written portion of the TEAMS test jumped from 50 to 83 percent; the percentage passing the math section rose from 53 to 86 percent; and the percentage passing the reading, writing, and math sections climbed from 34 to 71 percent. Previously, half of the students had been failing one subject; now only 6 percent were in that category.¹⁸

In recognition of its achievements, Morningside Middle School received banner headlines in the Fort Worth press. It was the recipient of the Texas Governor's Excellence Award in 1990, which carried an honorarium of \$53,000 that the school would use for staff development. As a result of its successes, Morningside was one of four schools in Texas in 1990 to win a prestigious Carnegie Initiative Award from the Texas Education Agency. Odessa Ravin credits the school's risk-taking behavior in the past with Morningside's reception of the award: "We were chosen because of parental involvement, and because we dare to do things in an area with problems like ours, whereas other people use their problems as an excuse for not doing things." Ravin is explicit about the debt she owes to ACT: "I could not have done any of this without ACT. They empowered me, and they taught me how to organize."

Odessa Ravin's leadership, ACT's engagement of the community, and the Carnegie Initiative have dramatically reshaped the internal culture of Morningside Middle School. Teachers now have advisory periods with students at the start of each day that combat anonymity by providing explicit time for teachers to mentor students about personal

issues and their overall academic development. The governance of the school has been divided into roughly fourteen teams, grouped together either by the grade of pupils, the location of teachers, or even membership of the students in the school's band; the key issue is not the point of departure but that the team function as a cooperative network of professionals dedicated to improving students' academic success. The Carnegie Initiative provides the school with financial support for teachers to have two planning periods a day instead of just one. Faculty members use their planning periods to confer with parents and to rewrite curricula using a dynamic interdisciplinary approach to instruction. Visitors come to the school and are impressed with the absence of graffiti, sparklingly clean hallways, and a genuine rarity in inner-city school restrooms—soap!

What is particularly interesting about Morningside from the perspective of educational policy research relates to the peripheral role that formal staff development issues initially played in turning around the school. ACT's collaboration with clergy and Morningside teachers and parents suggests that the development of social capital between teachers, parents, and clergy engaged in inner-city public schools can achieve dramatic educational results, and that the lessons from Coleman's studies on Catholic schools might just be transferable into inner-city public school settings. It is especially intriguing to note that ACT was able to be successful in organizing clergy involvement even though Morningside students listed over seventy area churches as their religious institutions in surveys conducted during the first visitations. In spite of that geographical obstacle, the high level of religious participation by African Americans proved to be a fruitful political point of departure for organizing for internal school change.

ACT's work in Morningside changed the orientation of TIAF to public schools. In the past, TIAF organizations had worked only on school issues that were directly relevant to external issues such as building renovation that did not address the internal culture of the school. The new levels of parental involvement, and the subsequent rise in test scores, taught TIAF organizers and leaders that they could make an impact at the heart of the school rather than just on the periphery. One immediate upshot of the Morningside victory was that Ernie Cortés approached the Rockefeller Foundation about funding TIAF *education* organizers, whose work would be focused not on the plethora of neighborhood issues that confront urban neighborhoods but rather on strictly educational matters. Once the Rockefeller Foundation agreed to fund those positions, TIAF organizations increased their school-based work in

other cities such as San Antonio, Houston, El Paso, and Austin. None of this would have happened without the signal victory at Morningside.

AUSTIN: THE STRUGGLE FOR HEALTH CARE

Zavala Elementary School is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Austin, Texas. Ninety-six percent of its 440 students are on free or reduced lunch programs. The majority of its students live in two public housing projects adjacent to the school in which the average family income is under \$5,200 per year. One-third of Zavala's students are in bilingual education classes, and 64 percent of all students are taught in eighteen portable classrooms outside the main building. Zavala is an inner-city school that for many years never promoted students into honor programs in middle or high schools and never sent students to one of the jewels of the Austin Independent School District, the Secondary Science Academy. For years, the school had been at the bottom of district rankings in academic achievement, and it was routine for roughly half of Zavala's teachers to transfer to another school at the end of the year. Participation of under a dozen parents in PTA meetings was common.

In December 1990, Alejandro Mindiz Melton was appointed principal of Zavala. For one year, he carefully monitored the situation in Zavala and deliberated over ways in which he could improve the school; simultaneously, he followed initiatives begun by Austin Interfaith, the local TIAF organization, in two local elementary schools. In October 1991, he met with Father John Korcsmar, Oralia Garza Cortés, and Joe Higgs from Austin Interfaith. Melton was immediately confronted with and impressed by the seriousness of Interfaith's leaders. As Korcsmar recalls:

When I went to Zavala I was a real stick-in-the-mud. In my mind, the only purpose of the meeting was to back Al up against a wall and to ask him if he was *really* committed to collaborating with us to do things differently. We'd been in other schools where the principals wanted help and wanted parents in the school. But when they did get parents in the school they'd lecture them and tell them what they were doing wrong. And that's no way to get parents to participate!

Melton knew that Zavala was troubled; he was pleased to discover organizers who were interested in radical change in the school's culture rather than in adding a prepackaged program to its troubled internal culture. "I think it's good when you're challenged," he says of Austin

Interfaith's first interview with him. "It means that people are taking you seriously." Melton had read Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* as a student at Santa Monica College in California in the 1970s, and he knew that Austin Interfaith would not promote tepid reforms that pasted over rather than confronted Zavala's critical issues.

Austin Interfaith found a principal in Austin's East Side neighborhood who was willing to confront the problems of his school rather than to gloss over the rough edges. "From the beginning Al said, 'This school is in trouble,'" Joe Higgs recalls; "There was no 'rah-rah.'" Father Korcsmar liked Melton's attitude: "It didn't faze him to be challenged," he observed. In addition, Higgs was pleased with Melton's readiness to embrace the values of his school's Mexican American and Catholic community. "I could tell he was different," Higgs remembers, "since he was a Sephardic Jew who had images of Our Lady of Guadalupe up in his office."

Austin Interfaith was soon to witness something of Melton's courage in tackling Zavala's problems. Zavala had scored poorly on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test in 1991 in spite of the fact that most Zavala students were on the principal's honor roll and were earning As and Bs. Instead of denying the discrepancy between the teachers' high evaluations of their students and the state's low assessment of their skills, Melton took the initiative to invite a disgruntled father, Albert Soto, to speak out about the problem at a PTA meeting in December 1991. "I thought that was necessary," Melton states, "to raise the critical concern of everyone about student achievement." Soto took advantage of the situation to invite many parents who were also disenchanted and used the meeting to demand greater accountability from the teachers for the education of their pupils. Soto accused the teachers of deceiving the parents about how weak their students' academic achievement really was and how low the school's test scores were. He observed that some Spanish-speaking parents did not have enough information even to know which grade level their children were in. Many parents were sympathetic with Soto. "My child was in the third grade," parent Lourdes Zamarron recalls, "but no one had told me that he was working on a first grade level. We hadn't been made aware of things like that."

Many teachers were shocked by the assertiveness of Soto and other parents. "He opened a wound," Claudia Santamaria recalled. "We teachers just sat there shaking." Others felt that Soto himself was partially to blame. "I had had his child in the first grade," Samantha Bednarski remembers, "and I had never seen that man during the whole

year." "He assumed that we knew what the kids' tests scores were," Santamaria says, "but in the old days we didn't know. That wasn't part of how we did things." In spite of her misgivings, Bednarski acknowledges, "He really did what needed to be done and jolted us out of our complacency." "There were hard feelings after that meeting," Melton recalls, "but I felt that could provide the opportunity for us to have a cathartic experience around student achievement. It could reenergize us to change the school, but to change the school you have to feel a *need* to do that."

Melton had invited Austin Interfaith leaders to attend that pivotal PTA meeting, and Oralia Cortés offered the services of her TIAF organization in improving parental engagement at Zavala. Austin Interfaith promised to help the teachers to respond to Soto's accusations not with defensiveness but with action. Austin Interfaith organizers and leaders immediately got the teachers involved in making home visits to parents to ask them for their perceptions of Zavala and ways in which the school could improve. The home visits represented a further transformation in Zavala's culture. T. A. Vasquez, a Zavala parent, recalls:

The home visits created a different view of the teacher in the eyes of the parents. Parents thought, "Look at this: she's actually coming to my house, instead of my having to come to the school all of the time." And the teachers also were really surprised at how friendly the parents were. But best of all, the kids were just ecstatic because the teachers were in their neighborhood, and it was something totally new.

Following the home visits, Austin Interfaith escalated its presence in the Zavala neighborhood by sponsoring a large Austin school board accountability session at Cristo Rey, the local parish church, in January 1992. Yet in spite of the proximity of the church to the school, Austin Interfaith organizer Joe Higgs estimates that only about five parents from Zavala Elementary attended the assembly, which drew over five hundred people from throughout Austin.

Austin Interfaith continued its house meetings and individual meetings with parents and teachers throughout the spring of 1992. In April, Zavala held its first Walk for Success, followed by another series of home visits to Zavala parents to solicit their participation in shaping a new culture in the school. On May 25, Zavala held its first Rally for Success, and even though over three hundred people attended, only forty of them were parents. The vast majority were Austin Interfaith leaders.

In spite of the overtures Austin Interfaith made to the parents in the Walk for Success, many parents were still hesitant to become engaged in Zavala after six months of constant community organizing in the neighborhood. "So many parents said that 'Other parents won't help, this isn't going to work, and I've tried it before,'" Higgs recalls. "The parents had given up on themselves." In spite of the discouraging results, Austin Interfaith continued to organize in the neighborhood.

Throughout the spring, Austin Interfaith continued small group meetings with Zavala's parents. Parents spoke of many issues of importance to them, such as students' academic achievement, drug dealing in the neighborhood, and safety. Of all the issues that surfaced, however, none came up with such frequency or adamance as that of their children's health. During the 1991 school year, only one nurse attended to the 440 children at Zavala on a quarter-time basis, and she was not empowered to help children with pressing medical needs such as immunizations. Most Zavala parents received very low wages and no health care benefits, so that the only time their children received medical care was in the case of emergencies. Roughly one-third of the students had not received vaccinations against such dangerous and preventable diseases as measles, mumps, rubella, and tuberculosis. In spite of the fact that Texas state law requires that all children be immunized against these contagious diseases before attending school, the law is often ignored.

The issue of health care for children became particularly acute in the summer of 1992 when parents learned that the East Austin clinic run by the Texas Department of Health was scheduled to be closed for repairs because of a faulty duct system. Since that clinic served over two thousand neighborhood residents each month and was the vehicle for allocating food coupons for a Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) nutritional program run by the Texas Department of Health, the plan by the Department of Health to relocate the clinic in northeast Austin on a temporary basis was a terrible setback to many low-income mothers without private transportation. Working closely with Austin Interfaith and Melton, parents began advocating the creation of a clinic in the school that would provide comprehensive, preventive health care.

Fighting for a clinic in an inner-city school is a formidable task for low-income parents, the majority of whom speak Spanish at home and are not accustomed to challenging the status quo. Nonetheless, with sufficient support from Melton and Austin Interfaith, Zavala parents created a proposal for a clinic with an immunization program in their children's school. T. A. Vasquez became part of the early organizing

process. She attended countless meetings with city health officials, individual school board members, the Austin Independent School District superintendent, and Austin mayor, Bruce Todd.

By August 1992, Zavala parents had persuaded the city council to fund a health clinic in their school, with salaries allocated for a full-time nurse and social worker and a part-time medical records clerk. When the next large assembly was held in Zavala in October, over two hundred parents and teachers attended, along with fifty Austin Interfaith leaders. "A constituency had been created," Higgs recalls. In a newfound show of power, the parents at that meeting were effective in securing a commitment from the Texas Department of Health to provide children's health services and WIC at Zavala while providing transportation for more severe, primarily adult services (related to the treatment of diseases such as tuberculosis and AIDS) to other area clinics.

The major opposition to the parents then came from an unexpected quarter: the school board. Resistance to the clinic at Zavala had two sources. First, school board members objected to the city council's decision to fund a clinic in a public school without prior consent from the board. The issue was not a trivial one, since in the event of an injury in the clinic, the Austin Independent School District would have to assume liability. Second, the Austin district at that time had a task force on sex education in which Lydia Perez, a former school board member, held a great deal of influence. Perez persuaded conservative members of the task force that opening a clinic in a school might prepare the way for condoms and abortion counseling to be provided in schools at a later date. At a November school board meeting, Perez organized ten speakers who opposed the clinic on grounds that it would open the way for distributing information and materials relevant to birth control to students. In spite of the fact that the Austin Independent School District would not be asked to contribute any financial resources to the clinic, and one was discussing a clinic in an elementary school in which reproductive services were almost entirely irrelevant, a battle between the parents and the Religious Right now took place, with school board members uncomfortably hedged in the middle. Debates were sponsored on local television channels; radio talk shows gave the story prominence; and the printed media kept a close watch on developments. Some teachers, such as Claudia Santamaria, were discouraged by the Religious Right's attacks: "I thought we were in over our heads," she recalls. Lourdes Zamarron, a Zavala mother, agreed: "I didn't think we were going to get the clinic when all of the opposition began. After all, we're on the East Side, and we're not used to getting anything."¹⁹

The waging of the conflict at this juncture is instructive concerning the manner in which community-based organizations mediate school politics advanced by different political interests. A variety of constituencies were now involved in adjudicating the school clinic issue. First, the mayor and city council had approved funding the clinic, not anticipating any opposition from the school board. Austin's mayor, a strong supporter of Planned Parenthood for many years, was particularly adamant that no restrictions be placed on the issue of reproductive services in schools. Second, the school board—which had not been consulted when the city council approved the clinic—felt intimidated by a vocal minority opposed to reproductive services in the schools. Third, Zavala parents—many of whose children lacked proper immunization—felt themselves pulled into a larger polemical struggle irrelevant to their fundamental concern for vaccinations and quality health care for their children.

On December 7, 1992, the Austin school board met again to discuss the health clinic at Zavala. For the meeting, Austin Interfaith organized clergy leaders to testify regarding the importance of the clinic for the children who attended Zavala. When elderly nuns from Cristo Rey, Zavala's parish church, came dressed in traditional habits and took the microphone to proclaim the importance of health services for children, the conservative opposition dissipated. Yet one complication remained. A surprise had been smuggled into the last proposal from the Texas Department of Health at the last minute, which mentioned staffing the clinic with a doctor. "When the board discovered this, total chaos broke out," Father John Korcsmar recalls. "They just didn't know what to do."

After several moments of tense exchanges among her colleagues, school board vice-president Kathy Rider stepped down from the podium, confessed the confusion of the board, and asked Zavala parents to caucus to determine whether they needed a doctor. The parents then decided that they had never asked for a doctor and wanted only that their original request for a school-based clinic be granted. The school board then voted unanimously to approve the opening of the clinic, without the addition of the doctor.

It was an emotional moment. T. A. Vasquez recalls, "I was crying, and many other people were crying too. We couldn't believe it." Melton reflects:

It was a turning point for this community because this was the first time that they had organized around an issue which they had identified, faced

opposition, persisted, and won. They had learned the basic tools of democracy and petitioned their government for a redress of their grievances. They petitioned vigorously, eloquently, and continuously, and secured the services that they wanted.

Immunizations, health screenings, and referrals were given at Zavala the very next day, with abundant coverage by the media.

After their victory, the morale of the students and teachers at Zavala soared. "The teachers now saw the parents in a new light," Joe Higgs recalls. "They hadn't realized that the parents were so capable." The sight of Zavala's low-income parents caucusing to resolve an impasse between the city council, the Department of Health, and the school board demonstrated in the most palpable way to the community the new respect and visibility the parents had won for themselves. For their part, parents' perspectives of the teachers had changed. Zavala teachers had come to school board meetings until late at night, met with officials from a myriad of city departments, and stood side by side with the parents as they fought to improve their children's health. For the first time, Higgs recalls, "Parents began to see that the teachers really cared about the kids."

Galvanized by their victory, the parents and teachers of Zavala Elementary were now ready to focus their attention on a second issue that had been discussed in many home visits with parents and at the acrimonious PTA meeting in December 1991: academic achievement. Austin Interfaith organizers and leaders held workshops to address the test scores on the TAAS test. As a result of the development of social capital in the school and community, scores at Zavala rose dramatically from 1992 to 1993. For third and fourth graders, scores climbed from 23 percent to 43 percent in reading, from 40 percent to 92 percent in writing, and from 17 percent to 50 percent in math. As for teacher retention, Melton closed the gap from a 50 percent turnover rate in 1991 to zero percent in 1993.

While academic scores and teacher retention rates are crucial indicators of school improvement, there are other dramatic indices of cultural changes at Zavala. First, there is the knowledge of all of the teachers and parents at the school that all of the children are now fully immunized. The disheartening situation from the spring of 1992, in which a majority of Zavala children's elementary health needs had not been attended to, has been radically transformed. In 1993 Zavala won an Award for Excellence in Texas School Health from the Texas Health

Foundation and the Texas Department of Health for its new clinic; in 1994 it won a second award for a dental health program that it installed in the clinic with assistance from a charity called the Manos de Cristo.

Second, one of the simplest and most profound changes in the school has ensued from the recognition that every effort must be made by the school to communicate with parents in the only language that many of them speak—Spanish. Before 1992, all of the letters sent home to parents were written only in English, and PTA meetings were held in English with no translation available. "You could always hear the parents whispering, '¿Qué dice él? ¿Qué está pasando?'" one teacher recalls. By the end of 1992, Zavala's monolingualism had been superseded with all report cards and letters home composed in both Spanish and English and regular two-way translations provided at all public meetings. As a result, the community has responded with hitherto unheard of events, as when two mothers who speak only Spanish invited all of the Zavala faculty to their homes for an end-of-the-year party in June 1993. "These things never happened here before," Melton says. "It is going to cost those parents a lot of money to feed the fifty people on our staff. It's a real sacrifice on their part to do this." Yet the parents are willing to make the sacrifice because of the commitment that the teachers have shown to their children.

A third change in the culture concerns Zavala students' perceptions of themselves. Santamaria explains:

You have to understand that usually whenever you heard anything about East Austin in the news before, it's always been about crime, drugs, and low test scores. And when our fifth graders would go to visit Murchison, our partner school in northwest Austin, they would chatter their heads off in the bus going there, but were completely silent on the way back. They realized that those other kids have everything—cars, computers, even polo, and that they had nothing. It's not fair to match the richest of the rich with the poorest of the poor. It really shot our kids down. And now, *finally*, we have something. *Finally*, our students, and especially our older ones, see that we're in the news for positive things. We have our students read every article about us in the paper, and they talk about seeing Mr. Melton on television. They see that visitors come to the school and take notes. *We never* used to have visitors; we've had more visitors to the school this year than ever before. All of this has lifted the spirits of the parents, too.

Additional changes in the school culture have come about through the creation of a vibrant after-school program, which offers a range of activities from academic skills to sports and music, and a tutoring program that brought more than one hundred regular volunteers to the school in its first year.

Changes in academic achievement, student health, parental involvement, language usage, and school spirit are major indicators of a marked change in Zavala's culture; they have also had a direct impact upon how teachers instruct at Zavala and how students learn. According to Alejandro Melton, the victory regarding the acquisition of the clinic empowered Zavala's parents to take a fresh look at the educational standing of their children and the range of services available to them in the public schools:

After their success, the parents felt emboldened to make other demands on us and on their city for their community. Their level of expectation increased. Now they started asking "Why aren't our children in honors programs in secondary schools? What are you doing to prepare our kids for college preparatory courses? Why can't our kids participate in the same after-school programs that they have at other schools?" They started focusing on solutions to community problems instead of just acquiescing to the status quo.

Parental interest led the teachers to reexamine their instructional styles and curricula and to develop new attitudes and techniques to teach their students better. "We've gotten away from the stereotypical idea of minority children that led many of us to water down the curriculum," Samantha Bednarski says, "and we're using materials from the city's gifted and talented schools to teach our kids literacy skills." Following the example of the Walks for Success, the school's librarian has organized "Reading Rallies," in which Zavala's children parade through the neighborhood with signs they have written promoting literacy. Melton believes that providing better instruction in reading and writing to his students will ensure that his students achieve greater successes in middle school. In addition to the emphasis on literacy, Zavala teachers have attended presentations by Harvard cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner organized by TIAF and are using discretionary funds to transform their curricula to focus on interdisciplinary topics that will emphasize conceptual development rather than memorization.

A fifth change in the culture of Zavala Elementary has had to do with the creation of new programs. In their assessment of their chil-

dren's educations, Zavala parents have learned that in the past decade only one of their graduates had attended a prestigious magnet school in Austin called the Kealing Junior High School, which prepared students for the Lyndon Baines Johnson Secondary Science Academy. Their lack of representation at Kealing concerned Zavala parents, particularly because Kealing is located only eight blocks away from their children's school. To rectify that situation and to enhance education in the sciences at Zavala, Melton applied for and received funding from the National Science Foundation to begin a new program for a class of sixth graders called Zavala Young Scientists. By linking Zavala with the University of Texas Science and Technology Center, Melton was able to win the guidance of first-rate scientists from the state's flagship university for his students. As a result of that program, Zavala students receive summer work as laboratory assistants at the University of Texas, and every Zavala student who attends the Secondary Science Academy and graduates receives a full scholarship to the University of Texas.

Liberal critics of tracking may wonder at the choice of Zavala parents to create a kind of gifted and talented program for their young people; in point of fact, the Austin superintendent and school board raised objections based on their opposition to tracking. So that the program is not misunderstood, it is crucial to understand the context informing the parents' support for Zavala Young Scientists. To demonstrate that Austin complies with federal school desegregation mandates, most middle school children from the Zavala neighborhood are bused to a middle school in the northwest of Austin populated by affluent European American children. There they are almost always tracked to the lower levels. Zavala parents understood that if their children were ever going to have a crack at the upper levels some differentiation at the end of their elementary school experience could be beneficial. Significantly, there was no opposition from the parents: "I was so impressed," Austin Interfaith leader Oralia Cortés recalls, "with how clearly the parents understood the need to address the larger public good in their community. It didn't matter so much to them that their own children could attend Zavala Young Scientists as it did that some children from their community would have opportunities they had never had before." As a result of their readiness to accept Zavala Young Scientists, eight graduates from Zavala attended Kealing Junior High School in the fall of 1994.

In addition to Zavala Young Scientists, another new program added to Zavala Elementary in October 1993 was an after-school enrichment

program created through advocacy with the Austin City Council. Many Zavala children have working parents and went home to unsupervised residences until their parents arrived shortly before dinner. Although that hazardous situation was disliked by many Zavala parents, their lack of resources compelled them to accommodate themselves to the situation as best they could. The new after-school program has relieved their anxieties and is giving their children an opportunity to enjoy academic enrichment activities in the late afternoon, activities that are accelerating students' intellectual development in their regular morning and afternoon classes.

The result of so many successes on so many fronts has been an utter transformation of the internal culture of Zavala Elementary as well as its relationship with the community. Melton says, "It used to be that we saw ourselves *apart from* the community rather than as an integral part *in* the community." The boundaries between school and community have now become so porous that they have almost dissolved. Zavala parents are now deeply involved in advocacy work with Austin Interfaith and have broadened their perspectives to reach beyond the immediate needs of their own children. In 1994 those parents worked with Austin Interfaith to argue for the creation of twenty new free after-school programs at schools in low-income neighborhoods throughout Austin, sixteen health clinics at other schools, and five hundred summer jobs for adolescents, all to be created in fiscal year 1995. Austin Interfaith is moving beyond its previous focus on the city's funds to ensure that Travis County, of which Austin is a part, makes a generous contribution to the creation of those new programs.

In spite of its many successes, Zavala Elementary continues to face multiple challenges. Of particular concern are the 64 percent of students who receive instruction in eighteen portable classrooms. "It breaks my heart to see the little ones going through the rain to the portables," Alice Hernandez, president of the PTA, has lamented. As a result of Zavala's many reforms and its students' improved achievement, however, Alejandro Melton has won nationwide visibility, which he intends to use to make further improvements in his school. Melton has appeared on the nationally syndicated television program, *Good Morning, America*, in April 1993 as an exemplary inner-city principal; he has also received a prestigious American Hero in Education award from the Reader's Digest Foundation. With the new momentum in the school, Zavala parents stand an excellent chance of winning approval for a new wing for their building.²⁰

EL PASO: FROM PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT TO A NEW SCHOOL

The El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization (EPISO) is a TIAF organization in the westernmost extremity of Texas. EPISO's educational work originated in two elementary schools, Ysleta and Alamo, and has recently branched out to include two others, Aoy and Roosevelt. All of the schools are located within a mile of the Mexican border and are made up almost exclusively of Hispanic students, the majority of whom are first generation immigrants. Over 90 percent of the students in all of the schools are on free or reduced lunch programs. Their parents work in factories or as farmworkers, tending huge agricultural enterprises outside of El Paso that grow onions, chilis, and cotton. Many mothers are domestic servants. The most recent immigrants live in overcrowded and unsanitary tenements. All of the schools have a tradition of educating highly transitional populations.²¹

Of the four schools, Ysleta Elementary, with nine hundred pupils, has experienced the greatest successes in mobilizing its parents to advance the interests of their children in the face of bureaucratic indifference and duplicity. Yet Ysleta parents have not always had a history of victories in advocacy work for their school. As recently as 1993, test scores of Ysleta students were so low that less than 20 percent of its students passed all three sections of the state's TAAS test, earning it a "clearly unacceptable" designation by the Texas Education Agency. In addition, Ysleta parents had long been worried about traffic safety issues at their school, and the school building was old and in need of renovation.

Ysleta Elementary was an easy school for EPISO to support. Its principal, Dolores De Avila, has been active in EPISO since its founding in 1981. Her parish, Santa Lucia, is an EPISO stronghold, and De Avila has supported EPISO's bond election work, its various neighborhood improvement projects, and its commitment to supplying sanitary water to residents in the colonias. Her commitment to the IAF was so deep that she attended one of its ten-day training sessions even before her school had an official link with EPISO. In addition, De Avila had worked with teachers and parents during the 1991-1992 school year to apply for Chapter I status for the entire school—which would add a quarter of a million dollars to Ysleta Elementary's resources—and teachers had promoted the idea of increased parental involvement as one strategy for enhancing education at Ysleta.²²

The major issue confronting EPISO organizers after they entered into

a relationship with Ysleta Elementary in the spring of 1992 concerned traffic safety. Although Ysleta is located adjacent to a bustling business area at the intersection of Alameda Avenue and Zaragosa Street, city officials had never provided the minimal traffic safety lights and crosswalks that were self-evident measures for the middle-class schools in the district. Dolores De Avila had placed phone calls to the appropriate officials for years to improve the traffic situation, but to no avail. Lupe Meils, an Ysleta mother, had written to J. J. Armes, her city councilman for the Lower Valley in El Paso, asking for assistance. She received a written response in March 1992 conveying that the situation would be rectified but still nothing happened.

Through home visits in the fall of 1992, EPISO organizer Maribeth Larkin heard that the traffic safety issue was the major concern of the community. When a girl attending a nearby parochial school, Mount Carmel, was hit by a truck on Zaragosa Street, Ysleta parents became increasingly alarmed at the lack of response by the city and district to their fears about their children's safety. Norma Silva, the parent coordinator, then called parents to assist her in circulating a petition demanding that the city and school district take immediate action to rectify the hazardous traffic situation. For the parents, the fact that the school was reaching out to them for the first time to organize concerted action to help with the traffic issue was a breakthrough. "Norma's receptiveness made me feel that it was OK to keep working on this," Meils said, "and I was discouraged because I wasn't getting any response from the city."

Silva, Meils, and other volunteers gathered over four hundred signatures on their petition. To capitalize on the momentum, EPISO convened an assembly in the gymnasium at Ysleta in November 1992 that over two hundred parents attended to meet with city councilman J. J. Armes, Ysleta Independent School District Superintendent Anthony Trujillo, area-school board representative Fred Sanchez, Assistant School Superintendent for Building Jim Barnett, and other individuals representing the Traffic and Safety Department of the El Paso Police Department and the Texas State Highway Department. To prepare for the assembly, EPISO worked carefully with parents to help them formulate questions they wished to address to their civic leaders and to practice asking them with clarity and force. When the evening arrived, the parents conveyed a unity that impressed the councilor and superintendent. J. J. Armes still sought to pacify the parents, however, assuring them that if they only directed their complaints through the proper channels that their concerns would be addressed. Anticipating that Armes would attempt to deflect parental concerns in this way, Lupe Meils had prepared a copy

of Armes's letter promising action from March that she displayed on an overhead transparency. "You could just feel the tension," Sister Larkin recalled, "because Armes was nailed and all of those bureaucrats were nailed." Armes, deeply embarrassed, promised that he really would respond this time.

At the end of the meeting, the parents asked their public officials to join them in monthly accountability sessions to monitor the progress the city would be making in implementing improvements. Parents then formed a traffic committee and began a door-to-door campaign to gather petitions to demand improvements.

One vital element of this organizing effort was the community's insistence on accountability sessions; this was of key importance because of the fragmented manner in which civic power is distributed in U.S. cities. Busy Alameda Avenue was maintained by the Texas State Highway Department, and some aspects of traffic safety were the responsibility of the school district, while others fell within the city's purview. When Ysleta parents met with traffic safety officers from one office, they typically tried to pass the buck to other public officials. "Most bureaucrats obfuscate the rules," Sister Larkin has observed, "so that regular people can't hold them accountable." EPISO organizers educated the traffic committee to conduct research on the traffic issue in such a way that all of the key public officials accepted their responsibilities to create a safer community.

The traffic safety problem was larger than just the government bureaucracies. Area homeowners welcomed the prospect of creating one-way streets on side streets, but business owners felt that rerouting traffic would make it more difficult for them to attract customers and would damage their sales. All of the diverse neighborhood constituencies and local and state political officials had to be tackled separately to hammer out acceptable solutions.

The strategy of holding monthly accountability sessions paid impressive dividends. Usually, no improvements were made in the first three weeks after each meeting. Whenever the deadline drew near for an accountability session, however, Ysleta parents discovered that a construction crew would arrive at Ysleta to install lights and signs or to paint crosswalks that would enhance the safety of the children. Public officials would then come to the accountability sessions, take credit for the progress that was being made, and do nothing until a week before the next accountability session. At that point, they once again made sure that they would have some concrete results to present at the upcoming meeting.

As a result of EPISO's organizing, by the time Ysleta Elementary opened for a new school year in August 1993, the traffic patterns around the school were totally transformed. For the first time, there were school crossing zones and a new traffic light on one of the busiest corners. A two-way street, Schutz Street, was converted into a one-way street to cut down on traffic congestion. The school district rerouted school bus entries so that the children disembarked directly on the school campus rather than into the street. "We totally changed the external traffic situation for that campus, and consequently things are a lot safer for the children," Sister Larkin says, "but the most important thing is that there is a whole new level of ownership that the parents feel."

As part of the process of working on external safety, the internal dynamics of Ysleta changed. There had always been a room for parents in the school, but it was located at a remote area on the third floor of the old building. "Parents never felt connected to the rest of the school," parent education coordinator Norma Silva recalls. Dolores De Avila had visited Hollibrook Elementary School in Spring Branch, Texas, in the spring of 1992 and had been impressed with the centrality of its Parents' Center in the building. De Avila decided to replicate Hollibrook's example and moved Ysleta's Parents' Center right next to the main office at the front entrance of the school in September 1992. De Avila acquired a grant from a local foundation to supply the center with a comfortable couch, tables and chairs for adult classes, and a rich array of materials promoting literacy and academic development.²³

Even with the Parents' Center relocated to the front of the school, some parents were hesitant to become involved. "It took about six weeks before parents started really saying 'This is our room,'" Silva recalls. "The parents were not always comfortable with other parents. There used to be a lady who would monopolize the room, so I needed to educate her about how to build relationships and trust with others. We have to remember that the parental involvement component is developmental."

To respond to parents' concerns about their children's safety, De Avila worked with the Police Department to designate a special office for police who are trained in community-based policing. Those officers not only provide security; they also help parents with income tax forms and public service referrals and have befriended many students in the school. A social worker, a parent liaison, and a parent educator are now all assigned to Ysleta and are paid for through Chapter I funding.

In October 1993, Superintendent Trujillo visited Ysleta parents to discuss strategies for enhancing the future of the school. In dialogue

with the parents, Trujillo extended them the opportunity to relocate to an entirely new school that he would build in a residential neighborhood far removed from the thoroughfares that run by Ysleta and are becoming even more heavily traveled as a result of the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Ysleta parent leaders designed a survey to solicit parent opinions; parents held fourteen house meetings to discuss the pros and cons of a move; and they took field trips to the proposed location of the new school and schools recently constructed by the district.

In late February, two-thirds of Ysleta parents voted to relocate to a new building scheduled to be completed in 1996. Trujillo encouraged the community to draw up a wish list of all of the features they would like to see in the new school. The parents have responded by expanding and renaming their traffic committee the "Parents-in-Action Committee." They have designed and circulated surveys to solicit parent opinions and have had several meetings with the superintendent to keep him informed of their wishes.

As a result of their deliberations with the parents from Ysleta Elementary School, Trujillo and Assistant Superintendent for Building Barnett increased their commitment to the community in the summer of 1994. Trujillo and Barnett understood that Ysleta Elementary parents sought immediate action to improve the educations of their children and that it would take several years to build a new school. As a result, Trujillo and Barnett decided to remodel Ysleta Elementary—not just with their own plan but with constant consultation and joint planning with the Parents-in-Action Committee. Subsequently the Parents' Center has expanded into a second room, and a Wellness Center providing health screenings has been integrated into the school. The district not only renovated much of the internal structure of Ysleta Elementary but also planted fresh grass in the rear of the building and over a dozen palm trees at the school's front entrance.

The district now is planning to convert Ysleta Elementary into a child care center and adult education program for the community, while the elementary school children will be moved to the new site. The features of the new school are being designed by the Parents-in-Action Committee. The committee is requesting a Parents' Center, a room for community-based police officers, and a Wellness Center that would provide not just screenings but also immunizations. The Parents-in-Action Committee is also exploring innovative aspects of middle-class schools from their area that they would like their own children to enjoy, such as a museum wing. As a result of their successful work with the school

district, parents, teachers, and administrators have forged a new culture of mutual respect and collaboration. "We've come a long way in our relationship with the district," EPISO organizer Elsy Fierro-Suttmiller says, "We've all been through a process of growth and negotiation."

Recent rises in academic achievement at Ysleta Elementary have validated the parents' engagement. In 1992 only 27 percent of Ysleta students passed the reading portion of the state's criterion-referenced test; in 1993 61 percent passed the same portion. When the results were made available in the summer of 1994, Governor Ann Richards visited the school to congratulate the parents. She saw a truly transformed school, with community police officers referring adults to social service agencies, a Parents' Center bursting with materials used in adult education classes, and a Wellness Center administering health screenings. She saw a school that for years had never been able to gain the clout to provide minimal traffic safety provisions and now had not only an impressive safety zone but also a renovated and beautifully landscaped building. Best of all, she saw empirical evidence of children's improved learning, reflected in test scores. "This program is one of the greatest things that has happened to public schools," Richards said.²⁴

SAN ANTONIO: SYSTEMIC REFORMS THROUGHOUT THE CITY

San Antonio is unlike any other city in either Texas or the nation in that its IAF organizations are so powerful that they are consulted as a matter of course by the mayor and city council on virtually every major piece of legislation that can affect the city. The oldest TIAF organization, COPS, has over two decades of political organizing and coalition building behind it. Its younger affiliate, the Metro Alliance, was not founded until 1989 and focuses more intensively on educational issues than COPS does. In their most important school-based initiative, COPS and Metro Alliance have institutionalized sweeping reforms that place San Antonio at the forefront of U.S. cities in terms of the free provision for after-school programs for the city's public school children.²⁵

The issue of quality after-school programs is a major social concern in the United States. Nearly half of U.S. youths under eighteen are now growing up in single-parent homes. Only 7 percent of students come from two-parent homes with only one a wage earner and the other a homemaker. In spite of dramatic changes in students' domestic lives, public schools have been slow to adjust their schedules to their pupils' needs. Schools with strong after-school programs are much more the exception than the rule; often, urban schools charge a tuition for after-

school activities. The result of the lack of public services in this domain has been a rising number of "latchkey" youth who often live in unsafe neighborhoods and either come home to an empty house each day or hit the streets with no organized activities to promote their skills and interests.²⁶

Seventy percent of students in communities served by COPS and Metro Alliance are either from homes where both parents work or are raised by just one parent. In addition, many parents have been alarmed by the rise of gangs and juvenile violence in their neighborhoods, and especially by the way that gangs have been recruiting younger and younger children into their activities. Since many working-class parents received little formal education and feel handicapped in terms of their own academic abilities, they expressed a strong desire to have after-school programs for their children where they could receive tutoring and academic enrichment programs that would enhance their children's overall cognitive development.

To serve their clientele and the larger public interest, COPS and the Metro Alliance organized to urge the city to fund three middle schools with after-school programs in 1991. When objections were raised about the expense of the programs, COPS and the Metro Alliance organized teachers, principals, and parents to conduct research to identify revenues for the programs. The research team found that the city's Department of Parks and Recreation had suffered over \$5 million in budget cuts in the previous two years.²⁷

COPS and the Metro Alliance then pressured the city to restore \$1 million to the department's budget and integrated that request into a budget plan they had been developing over years for neighborhood development in inner-city San Antonio. The plan included a wide range of issues, including housing, jobs, and code compliance. To complicate matters, San Antonio has an unusually fragmented public school system; the metropolitan area is divided into eighteen separate independent school districts. COPS and Metro Alliance activists thus needed to meet with many different sets of school administrators. They drew on their large congregational bases, with twenty-eight churches in COPS and thirty-two in the Metro Alliance, to rally their citizens to these meetings. Hundreds of "one-on-ones," small group meetings, and strategic planning sessions culminated in January 1992 with an assembly at Holy Redeemer Church on the East Side in which over two thousand San Antonians gathered to address the after-school issue. Mayor Nelson Wolff, city council members, and Texas Commissioner of Education Skip Meno attended.²⁸

Planning for the January meeting yielded a new coalition of teachers, principals, parents, and community leaders in San Antonio who understood that they could unite to demand public services from their representatives to enhance the quality of life of the city's children. That coalition discovered the scope of the budget cuts suffered by Parks and Recreation, and they also discovered that in spite of those cuts, Parks and Recreation had funded three after-school programs in middle schools in the 1991-1992 school year that established a precedent for free after-school programs. COPS activist Maria Diaz recalls "meetings upon meetings" with city council representatives as COPS and Metro Alliance advocated that the council set a top priority on the creation of after-school programs. "Of course, the first response was 'No, there is no money,'" she states. Yet because Mayor Wolff had set a high priority on youth in his electoral campaign, COPS and Metro Alliance activists were able to enlist his aid in finding funds in the city budget. Community activists did not just demand money; they also worked with public officials to find funds that were poorly spent or not spent at all.

As a result of the advocacy that preceded the January assembly, Mayor Wolff and the San Antonio city council agreed to fund the plan proposed by COPS and the Metro Alliance for twenty free after-school programs in the 1992-1993 school year. The city allocated \$14,000 for each site to hire a staff of two after-school coordinators out of its Parks and Recreation budget. Those positions were matched by a third position paid for by the school district to provide games and equipment for the programs. Each school would need to work with COPS and Metro Alliance to recruit parents to provide additional staffing for the programs, which would vary based on participation from school to school.

In the first year of its funding, between one-quarter to one-third of all children in each school in San Antonio with an after-school program took advantage of the new program. Children were tutored in material that they had studied during the regular school day and participated in a host of offerings involving the arts, athletics, and the sciences. There was such vocal public support for the programs in their first year that Metro Alliance and COPS convened another large assembly of over five hundred activists in February 1993. Recognizing the widespread popularity of the after-school program, Mayor Wolff and the city council created funding for an additional forty schools for the following year. When the school year opened in August 1993, sixty schools sponsored free after-school programs for the children of San Antonio for a total cost of \$1.3 million.

According to COPS education organizer Joe Rubio, COPS and the Metro Alliance made "sure that the parents were involved in the process of deciding what kind of program to have." Parents and community leaders not only play a major role in recruiting staff, determining curricula, and monitoring the programs, but they also are highly visible on a day-to-day basis as they offer courses, provide refreshments, and serve as teachers' aides. Some after-school programs emphasize academics; others allow children to play in a variety of organized games; and most are a blend of tutorials and recreation. In all of them, the community plays an integral role in directing the program.

In addition to providing a safe environment for the children, the after-school program began to change students' attitudes toward school and academic achievement. "Students who previously hadn't done their homework began turning it in every day," according to Julia Lerma, educational organizer for Metro Alliance. "As a result, their grades were improving, and so was their self-esteem." Laura Villanueva, a fifth-grade teacher at Woodrow Wilson Elementary, credits the after-school program with a sense of greater student and community ownership of the school: "Instead of the school being a place where students came for eight hours a day and then left, now it is *their* place, now it is *their* home."

Not only do the children benefit from the after-school program, but their parents are enthusiastic supporters. Those who have to work until the evening are relieved to know that their children are not only safe at school but are learning. As Villanueva testifies:

Time after time parents would come up to us and were so grateful that their children were *finally* getting the help that they needed to be in a safe environment and socially interact with other children. They didn't have to worry so much about their kids being at home by themselves.

Yet it would be a mistake to construe the after-school program just as a child-care program. As COPS activist Maria Diaz states, "Our concern was that the after-school program shouldn't feel like a day-care center. We really wanted it to get the community more involved in the schools. And it *has* led to more parental involvement, and a new kind of development in the schools." Parents who teach in the after-school program testify that they have a much greater awareness of the children, teachers, and challenges in the school and are in a better position to contribute to their children's educational development.

The combined efforts of COPS and the Metro Alliance have virtually

revolutionized the process of growing up in San Antonio. In the 1993-1994 school year, the after-school program was installed on sixty campuses at a cost of over \$1.3 million; in 1994-1995 the program rose to close to one hundred schools. Yet Pearl Ceasar, TIAF's lead organizer in San Antonio, sees the major contribution of TIAF in its work with schools as lying beyond the programmatic. "We've moved schools into the power arena rather than just creating programs," Ceasar says: "In fact, our real work isn't about creating programs. It's about educating parents, teachers, and principals to deal with the political realities of the city in terms of power." Laura Villanueva agrees: "I've always prided myself on my work as a teacher. But now I see how much change we've really created, and how much potential we really have. It's not just small changes for a small number of children. We've effected change for all of San Antonio."

ALLIANCE SCHOOLS: REFORMS THROUGHOUT THE STATE

When the Allied Communities of Tarrant County experienced success in Morningside Middle School in 1988 with the dramatic jump in test scores, TIAF received its first major validation that increased community participation could indeed promote academic achievement. That success compelled TIAF organizers to reflect on their accomplishments and to see whether they could be extended in a systematic fashion. "We were trying to figure out how to replicate Morningside," Ernie Cortés recalled, "but at the same time we didn't want to get bogged down in school-by-school work without having an overall strategy."

The quest for a more systematic approach led Cortés and his colleagues through a series of developments. One important step was the articulation of their philosophy of education in a paper, *The Texas IAF Vision for Public Schools: Communities of Learners*. That paper served several purposes. First, it helped with self-clarification for TIAF organizers and leaders, who recognized the need not just for relentless action but also for democratic principles to anchor and catalyze their work. Second, it was written in a way both to reassure anxious superintendents and to intrigue powerful philanthropists, such as those at the Rockefeller Foundation, who subsequently offered to provide funding for TIAF educational organizers. Third, it has provided a manifesto for parents, principals, teachers, and even students to study and to debate as they think about reshaping their schools and communities.

In the late 1980s, the TIAF then began a number of meetings with Texas Commissioner of Schools William Kirby. Ernie Cortés hoped that he could formalize a partnership with the Texas Education Agency that

would both release funds to schools in partnerships with TIAF and enhance the process of innovation in each school by giving it an official blessing from the TEA. The appointee of conservative Governor Bill Clements, Commissioner Kirby did not make any commitments to the TIAF.

In November 1990, Ann Richards was elected governor of Texas. A former public school teacher herself, Richards was eager to improve Texas' schools. She quickly appointed former COPS chair Sonia Hernandez as the director of education policy in her office and recruited a new commissioner, Lionel "Skip" Meno, from New York. Meno attended a series of TIAF gatherings in Austin and San Antonio and was persuaded that some kind of collaborative should be formed to test the power of community-based organizations to increase parental engagement and to enhance academic achievement.

On June 6, 1992, the TEA and TIAF designated twenty-one schools in low-income neighborhoods throughout Texas as Alliance Schools. Schools accepted into that network would receive special waivers from the TEA to overcome impediments to innovation and \$10,000 in TEA funding per school to enhance students' academic achievement. All of the twenty-one schools had gone through a rigorous process of house meetings, Walks for Success, assemblies, and strategic planning. All of the schools had previously collaborated with TIAF affiliates and had made a concerted effort to increase community involvement in the schools. To bolster those schools, the TEA held a special Capacity Enhancement Institute on education in the summer of 1992 in which both TEA educators and TIAF organizers presented workshops to discuss the philosophies and tools that could enhance the internal development and external community organizing work of the Alliance Schools.

The Alliance School initiative was a milestone in TIAF's work in schools. School change can be easily blocked on many levels when it is undertaken in isolation from broader movements that can support reform. The individual parent, teacher, or even principal who attempts to bring about change faces a breathtaking battery of bureaucratic restraints concerning such innocuous issues as the shape of tables in a school's cafeteria, to educational matters of major importance that relate to curriculum design and the assessment of children's learning. With the formalization of the relationship between TIAF and the TEA, TIAF schools now had new credibility in their districts. They had funds, and they had waivers that would help them to cut through bureaucratic guidelines that strangle flexible and child-centered responses to young people's manifold needs. Perhaps best of all, the TIAF and the TEA had

created a network of other educators with whom they could share ideas, develop common strategies, and fight for change. As a result of the Alliance School project, the many minefields that obstruct successful school reform could begin to be swept aside, and funds could facilitate the process of change.

Although it is often hard to judge the success of the different Alliance Schools, which have to deal with many social forces in the community, the TEA has been persuaded that the Alliance Schools are an important piece of its effort to upgrade education in Texas. According to TEA liaison James Johnson, "Alliance Schools are different because they are bottom-up, collaborative, there is a focus on parental involvement, there is a statewide organization in the IAF, and it is an intellectual group. Every one of these schools is unique, and it is very exciting." To back up that verbal support, Skip Meno agreed to increase the funding for the schools in their second year to \$15,000 per school.

The Alliance Schools have used much of their funding to promote university-based teacher education projects. In San Antonio, professors at the University of Texas at San Antonio and Trinity University work with teachers on curriculum design; in Austin, professors from the University of Texas Science and Technology Center advise teachers at Zavala Elementary; in Houston, professors from Rice University's Center for Education support mathematics and writing projects. Since research data suggest a correlation between teachers' higher education and student test scores, the investment in teachers' ongoing learning is an essential contribution to students' academic achievement.²⁹

Although the sums allocated to the Alliance Schools are paltry, principals nonetheless attribute them with promoting major changes within their schools. Morningside Middle School used its funds to train faculty in the development of interdisciplinary curricula. Houston area Alliance Schools credit Rice University's programs with both deepening their faculty's content area knowledge and expanding their repertoire of teaching methods. Zavala's partnership with the Science and Technology Center at the University of Texas has infused hitherto nonexistent vitality into its science education curriculum.

TIAF's successes in the arena of school reform are only now beginning. In January 1994, Commissioner of Education Meno publicly committed to push for the creation of one hundred Alliance Schools in the 1994-1995 school year, with a raise in TEA funding to \$50,000 per school. Meno has constantly supported the activists who fuel the Alliance Schools, saying, "If you did not exist, it would be necessary for me to invent you." Yet Ernie Cortés has even grander plans, hoping to

create a fund of over \$50 million for five hundred Alliance Schools in the coming years. Given the persistence of severe social problems in low-income neighborhoods, the successes of the Alliance Schools are important beacons of light in many areas that have been neglected by policymakers for decades.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

It is important not to overstate the successes of schools that have been in partnership with TIAF organizations. The presentation of the gains demonstrated by parental engagement at Morningside, Zavala, and Ysleta is made to demonstrate the power of parental engagement through TIAF organizing to improve public education in the inner city. All of the Alliance Schools cannot demonstrate such impressive changes in such compressed periods of time. The process of changing school cultures is developmental and requires a fortuitous interplay of many social forces and actors if it is to be successful. Most school cultures are resistant to change, even when there is widespread recognition that children are poorly served under current conditions, partially because fear is more likely to breed defensiveness and rigidity than risk-taking behaviors. It is therefore important to reflect upon the various factors that can subvert the process of cultural change promoted by TIAF organizers and leaders.

Perhaps the biggest problem for TIAF organizers and leaders involves gauging whether principals truly wish to engage parents in the heart of the school, or whether, when the moment of reckoning arrives, principals will delegate tasks to parents that help with lunchroom supervision or returning library books but make no use of their knowledge of their children and their community. If there is any grievance of TIAF organizers and leaders that surfaces most frequently, it is that principals state in advance that they want high community involvement in their schools but sabotage it when TIAF organizers and leaders actually bring the parents into the school. TIAF organizers and leaders have described principals who schedule meetings for faculty at times that conflict with meetings the parents have established to further collaboration between teachers and parents. Other principals express interest in parental concerns but provide no follow-through on grievances expressed by parents on surveys collected during a Walk for Success. Sometimes TIAF organization is not able to establish contact with the parents. Robert Rivera of TMO described one inner-city high school in Houston in which he estimated that only 10 percent of the students' addresses provided by the school for its first "Walk for Success" were

accurate. Such poor planning not only is a momentary disservice to the students people are trying to assist and the participants in the Walk for Success; it also undermines the community's confidence in the TIAF organization in the long term.

Resistance to change can come not just from principals but also from teachers. Some teachers resist any effort to reflect on their work and its meaning. When Angela Flenory of TMO gave a workshop at an inner-city high school in the spring of 1994 and asked teachers what they enjoyed the most about their work, one teacher frankly said, "Nothing," and refused to elaborate. One teacher at Ysleta took me aside and said, "You need to know that Ysleta was a fine elementary school long before EPISO got here"—an interpretation belied by the school's low test scores, lack of parental involvement, and inability to provide safe access for the children.

Whatever the problems with rallying teacher engagement, the case studies suggest that the most tenacious opposition to changing the culture of schools does *not* come from teachers. If principals are willing to model calculated risk taking that promotes parental involvement, the general tendency is for teachers to find new levels of dedication and enthusiasm for their work. There must, however, be strong leadership to encourage and nurture the teachers through the process of change as they expand their roles from conduits of information to collaborators with the community.

Another area of resistance to changing the school's culture can come from parents and from clergy. As the case of Zavala suggested, it was necessary to build up considerable momentum over many months before parents truly became involved in the school. Other parents do not know how to behave in the school once they do feel welcomed there. At Morningside some parents hit children or verbally abused them; others took Odessa Ravin's welcoming attitude as a sign of weakness and sought special privileges for their own children. At Ysleta one parent sought to take over the Parents' Center and made other parents feel as if they were intruding into her domain. In these circumstances, schools need to provide training for parents to curtail destructive behavior and to maximize their educational role in the school. While many clergy, and especially those at Morningside, took a strong leadership role in improving the school, too many clergy restrict their mission to their immediate parishioners and do not venture into the public schools. Too many parents and too many clergy affiliated with Alliance Schools are only involved in an episodic, hit-or-miss fashion that does not cultivate the textured relationships that develop social capital.

Even though they have played essential and positive roles in promoting school change in most circumstances, TIAF organizers and leaders are of course fallible. Occasionally they have violated the "iron rule" and maintained control of a program when parents were capable of doing so on their own; at other times they have dropped into the background prematurely when local leadership has not matured sufficiently to organize parents. The first educational organizer at Morningside Middle School got deeply involved in an after-school program she established, primarily because she loved working with the children, but because she was more focused on serving the children than in developing parental leadership skills, the program folded when she departed. Although the IAF practice of switching lead organizers from one city to another after several years of involvement in a site probably benefits the long-term vitality of their own organization, it can seem disruptive to principals and teachers who crave stability and who harbor initial skepticism toward outsiders who seek to promote political activism within the neighborhood and the school.

Finally, even the successful cases of school reform described are challenged by the persistence of deeply troubling phenomena and particularly the rise of youth gangs in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Drug dealing has escalated in public housing projects adjacent to Zavala Elementary School, and Zavala parents, fearful of retribution, are trying to gather the courage to press the police to clean up the projects. Morningside Middle School has had a particularly difficult struggle in recent years. Powerful youth gangs such as the Bloods and the Crips have largely taken control of portions of the Morningside neighborhood, and some parents are so worried about gang violence that they insist on picking up their children from school even though they live only four blocks away from the campus. ACT has organized information meetings with the Fort Worth Police Department and city council members to inform parents about effective ways of battling gangs' influence in their neighborhood. "Morningside is in a much tougher position than it has ever been in before," Perry Perkins confesses, "and we've really had to redouble our efforts."³⁰

WHY IT WORKS

The challenges preventing enduring successes are formidable. Yet the productivity of TIAF organizations' collaborations, which has done much under adverse conditions, demands further work on two fronts. The first of those refers to the continuing political challenges that are being mounted by TIAF organizations and met by public officials. For

although it is rarely articulated in a systematic fashion, TIAF is advancing a mutually reinforcing policy agenda in Texas that should serve to improve the educations of the state's low-income children. Even with the problems described above, TIAF successes in other areas sustain a complex web of policy whose scope is rapidly expanding throughout Texas' urban neighborhoods. Low-income schools in San Antonio can now join up with COPS and Metro Alliance to advance free after-school programs—but what is especially promising is that similar initiatives have been won in Dallas, Austin, and Houston, inspired by the San Antonio example. Likewise, within Austin, sixteen schools are seeking to replicate Zavala's success with acquiring a health clinic, and health fairs have also been held in Houston and San Antonio. TIAF organizations have fought for housing, job training, and summer work opportunities for youth and have acquired all of these with a mix of public and private funds—all as part of a trajectory that truly does address Kozol's critique of the apolitical and introspective nature of so much contemporary school reform.³¹

The second response to TIAF's work in schools is more theoretical and pertains to research agendas that should be pursued to improve urban education as well as larger issues of democratic revitalization in U.S. society. One of the most striking areas for further exploration concerns the manner in which TIAF overcomes the separation between church and state in the area of public education. "We bring the congregation to agitate the school and the school to agitate the congregation," Ernie Cortés says. Certainly that was the case at Morningside Middle School, whose success provided the point of departure for launching the entire Alliance Schools project, as well as in Zavala Elementary, where presentations from clergy helped to persuade the school board of the importance of approving a school-based clinic.

TIAF has scrupulously avoided issues of school prayer, creationism, and sex education that so often capture headlines in the media and pit public school officials against clergy. Instead, TIAF organizers have sought to recognize the intrinsic integrity of both the free public schools and religious institutions, while using the best in both sectors to upgrade the academic achievement and social conditions of low-income urban youth. According to Ernie Cortés, "There's enough common ground among our traditions that we can carve out enough space to create a public square that has moral tradition that isn't sectarian." The point is an important one, for there is indeed a filtering process in TIAF undertakings in which organizers carefully weigh the relative merits and pitfalls of attacking different kinds of social problems. Sectarian

issues, which could divide low-income African Americans from Latinos, or Protestants from Catholics, must be avoided if the IAF is to maintain its credibility as a broad-based mass organization with deep roots in low-income communities.

Educational activism can serve the internal needs of a church for recruitment of new parishioners; many parents joined their current churches as a result of the church's engagement with schools in their neighborhood. The Reverend Nehemiah Davis in Fort Worth credits his visitations with ACT with enriching his own ministry; after using surveys designed by ACT to elicit parent sentiment about Morningside Middle School, he posed similar questions to his parishioners at their homes about Mount Pisgah Baptist Church. Many parents in TIAF organizations testify that their social activism, channeled through their churches and the public schools, has deepened their appreciation of religion.³²

If churches benefit from their collaboration with the Alliance Schools, TIAF's need to identify community leaders has been excellently served by its institutional base in the churches. For those TIAF organizations that have been branded as radical in the media, as EPISO was in the 1980s, the church affiliation has also been an essential source of legitimization of the organization's presence in the community. Even when organizing in low-income neighborhoods among constituencies who have little to lose, many parents and teachers recalled that their initial reaction to TIAF organizers was one of fear, driven by the anxiety that TIAF organizers might abuse the trust of the community for their own purposes. Those fears have been allayed as parents have observed their neighbors and clergy articulating issues that have long irritated their community. The case of Zavala, where clergy testified that a health care clinic in an elementary school would not become a conduit for the distribution of birth control devices, is instructive on this point.

Given the quality of their successes, it is intriguing that TIAF organizations experience such little resentment from teachers or administrators once they have helped to change the culture of schools. It is useful at this juncture to reflect on some key internal dynamics of TIAF, both in terms of its organizational philosophy and political strategies, that explain that lack of resentment and that have enabled TIAF to be one of the few community-organizing groups that have not only survived but have developed an impressive momentum in the last two decades.

One key helpmate in TIAF organizing is the famous IAF "iron rule" never to help others who can help themselves. Once TIAF has helped a community to garner its resources, to vocalize its grievances, to broker

reforms, and to gain political credibility, it usually is not long until organizers move on to another project. "The iron rule provides dignity, self-respect, and ownership," Ernie Cortés says. The pedagogical analogue to TIAF organizations' movement of engagement and removal is the constructivist principle of "scaffolding" and "fading." Once organizers have helped the community to build a "scaffold" for their own self-mobilization, they will typically "fade" by devoting their attention to other projects where they are more deeply needed. Lupe Meils, an activist parent of Ysleta Elementary in El Paso, understands this point when she says, "We're learning for ourselves that we can organize ourselves. If EPISO was to leave tomorrow, we could take the skills we've learned and go on." Ysleta principal Dolores De Avila agrees, "We've internalized the process."

Another reason for the success of TIAF parent organizing concerns its open-ended, facilitative nature. When TIAF organizers and leaders visit homes for one-on-one conversations or as part of the Walks for Success, they do not approach parents with an agenda to sell, although in certain cases they do want parents to know about programs that can benefit their children or themselves. But first and foremost, a successful home visit is one in which organizers and leaders learn from the community about its most salient issues. It is important to emphasize that acquiring that information may not always be an easy task. Low-income inner-city residents are not accustomed to visits by community organizers and neighborhood leaders who ask them for their ideas on better ways in which their children can be served. As a consequence, parents may need considerable time to reflect upon what they might truly like for their children. "Considerable time" will vary from neighborhood to neighborhood; when Julia Lerma first began working for Metro Alliance, she spent a full six months just visiting community leaders, local clergy, teachers, and principals before she even began formulating an agenda in collaboration with community leaders. While six months may seem like a long time for this kind of work, for inner-city residents it indicates something important in terms of follow-through and commitment, which builds a base of trust and solidarity that will be needed for the political struggles that lie ahead.

Home visits and outreach in general are not just about receiving information. A major theme underlying all of that work is leadership development—finding ways in which parents can formulate and identify with carefully targeted strategies that will result in concrete benefits for their children. The solicitation of potential community leaders, and the coaching that will enable them to meet with public officials in settings

that range from Luby's Cafeteria to the San Antonio Convention Center, is much of the "bread-and-butter" work of TIAF organizers. Again, the expenditure of vast quantities of time, including one-on-one preparations of questions and hours spent in carefully prepared role plays, is absolutely essential to cultivate the local leaders who can direct and sustain the "actions" that result in funds for staff development, health care programs, and code compliance and better lighting in the neighborhood surrounding the school.

If one positive element of TIAF organizing with parents is its open-endedness in terms of staging the initial dialogues, another strength resides in the pedagogical interventions involved in helping the community to limit its grievances to focus on one deeply felt and winnable issue. Organizers are not *laissez-faire*; they do not promote whatever concepts the community brings forth. Rather, they use their judgment to identify more urgent issues that can be addressed with concrete results and that can create a dynamic of self-mobilization within a community. When EPISO first became active in Ysleta, parents had many grievances. Maribeth Larkin helped the community to choose the most salient one—traffic and safety—and to keep that in the foreground for an entire year. Austin Interfaith organizers and leaders discovered that the major issue vocalized by parents concerning their community dealt with the high volume of drug dealing in two public housing projects near Zavala Elementary. The organizers and leaders observed that the community was too afraid of the dealers to confront them. Now that the community has developed more self-confidence, it may be ready to take on that issue. In any event, Austin Interfaith will not go beyond the community in addressing issues that the community feels it can tackle successfully at any given time.

A fourth reason for the success of TIAF activities in schools is related to the organizations' interest in evolving into a *governing* rather than a *protest* group. The overall trajectory of each TIAF organization in Texas is to reach the level of COPS and Metro Alliance in San Antonio, where virtually no piece of major urban legislation is passed without prior consultation and negotiation with TIAF organization leaders. Clearly, that level of political power is impossible if organization leaders define their identities in such a way that collaborative relationships with powerholders are tabooed. Closely related to the interest in governance is the manner in which differences between racial and ethnic groups are minimized in TIAF organizations. The language of universality and democratic participation is constantly heard at TIAF gatherings, whereas the language of minority grievances is almost never advanced.

The net effect is to give TIAF a much stronger interethnic organizing base that, in turn, makes it much harder for public officials to dismiss TIAF organizations as representing a small, literally "minority" sector of the electorate.

A fifth reason that the alliance between TIAF organizations and public schools has been so fruitful is related to the rise in test scores on Texas' standardized tests. One of the most successful and appreciated parts of the work of TIAF organizations concerns workshops that its leaders and organizers have held that explain to parents just why the standardized tests are so important and how they can help their children to better prepare for the tests. The initial response of many low-income parents to TIAF workshops on testing has been anger. "Why didn't anybody ever tell us parents what these test scores mean?" one angry Austin parent inquired at a workshop in a new Alliance School in August 1994. Yet Austin Interfaith organizers Joe Higgs and Kathleen Davis have not let the anger stay on the issue of test scores. Instead, they have used that anger as a point of departure for reflecting on cultural change within schools, so that the *monologue* of reports and mandates from the school is replaced with a culture of *dialogue* with parents, teachers, clergy, administrators, and students about issues of instruction, curriculum design, and assessment.

It would be a major misinterpretation of TIAF work to wager that one could introduce policy reforms in schools and low-income neighborhoods without serious parental and community involvement and produce the same results. San Antonio designated two schools as the recipients of after-school programs in 1983 in a district in which COPS and the Metro Alliance had no member churches, and the lack of an institutional base in the community led to unstable programs that were terminated after six months. "One of the reasons that those programs have been successful is because we helped the city to identify communities close to our churches where the parents would understand the programs," organizer Joe Rubio of COPS comments. "In the other communities no one had gone in and done the legwork required to build similar relationships." Likewise, Austin Interfaith worked with principals from two elementary schools in the 1990-1991 school year who claimed to want parental engagement, but understood that in a way that reinforced rather than changed the existing school culture. As a result, Austin Interfaith broke off its relationship with both schools at the end of the year. Only when the community has a genuine opportunity to participate and to share power can the bureaucratization and

paternalism that create barriers between schools and communities be prevented.

Just as it is essential to emphasize the indispensable role of parental involvement in the preceding case studies, so must one also underline the key attitudinal and contextual nature of TIAF school organizing. Consider the example of Zavala Elementary in the spring of 1992, when an angry parent asked the teachers to explain the discrepancy between the high assessments Zavala students received from their teachers with the low results on Texas' state-mandated tests. It was of the utmost importance that *immediately* after the meeting Austin Interfaith organizers helped Zavala's defensive teachers reach out to the community to learn more about community attitudes toward the school, and that Zavala teachers felt that the community was genuinely delighted to welcome them into their homes. It would be a grave misreading of the Zavala case to presume that parents or organizers could agitate the already demoralized staff of an inner-city school and then leave teachers on their own to find a solution to their dilemma. Such strategies, applied in isolation from the larger dynamic of constructive community building and continual follow-through, would consist of an atomistic and tragic misapplication of the real lessons to be garnered from parental engagement in schools.

Staff development does not just occur within the school, in the community, or even in state and regional IAF meetings. Even before the approval of the Alliance Schools, Ernie Cortés has been aggressive in pursuing top-notch school reformers to educate TIAF organizers and leaders. TIAF has hosted large conventions and invited in keynote speakers of international renown to expand the horizons of its organizers and their Alliance School partners. Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner, school reformer Ted Sizer, and child psychologist James Comer have all shared their philosophies of education and policy recommendations in forums organized by TIAF. The structure of those conferences is designed in such a manner that representatives from each Alliance School can question presenters based on their immediate needs—a structure that enables a dynamic cross-fertilization of experiences and innovations among Alliance School activists. By bringing in advocates of school change who have a larger agenda than the creation of functional rather than dysfunctional factory schools, TIAF agitates its partners to pursue cultural change in schools rather than reinforcing the status quo. While change will be incremental, the conferences prevent the usurpation of Alliance School work by educational accommodationists

who would stymie the larger dynamic of introspection, evaluation, and transformation.

Not all Alliance School conferences feature academic luminaries flown in from the nation's leading universities. Smaller conferences, organized just for Alliance School principals or education organizers and accompanied by readings about school organization, political power, and curriculum development promote a broadening of participants' horizons concerning current developments in school reform and neighborhood revitalization. As part of TIAF's community-based orientation, its conferences and seminars never focus simply on matters confined to the internal organization of the school but expand beyond that institutional base to address neighborhood issues such as crime, code compliance, and health care. A key facet of the art of community organizing around school issues involves maintaining the proper integration of issues residing inside the school proper and in the larger community.

There are many technical reasons for the successes of TIAF school collaboratives. We miss the point, however, if we focus just on better programs, improved teacher retention rates, or even academic achievement. The most moving aspect of the partnership between TIAF and schools has to do with the dramatic personal growth of participants in the process. The majority of leaders in TIAF organizations are working-class women who are either Mexican American or African American. Many of those women remember vividly from their own childhoods the indignities of another era, in which they and their siblings received corporal punishment at school for speaking Spanish or watched beloved family members dealing with the scars inflicted by white racists. It is therefore a dramatic testimony to those women's resilience that one generation later, they have made tremendous strides in recovering the dignity of their cultures and their communities. Consider four examples of parents who have been transformed personally by their involvement in TIAF organizations in matters pertaining to education:

Annette Ytuarte is a parent from San Antonio who was labeled a special education student when she moved from a predominantly Mexican inner-city school to a predominantly Anglo suburban neighborhood in her own childhood. She now feels that her involvement in COPS is one way that she can make sure that her own children do not suffer the same stigma. "I never imagined myself meeting with the mayor. I never imagined myself in the position that I'm in now, as a leader in the community," she says. "But one thing I do know is that I had a lot of anger in me. I wasn't less intelligent than those other kids, but I didn't have the same opportunities they had." After her marriage, Ytuarte

moved back to the same inner-city neighborhood that she had grown up in and sent her children to the same schools, "but this time it was going to be different," she says. "Things had not changed, but I was determined to do something, and I also knew that I couldn't do it alone. I also knew that a lot of people felt the same anger that I did. That is when I came into COPS." Ytuarte worked hard on the after-school program and has felt tremendous vindication as the program has expanded in San Antonio.

Terri Morado, now co-chair of the Committee on Education for COPS, experienced similar injustices in her childhood. Always an industrious student, she was accepted to Yale University as a high school senior from San Antonio in 1972. Her Anglo guidance counselor, however, advised her against attending, since he was sure that she would fail. Morado went to Yale regardless and returned to San Antonio to work in her home community after graduation. In the summer of 1994, it was her role to ask the comptroller of the state of Texas at the twentieth anniversary COPS convention if he would make every effort to expand the Alliance Schools network to one hundred schools in 1995. He responded in the affirmative.

Virginia Ramirez, also a COPS co-chair, is another individual who has been transformed through her work with TIAF. Ramirez was a high school drop-out who initially was intimidated in dealing with public officials but became emboldened through the leadership training she acquired in her work with COPS. When she was forty-four, she returned to school to earn her general equivalency degree; she then continued on to college. Today, she is one of the most respected civic leaders in San Antonio, who has had a series of meetings with the mayor, school superintendent, and corporate leaders to articulate COPS' issues. "We're making sure that the system is changed," she affirms.³³

Leonora Friend is an educational organizer with Dallas Area Interfaith who worked for close to four years with ACT at Morningside Middle School in Fort Worth. When Friend's grandmother—who was a teacher—was one of the first African Americans to move to the Morningside neighborhood in 1958, she woke up the first morning after her arrival to find that a cross had been burned in her front yard during the night. Friend grew up in the Morningside community and attended Morningside Middle School in the 1960s; her daughter attended it in the 1990s. Friend was recruited by ACT, trained as an education organizer, and worked closely with principal Odessa Ravin, her staff, and parents to revitalize the school and its community. She played a major role in forming the school's action committees, increasing parental

engagement, and in creating a Neighborhood Zone with Fort Worth police that would secure Morningside students safe transit to and from the campus. On the basis of her successful work at Morningside, Friend has recently been assigned as an educational organizer for one of Dallas' toughest inner-city neighborhoods.

Those parents who are active in the Alliance Schools now have the opportunity to make sure that their own children receive better educations and become politically involved. They go on Walks for Success with their parents, learn about their parents' meetings with public officials, and some of them have directly asked their mayors, school superintendents, and other public officials to make commitments to improving public services in their communities. In San Antonio, elementary school students from the Alliance Schools have testified before the city council about the tragic conditions of their inner-city neighborhoods. "They're learning politics at a very early age," Annette Ytuarte of COPS affirms.

CRITIQUE

It should be clear that TIAF is enriching U.S. education at a critical juncture in the history of the public schools, when many interests are leading a wholesale attack on public education. Nonetheless, as the aphorism says, "A great truth wants to be criticized, not idolized." Let us therefore set forth some shortcomings of TIAF's initiatives, followed by a description of problems that can accompany intensified parental engagement in schools.³⁴

A first and major limitation of TIAF organizing occurs at the classroom level, where the quality of interaction between teachers and students is critical and where TIAF organizers and leaders are on terra incognita. Most TIAF organizers and leaders are novices unfamiliar with the history or philosophies of education; the nuances of instruction and learning, or the various modalities of assessment. Through seminars, conferences, and sheer chutzpah, they have acquired a working knowledge of many issues in contemporary education, but that working knowledge is thin given the actual richness and diversity of theories and methods of education. While this shortcoming has not impeded remarkable changes within the Alliance Schools, much further study of current research could greatly enrich and advance the work of the Alliance Schools.

A second area of critique concerns the much-heralded pragmatism of Alinsky organizers. While issues-driven organizing doubtless has many

blessings in terms of avoiding the quagmires entailed in hardened ideological positions, the focus on concrete, winnable issues confronted by the community on the neighborhood level can impede a larger effort entailing organizing at a national level to address pressing civic needs. The three cities that sell the highest quantities of guns in the United States are San Antonio, Dallas, and Houston. Surveys suggest that the roughly 18 million Texans own over 60 million guns. In 1994 over 100,000 Texans were imprisoned, many for offenses involving firearms. Yet in spite of the virtual war zone that exists in inner-city neighborhoods, TIAF has taken no stance on gun control. A price is paid for TIAF's efficacy.³⁵

As an organization, TIAF must avoid strictly partisan politics if it is to survive as a viable political actor in urban Texas. At the same time that we respect TIAF's need for autonomy, however, we should not lose sight of the need for frankly partisan politics. Nor should an emphasis on the self-interestedness of social actors mitigate the few fragile manifestations of public virtue because of individuals' comprehension of the larger issues at stake. When Mayor Bruce Todd of Austin sought to expand the notion of school health clinics to include sex education and counseling, he was recognizing the hard fact that many U.S. youth are both sexually active and ignorant of the consequences of their actions. Austin Interfaith was loyal to the Zavala Elementary School community and restricted the mission of the clinics. An impartial spectator, however, must ask whether the youth in the Austin schools were well served by that decision. Simply the response that the community and in particular the Catholic Church did not want sexual counseling in the schools does not mean that either the community or the church is willing to address the need of Austin adolescents for forthright counseling and services that could, if properly conveyed, save the lives of youth who could incur AIDS or other contagious diseases.

TIAF's pragmatism has led to a muting of the radical propensities of the IAF that Saul Alinsky boldly touted. Alinsky dared to voice direct criticisms of capitalism as an economic system; TIAF organizations avoid such cultural taboos. While that strategy may open TIAF to more coalitions with corporations and entrepreneurs, it also blunts a radical critique of the prevailing contemporary spirit of unlimited acquisitiveness and materialism, promulgated so persuasively through the mass media.

It is not true that TIAF school strategy is simply pragmatic. If it were, TIAF would not engage keynote speakers such as Howard Gardner and

Ted Sizer, whose innovations have only recently been piloted in schools but whose visions of public education are tenaciously democratic, intellectually multifaceted, and demand risk-taking behavior on behalf of educators. Rather than lower expectations to the level of the attainable, TIAF has raised standards and advanced reflection about educational achievement that challenges the nostrums of even the most accomplished schools.

Third, there are also problems with increasing parental involvement. All principals have stories of parents who have illegitimately sought to advance their children's private interests at the cost of the community, or who have demanded high standards of the school for their children's academic achievement while providing no supervision or discipline for their children at home. For principals who already feel beleaguered by their faculty, their students, their central office, and the Texas Education Agency, the prospect of inviting in yet another interest group with its own agenda can be an intimidating prospect. TIAF needs to be more specific about the nature of parental engagement that it promotes in its work in schools if it is to expedite the process of opening up schools for a climate of radical cultural change.

These criticisms of TIAF organizations' work in education are subject to correcting influences. Lack of knowledge about education from the inside out, rather than from the outside in, can be corrected through study, debate, and the experience that comes from hundreds of hours of observation and intervention in schools. An emphasis on issue-driven politics within the organization can be corrected through partisan politics by individual members in groups outside of TIAF organizations' boundaries. TIAF organizations make no claims to be totalistic associations that should overpower the pluralistic nature of their members' lives; the very fact that TIAF organizations expend tremendous energy encouraging and enabling low-income citizens to vote, but do not prescribe how they should vote, reflects the self-limiting nature of TIAF's radicalism.

CONCLUSION

The openness of TIAF organizations to the radical underpinnings of the U.S. democratic tradition enables them to win a broad-based appeal that is a major cornerstone of their very real political power. The importance of a broadly based democratic philosophy, grounded in the Judeo-Christian heritage and respectful of other religious orientations, enables TIAF organizers to speak to all segments of the U.S. polity. From

the vantage point of organizing communities to improve public schools, this maverick, open-ended, and pragmatic orientation is a highly effective conduit for catalyzing radical, community-based change in schools.

The complex negotiations between TIAF affiliates and schools, churches, and public officials have recently come full circle to transform the internal structure of TIAF. The executive committee of Metro Alliance in San Antonio voted in the spring of 1994 to include Pamela Walls and Richard Alvarado, the principals of two Alliance Schools, on its executive board. "We see it as an important step in the development of joint strategies," Metro Alliance educational organizer Julia Lerma says. Metro Alliance will now reflect the nature of its commitment to public education in the composition of its governing body—an unprecedented event in the history of the IAF. If the patterns of past years are followed, the San Antonio TIAF chapters will lead the way in this important reorganization for other affiliates, thus slowly transforming the internal culture of TIAF and opening new avenues for the recruitment and development of community leaders.

TIAF organizations have developed sufficient momentum in changing the culture of schools that many of their successes are irreversible. Some of the most important of those successes are attitudinal: "I remember learning at my professors' feet that educators should never have anything to do with politics," one Alliance School principal recalls, "but I'll never be that quiet little principal I was before. Now I'm a community leader." "Twenty years ago people used to say, '*Somos pobres. No somos nada*,'" Archbishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio and a member of the IAF's board of trustees says, "but now people have discovered their self-worth." Through their engagement, parents are showing that policymaking can transpire just as effectively at the kitchen table as in the Oval Office.

TIAF organizers and leaders now have over a decade of intense organizing in educational policy matters behind them in Texas. They have fought for parental engagement, adequate funding, better student-teacher ratios, and a new kind of political power based in interdenominational partnerships for public school reform. They have forged themselves into a dynamic new mediating institution that is independent of governmental bureaucracies and the vagaries of the marketplace. An early reading of the evidence demonstrates that TIAF organizations have played a provocative role in renegotiating power relationships to improve the educations of low-income youth throughout Texas. While the Alliance School projects are still at an early stage of their development, they

represent a dynamic source for educational renewal that should attract widespread attention in the national quest for inhabitable and humane cities with prosperous, stable, and safe schools and neighborhoods.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown, 1991). 4. Grateful acknowledgment is made of grants from the Mellon Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the American Academy of Arts and Science that supported this research. I am grateful to Allen Matusow of the Department of Humanities at Rice University, Robert Wilson of the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, and Theda Skocpol of the Department of Sociology at Harvard University for their roles in gaining that financial support. In addition, I thank the many community organizers and leaders of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation who hosted my visits, explained their programs, and commented on early drafts of the manuscript. I also thank Keri Kinsey for her assistance in starting this research.

2. On the peculiar alliance between both conservatives and radicals in their attacks on public schooling, see Peter S. Hlebowitsh, *Radical Curriculum Theory Reconsidered: A Historical Approach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 94–116. For a description and analysis of the school restructuring movement of the 1980s, see Thomas Toch, *In the Name of Excellence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). On school choice, vouchers, and privatization, see John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990), and Myron Lieberman, *Public Education: An Autopsy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

3. On traditions as arguments, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and David Gross, *The Past in Ruins: Tradition and the Critique of Modernity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992); on U.S. traditions, see Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991). The best survey of U.S. educational history remains Lawrence Cremin's three-volume survey: *American Education: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); *American Education: The National Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); and *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

4. For cross-national comparisons describing Americans' support of voluntary associations, see James Curtis, "Voluntary Association Joining: A Cross-National Comparative Note," *American Sociological Review* 36 (1971): 872–880, and Sidney Verba, Norman H. Nie, and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven Nation Comparison* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

5. For an interpretation of the discrepancies between Texas myths and realities, see Walter L. Buenger and Robert A. Calvert, *Texas through Time: Evolving Interpretations* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991).

6. Report of the Task Force on High School Education of the Texas State Board of Education, *One Student at a Time* (Austin: Texas Education Agency, 1992), 12; Bennett Roth and Rad Sallee, "Houston's Much Poorer Now than It Was in 1980," *Houston Chronicle*, February 10, 1993; Amy Lowrey, ed., *Building Communities of Learners* (Austin: Office of the Governor, 1992), 11; see also the United States General Accounting Office, *School*

Age Demographics: Recent Trends Pose New Educational Challenges (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1993).

7. Lowrey, *Building Communities of Learners*, 45; "Seeds of Trouble," *Houston Chronicle*, Sunday, August 14, 1994, 2.

8. Recent analyses of the erosion of the U.S. middle class include Frank Levy, *Dollars and Dreams: The Changing American Income Distribution* (New York: Norton, 1988); Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: Harper, 1990), and *Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity* (New York: Random House, 1993); Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations* (New York: Vintage, 1992); and Lawrence Mishel and Jared Bernstein, *The State of Working America, 1994–1995* (Westchester, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1994). Gary Orfield defines schools with over 90 percent minority youth as intensely segregated. See his *The Growth of Segregation in American Schools: Changing Patterns of Separation and Poverty since 1968* (Alexandria, Va.: National School Boards Association, 1993). 5. For a historical analysis of racial segregation and urban education, see Harvey Kanor and Barbara Brenzel, "Urban Education and the 'Truly Disadvantaged': The Historical Roots of the Contemporary Crisis, 1945–1990," in Michael Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debate: View from History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 366–402. For an analysis of Texas' low ranking on the provision of public services, see Chandler Davidson, *Race and Class in Texas Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); for Texas' affinity with other southern states on this point, see David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 139–196.

9. See Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

10. There is a vast research literature on the Industrial Areas Foundation. Essential readings include Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1947), and *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971); Sanford D. Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky—His Life and Legacy* (New York: Vintage, 1992); Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Emil Schwarzhaupt, 1980), 233–330; Harry C. Boyte, *Commonwealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989); and the Industrial Areas Foundation, *IAF: 50 Years: Organizing for Change* (Franklin Square, N.Y.: N.p., 1990). On COPS' early efforts, see Heywood T. Sanders, "Communities Organized for Public Service and Neighborhood Revitalization in San Antonio," in this volume, and Joseph D. Sekul, "Communities Organized for Public Service: Citizen Power and Public Policy in San Antonio," in David R. Johnson, John A. Booth, and Richard J. Harris, eds., *The Politics of San Antonio: Community, Progress, and Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 175–190. For background on school funding in Texas, see Richard Lavine, "School Finance Reform," in this volume; Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 206–233; Toch, *In the Name of Excellence*, 72–95; and Gregory G. Rocha and Robert H. Webking, *Politics and Public Education: Edgewood v. Kirby and the Reform of Public School Financing in Texas* (Minneapolis and St. Paul: West, 1992).

11. On TIAF, see the Texas IAF Network, *Vision, Values, Action* (Austin: Texas IAF Network, 1990); Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* (Denton: University of North Texas, 1990); Ernesto Cortés Jr., "Reweaving the Fabric: The Iron Rule and the IAF Strategy for Power and Politics," in Henry G. Cisneros, ed., *Interwoven*

Destinies: Cities and the Nation (New York: Norton, 1993), 294–319; and Peter Skerry, *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (New York: Free Press, 1993). The relationship between the national IAF and the Texas IAF is, of course, close and dynamic, and many comments in this chapter that refer to the Texas IAF could be generalized to the national organization. In the interests of capturing the regional and grassroots character of Texas developments, I shall in general refer to TIAF in the following and make reference to the national IAF only in cases in which a uniformity of opinion or tactics is explicit. On academic achievement as a consequence of House Bill 72, see Ronald F. Ferguson, "Paying for Public Education: New Evidence on How and Why Money Matters," *Harvard Journal of Legislation* 28 (1991): 465–491.

12. Cortés, "Reweaving the Fabric," 298.

13. Representative works of the new progressivism include Theodore Sizer, *Horace's Compromise* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), and *Horace's School* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992); Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic, 1983), and *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (New York: Basic, 1991); and James P. Comer, *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project* (New York: Free Press, 1980). The use of the term "new progressivism" to describe the emergent collaboratives between Sizer, Gardner, and Comer may be subjected to scrutiny by critics who would emphasize the differences between an earlier generation of progressives and Sizer et al. In their emphasis on thematic approaches to curricula, child-centered interventions, and democratic community participation, however, the commonalities between generations are salient enough to emphasize historical continuities and the relationship of the contemporary educational movement to its predecessor. Further research is needed to address these relationships and to articulate the conceptual affinities only touched upon in this deliberately schematic representation. For criticisms of the factory school, see Raymond Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); and Linda McNeil, *Contradictions of Control: School Culture and School Knowledge* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). On progressive education in its earlier incarnations, see Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Vintage, 1961); Patricia Altbjerg Graham, *Progressive Education: From Arcady to Academe* (New York: Teachers College, 1967); and Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

14. On "social capital," see Glenn Loury, "Why Should We Care about Group Inequality?" *Social Philosophy and Policy* 5 (1987): 249–271; James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 300–321; and Ernesto Cortés Jr., "Politics of Social Capital," *Texas Observer*, January 29, 1993, 16–17.

15. On Catholic schools' academic achievement, see James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared* (New York: Basic, 1982) and Coleman and Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

16. The poverty line and the requirements for qualifying for free or reduced lunches are changed every few years. In 1993 students could get a free meal at school if their family income was at 133 percent of the poverty level or below. They could get a reduced-price meal if their family income was at 185 percent of the poverty level or below. For a

family of four, the free-lunch annual income limit was \$18,655. For a reduced-price lunch, the income limit was \$26,548 for a family of four.

17. Beth Freeking, "Community Answers Call to Save Its Schools," *Fort Worth Sunday Star-Ledger*, October 10, 1993.

18. Many convincing studies have been conducted by educators who warn about the reductionist nature of standardized test scores. Certainly, the hypostatization of test scores, so that they are reified as absolute indicators of pupils' knowledge, rather than as rough indicators of students' cognitive ability, is erroneous. On the other hand, to leap to the opposite extreme and suggest that test scores reflect nothing of students' intellectual ability is a disservice to inner-city students whose educators need to be held accountable for their poor performance. For a balanced critique of standardized testing and an alternative interpretation of assessment, see Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (New York: Basic, 1991).

19. Starita Smith, "Panel Won't Back School Health Plan," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 2, 1992, B1; "AISD Trustees Delay Decision on Health Project," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 3, 1994, B1.

20. Editors, "Zavala Elementary Earns Recognition for Turnaround," *Austin American-Statesman*, April 10, 1994, D2.

21. For historical information on public education in El Paso, see Mario T. Garcia, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880–1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 110–126.

22. Chapter I funding has been allocated by the Department of Education since 1981. From 1965 to 1981, it was known as Title I and was provided under the auspices of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

23. Hollibrook Elementary School is part of Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools program. For descriptions, see Edward Fiske, *Smart Schools, Smart Kids* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 17–20, 112–113; Pamela Bullard and Barbara Taylor, *Making School Reform Happen* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993), 31–54; and Jane McCarthy and Suzanne Still, "Hollibrook Accelerated Elementary School," in Joseph Murphy and Philip Hallinger, eds., *Restructuring Schooling: Learning from Ongoing Efforts* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Corwin, 1993), 63–83.

24. Juan A. Lozano, "Richards Praises Ysleta School," *El Paso Herald-Post*, August 20, 1994, B1.

25. See Heywood T. Sanders, "Communities Organized for Public Service and Neighborhood Revitalization in San Antonio," in this volume and in Johnson, Booth, and Harris, eds., *The Politics of San Antonio*.

26. Leon Lynn, "Building Parent Involvement," *Brief to Principals* 8 (Winter 1994): 1.

27. "Teach Parents to Help Children," *San Antonio Express-News*, September 10, 1993.

28. On COPS' work on housing, see Sanders, "Communities Organized for Public Service and Neighborhood Revitalization in San Antonio," in this volume.

29. On the relevance of teachers' higher education to student test scores in Texas, see Ferguson, "Paying for Public Education."

30. Drop-out rates for Davis and Yates refer to the number of freshman students who drop out before completing their high school education within a four-year period. On Morningside, see Ruth M. Bond, "Principal Fighting to Protect Students from Gang Influence," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 19, 1993, A1.

Dennis Shirley

31. The multifaceted approach of TIAF to education and community development bears strong similarity to the integrative policy approach advocated by Lisbeth Schorr, *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* (New York: Anchor, 1989), excepting her failure to address the importance of engaging parents on the level of political participation.

32. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 153.

33. Cortés, "Reweaving the Fabric," 307.

34. Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorism is quoted by Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 50.

35. For a criticism of the IAF, see Robert Fisher, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984).



The Colonias Water Bill

Communities Demanding Change

Robert H. Wilson and Peter Menzies

FOR DECADES THE BORDER REGION OF SOUTH TEXAS has been characterized by economic deprivation.¹ More than a third of the region's mostly Hispanic population lives in poverty.² Unemployment rates in the border counties are typically two to four times higher than the state average. At the same time, the region has experienced strong population growth, surging 40.5 percent between 1970 and 1980 before abating to more modest, yet still robust, levels during the 1980s.³ As a result of these forces—pervasive poverty and rapid population growth—home-ownership opportunities for low-income families have been severely limited. Among the few affordable housing options available to the poor is the purchase of a lot in the residential subdivisions known as "colonias."

The proliferation of these colonias has led to some of the worst housing conditions in the nation. Colonias lack the basic amenities most U.S. citizens take for granted: paved roads, street lights, effective drainage systems, garbage collection, and police protection. More critical, however, to the health of colonia residents and the region in general is the widespread use of substandard septic tanks and the lack of access to clean, potable water in many homes. In some subdivisions, residents have little choice but to obtain drinking water from contaminated wells or irrigation ditches. Nearly all colonia households rely on substandard septic tanks, latrines, or outhouses to dispose of wastes.⁴



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