

Communities, Unions Partner for Change

By Henry Allen and Leigh Dingerson

In 1996 an informal group of foundation leaders began meeting to explore opportunities for collaboration among grantmakers, community groups and unions to address issues confronting the working poor. The following year the Neighborhood Funders Group (NFG), a national network of foundations committed to expanding support for organizations that help low-income people improve their communities, formally established the Working Group on Labor and Community.¹

NFG and the members of the Working Group are deeply concerned about America's widening gap in wealth, income and political influence, and the deterioration of conditions for immigrant workers vulnerable to the most extreme forms of exploitation. They see vast numbers of America's workers struggle to survive in part-time, seasonal or minimum wage jobs with few or no benefits. This most often means lack of health care coverage, and very limited opportunities for career advancement, affordable housing or a decent education for their children.

At the same time, the American labor movement has been undergoing major leadership and policy changes, returning to its core mission of "organizing the unorganized." This has led to a fundamental shift in its positions on immigration policy and immigrant workers, as well as to a growing recognition that the future of organized labor and a broader movement for social justice are inextricably linked.

In this context, the goals of the Working Group are to provide opportunities for foundations and unions to learn more about one another; to increase support for nonprofit organizations that build partnerships between unions and community groups; and to create opportunities for funders to meet with low-wage workers, union leaders and religious and community leaders to identify areas of agreement and common concern.

1. Much of the material used to describe the history of the Working Group on Labor and Community is drawn from the group's 2003 brochure published by the Neighborhood Funders Group.

Over the past seven years the Working Group has reached hundreds of other funders through a variety of activities, including organizing workshops, site visits and learning tours at the national conferences of the Council on Foundations and the Neighborhood Funders Group. Its focus has been on a wide range of issues, from child care, health care, affordable housing and immigrant rights to workforce development, worker rights and education reform. The Working Group convened a group of funders to meet with top officials of the AFL-CIO and co-sponsored with Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees a series of learning tours on immigrant workers. It will soon publish a study on the role and impact of Immigrant Worker Centers across the United States.

One recent initiative sponsored by the Working Group is *Partnerships for Change: Community-Union Collaboration in Public Education*, which was convened in Chicago in April 2003.

Partnerships for Change: Community-Union Collaboration in Public Education

Early in 2002, a small group of foundation officers, including members of the Working Group on Labor and Community, began a series of conversations with community organizers and teacher-unionists about their common interests in public school reform and about the joint work emerging in some cities.

In dozens of cities across the country over the last decade, community-organizing groups have begun to tackle education-related issues. As that work moves deeper into issues directly relating to teaching and learning, the dynamics between parent and community organizations and the local teachers unions become critical.

Unfortunately, plenty of blame gets served up when it comes to determining why our public schools—particularly those that serve predominantly low-income children and children of

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color—don't provide a better education. One of the casualties of this development has been trust and enthusiasm among parents and teachers in figuring out ways to work together.

Yet, a handful of community organizations have refused to accept the widespread assumption that parents and teachers are adversaries, and are developing tentative but exciting relationships with parents and local teachers unions. Together, these constituencies are identifying and working toward substantive school reform. The foundation officers began to focus on a handful of collaborations that were emerging, and to consider how their efforts could be spotlighted and supported.

By July 2002 the discussion group had become a Planning Committee. A request for proposals was distributed, and the Center for Community Change (CCC) was selected to coordinate a two-day meeting of some of these parent, teacher and community leaders to learn from them and identify ways to support their efforts. The result was *Partnerships for Change: Community-Union Collaboration in Public Education*, a convening of some 75 parents, community organizers, representatives from several foundations and local and national union leaders from the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers.

Building a Table for Dialogue

As the Center for Community Change began to explore emerging partnerships across the country, staff held conversations with over 60 unions and community organizations in 25 school districts in 21 states.

By the fall of 2002 it had developed some understanding of the landscape. Certain themes were emerging that helped CCC refine its ideas about the convening and develop a better sense of some of the nuances of these relationships.

The Planning Committee wanted the convening to provide an opportunity for union leaders and organizers, teachers and parents, to learn from and build relationships with each other. It wanted fledgling partnerships around the country to share ideas and experiences with one another and with funders. It wanted to support and encourage such partnerships.

Participants came to the event in teams of union and community representatives. This team-based approach enabled the participants to

strengthen their working relationships. It also allowed the committee to take a comprehensive look at a small number of districts and learn from both sides of the partnerships.

Coming Together: Chicago

In April 2003, when Partnerships for Change convened in Chicago, nine teams of four people, representing collaborations in eight school districts (New York City sent two teams), came together for the two-day event.

A key to the gathering's success was the presence of high-level leaders from the school districts. Members of participating teams included union presidents and other officers, classroom teachers, senior community organizers representing three of the national organizing networks and one independent organizing collaborative, two school principals, six community leaders and three parent leaders.

Prior to the convening, each team developed a "profile" describing the challenges with which it grappled in building its collaborative work. The two-day meeting was filled with questions. What made these relationships tick? What are the hurdles that others might encounter? What concrete issues lend themselves to collaborative work? Will such collaborations really lead to better results for poor children and children of color? How can these partnerships be supported?

During the meeting, participants identified some common characteristics of their relationships that could perhaps be useful to others engaged in this work. Successful partnerships seemed to be:

- rooted in negotiation and openness and engaged in deep communication;
- mutually respectful of each other's work and organizational culture;
- talking about big issues, each group's assumptions and long-term goals; and
- developing a common agenda, rather than pushing pre-existing strategies on one another.

Another lesson was the value of "retreat" time. All of the participants expressed gratitude for the time to meet informally with their fellow teammates, and to build both the personal and professional sides of their relationships.

It became evident that several areas of work tended to lend themselves to parents and teachers finding common ground on important issues.

These included efforts to understand and influence the implementation of the new No Child Left Behind Act, campaigns to oppose privatization of schools, and work concerning teacher quality and school climate.

A full report on the meeting and brief descriptions of the partnership teams can be found in the Center for Community Change's report on the convening, which was published in the center's *Education Organizing* newsletter. The report is available in hard copy through the center, or on the center's Web site at www.community-change.org/education/publications.

After Chicago

The Chicago meeting produced more than talk. Each of the partnership teams has continued to work together, and several have launched major initiatives since April:

- In New York, the United Federation of Teachers and the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools (CC9) have reached agreement on a "Platform for Educational Improvement." The organizations credit the Chicago meeting with having a significant impact on their relationships and ability to move forward.
- In Albuquerque, ACORN and the Albuquerque Teachers Federation are working jointly on a proposal for a pilot project on teacher quality in several Albuquerque schools. The proposal will be introduced in the New Mexico state legislature in January.
- Sacramento's Area Congregations Together (ACT) is helping the local teachers union and the district administration negotiate agreements around several initiatives. Both organizations credit the work done in and since the Chicago meeting with helping ACT play a positive role in the increasingly difficult relationships in the district.

The enthusiasm generated in Chicago led to a commitment by the Working Group, the Planning Committee and the CCC to extend the project for at least another 18 months. Efforts are under way now to secure funding for four types of activities:

- The Partnerships for Change project will plan two additional convenings of the original partnership teams, and provide them a chance to

continue building their relationships and reflecting on their work. These meetings will delve more deeply into the work of the partnerships, and provide an opportunity for planning, common learning and strategizing around specific joint efforts. The project is also seeking to include a small number of newer collaborative teams in each meeting.

- The project will produce regular updates for partnership teams so that they can stay in touch with the work developing in other cities.
- The project hopes to use newsletters, magazines and other media to begin to change public perceptions of divergent interests of teachers and parents in school reform. By telling the stories of the collaborative work among community groups, parents, school reform organizations, teachers and their unions, the partnership is encouraging more discussion and collaboration among parents and teachers and their organizations across the country.
- As the collaborations begin to delve into some of the sticky and complex issues of school reform, the project will develop a resource clearinghouse to support its work. The clearinghouse might, for example, have sample union contract language around staff development or parent involvement. Organizing groups that develop platforms or working principles will be able to share them through the resource clearinghouse. Such a clearinghouse would provide partnerships with the program support needed to assist their efforts.

The Partnerships for Change project has provided a welcome spark in the all-too-often frustrating world of school reform. Its organizers are hopeful that some of these partnerships will begin to demonstrate the power of collaborative work between community organizing groups and teacher unions to improve educational achievement for low-income children and students of color in struggling public schools. ☺

Henry Allen is the senior program officer at the Hyams Foundation in Boston, whose mission is to increase economic and social justice and power within low-income communities. Leigh Dingerson serves on the field staff at the Center for Community Change, which works to build and strengthen community-based organizations in low-income neighborhoods nationwide.

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