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# WASHINGTON COMMENTARY

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## Parents: Time to Get Organized

BY ANNE C. LEWIS

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**S**EVERAL months ago, an organized protest and boycott by some California parents abruptly ended a fast-food chain's practice of offering free calorie-laden treats to students with good grades. And yet, parent organizing groups in the same state complain that they cannot get beyond the "rude" office staff at their children's schools.

Apparently, the power of customers' purses means something in the private sector, but the power of the "customer" parents in the public sector runs into a wall. True, everyone knows that "helicopter" parents — the ones who hover over their children even in classrooms — have some leverage in schools for the middle and upper classes. But the people inside schools generally have the most power over what happens to children's education. And they will continue to hold it as long as they provide the definition of sound parent involvement, which for many educators still means bake sales and showing up on time for meetings with teachers.

Conservative economic theorists and activists have tried to change this imbalance by proposing that parents be given greater choices. More affluent parents already have and use such choices, either in the selection of where they live or in their know-how about how to "work the system" and get into the schools they want or get their children the teachers they want. Low-income parents, however, seem to lack enthusiasm for sending their children to other schools where the academics might be better but where they have no guarantee that their children will be treated any better.

At the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) this year, parent involvement issues were prominent because they were embedded in the meeting's theme about schools and civic responsibility. Although often using convoluted titles, the research seems to be giving parents a simple one-

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word message: organize. Even one of the most prominent researchers on parent involvement, Anne Henderson, who has recently updated *Beyond the Bake Sale*, her popular review of research and practice, and has always promoted school/family partnerships, commented that partnerships are not possible unless "there is equal power, which comes from organizing by parents."

Most of the examples from the research focused on "safe" places that don't require direct collaboration with the schools. La Manzana Community Resources, serving communities around Watsonville, California, south of San Jose, for example, established a center where even migrant families find a way to communicate to teachers and administrators. Eduvigis Caballero, who picked strawberries for 10 years in the fields, helped hundreds of parents write letters to teachers about "their dreams for their children." She worked with the center to turn themes from the letters into mini-dramas, which are presented to groups in the area. Parents now are recording their digital stories to give to teachers.

Another AERA session highlighted the Urban Parent Teacher Education Collaborative, a joint effort of Pepperdine University and the Parent-U-Turn organization in Los Angeles County. Anthony Collatos of Pepperdine and Mary Johnson, now head of the LA Parent Collaborative, co-teach a course — at parent centers — for aspiring teachers. One point Johnson drives home with the student teachers is that it takes only a few informed parents to hold a school accountable, but to be effective, active parents must also be seen not just as "rebels" but in other roles such as community volunteers.

One of the most solid sets of research findings released at AERA showed that community organizing actually produces better outcomes for students and influences policies and the redistribution of resources. The Community Involvement Program of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University documented six years of work by seven urban organizations that were mobilizing low-income communities to press for school reforms.

Supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the research found that successful strategies sustained over time contributed to higher student attendance, test scores, graduation, and college-going rates in the cities of Oakland, Philadelphia, Miami, and Austin. The organizing led to more equitable distribution of resources in Illinois, Austin, and Los Angeles. Students involved in the community organizing showed a commitment to civic life — 60% had contributed to community problem solving in the last year compared to 19% in a national sample. (The full report of

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the Annenberg effort, *Organized Communities: Stronger Schools*, will be released this summer.)

Engaging the public in improving and supporting schools is a different area of research from engaging parents but should be just as “deliberative,” if not more so, according to another AERA panel. Reporting on research in California, Connecticut, Alabama, and South Carolina, the researchers said that a community vision for schools was a “hallucination” unless there was also action and that permanent structures providing expertise and time needed to be put in place.

The fact that we need to deliberately construct ways for parents and communities to exercise equal power in the education of children seems unfortunate, because everyone knows that children thrive best when they are surrounded by competent, caring adults — educators as well as parents. However, the issue will be with us for a long time, I predict, because it is going to take a long time to build the trust that is needed.

Power will be equalized when those inside schools have the capacity and the will to educate every child to his or her fullest and when parents or their surrogates care deeply enough about the advantages of education to give it first-order importance in their lives. In the stressed and complex world of families today, however, parents cannot provide their side of the power bargain unless they do it together and in communities that are doing their part to be healthy, positive environments for children.

Meanwhile, we have much to learn about the community side of the bargain — and how much it can contribute. In a somewhat ironic twist, La Manzanita Community Resources, which grew out of a cannery strike by low-income workers more than 20 years ago, is providing a “safe” place for some teachers who have become frustrated with the limits on their professional abilities. They are using the center for professional development on such issues as bilingual teaching and are going to put their stories into digital form and show them around the community. ■

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