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ABSTRACT

This study examined how community organizations can use research to identify community education interests and to influence school systems to serve those interests. A case study of the Southeast Education Task Force in Baltimore, Maryland, analyzed the organization's efforts to develop a school facility plan and to persuade the school system to adopt and implement it. The community organization combined formal research on school facilities, political research on allies and decisions makers, and informal collection of local knowledge. The organization used this research to develop short-term and long-range facility and capital improvement plans. With the research, the organization persuaded the school system to repair school facilities and assisted the system in persuading state decision makers to approve a new neighborhood school. The paper identifies conditions under which an organization may use research influentially with a school system. The case illustrates ways community organizations can use research to hold school systems accountable for responding to community agendas. (Contains 56 references.) (Author/SLD)

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HOW COMMUNITIES CAN USE RESEARCH TO HOLD SCHOOL SYSTEMS ACCOUNTABLE

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how community organizations may use research to identify community education interests and to influence school systems to serve those interests. A case study of the Southeast Education Task Force in Baltimore, Maryland, analyzes the organization's efforts to develop a school facility plan and to persuade the school system to adopt and implement it. The community organization combined formal research on school facilities, political research on allies and decision makers, and informal collection of local knowledge. The organization used this research to develop short-term and long-range facility and capital improvement plans. With the research, the organization persuaded the school system to repair school facilities and assisted the system in persuading State decision makers to approve a new neighborhood school. The paper identifies conditions under which community organizations are likely to conduct and use research, as well as conditions under which they may use research influentially with a school system. The case illustrates ways community organizations can use research to hold school systems accountable for responding to community agendas.

Key words: community organizations, school facilities, school systems, research use, accountability

HOW COMMUNITIES CAN USE RESEARCH TO HOLD SCHOOL SYSTEMS ACCOUNTABLE

The Leave No Child Behind Act is one of many school reform initiatives that emphasize the importance of using research to design educational programs. Most of the debate focuses on curriculum and pedagogy, with the burden of scientific proof placed on school systems. This paper extends that discussion in two dimensions. First, it looks at school facilities. Second, it considers how communities may conduct research as a basis for school system decisions.

The paper analyzes conditions under which a community organization may use scientific research to hold a school system accountable for providing adequate facilities for low achieving students in high poverty schools. This inquiry has two parts. One examines when and how a community organization may develop and use research. The other looks at when and how a community organization using research can influence a school system.

The paper explores these questions by analyzing a case study of the Southeast Education Task Force, a grass-roots community organization created in 1995 to improve the schools of Southeast Baltimore, Maryland. The case focuses on efforts to develop and use research to prepare a neighborhood school facilities plan and to persuade the school system to implement the plan. The paper's first section presents a perspective for the study. The second describes the study's research methods. The third presents the case. The fourth draws conclusions and lessons for community action in school reform.

FRAMEWORK

School Facilities

When James Coleman and his colleagues looked for associations between school facilities and student achievement, they concluded that facilities apparently have slight impact on student learning. They found that students' family backgrounds, particularly socio-economic status, matter a great deal (Coleman, et al., 1966). Curriculum and pedagogy, on the one hand, and family and community culture and conditions, on the other, both strongly influence student learning. Within this context, however, school buildings affect students in two ways: through symbolic meanings and effects of the physical structures.

The most consistent case regarding the educational consequences of buildings' symbolic meanings has been presented by civil rights advocates calling attention to racial and associated class inequalities in school facilities. They argue that familiar, easily recognizable, once legally sanctioned disparities teach racial minority and lower-income students that society values them less than white and middle class students, suggest that society may not have ready places for them as adults, and may discourage them from trying to learn at school (for example, Anyon, 1997; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Irons, 2002; Kluger, 1975; Patterson, 2001).

At the same time, the physical characteristics of school buildings, whatever their financial costs or symbolic meanings, can affect teachers' and students' efforts and success. Their consequences may be idiosyncratic to specific local conditions and may be difficult to chart, as with the effects of a school's location on a student body's racial composition and children's learning or the impact of faulty heating, ventilation, and air conditioning on teachers and students. For these reasons, Coleman and his colleagues lacked data on many consequential facility characteristics. Consistent with racial and class differences in facilities, minorities and the poor are particularly likely to have problematic facilities.

A school's location and zoning affect the size of its enrollment and, in turn, class size. Good small schools have an educational advantage over larger schools (Clinchy, 2000; Meier,

2002). Small classes have significant positive effects for children in the early elementary grades (Mosteller, 1995). Location and zoning also shape a school's racial and economic composition. Low-income African-American students do better academically in racially mixed schools than in segregated schools (Eaton, 2001; Orfield, 2001; Orfield and Eaton, 1996; Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum, 2000; Schofield, 1995; Wells and Crain, 1997). School location and zoning, by regulating the distances from students' homes to their schools, affect the likelihood that parents involve themselves in their children's schools. Parent involvement, in turn, contributes to children's academic success (Epstein, 2001; Henderson and Berla, 1994). Finally, location and zoning affect the routes to school, with impacts on whether children must, for example, pass through hostile neighborhoods or gang turf or cross dangerous streets or railroad tracks.

The size of a school building, in conjunction with local demography and zoning, affects overall enrollment and class size. A school's internal structure can influence children's learning in various ways. Students need space in which they can periodically release physical energy. They need a library and computer center for access to learning resources. The older grades require science laboratories. Students of all ages can benefit from facilities for art and music, which research suggests are associated with academic success. In general, a particular concern if a building is converted from one grade configuration to another, facilities should be of a scale appropriate for students using them. One other general requirement is that facilities be congruent with teaching methods for enrolled students. For example, many schools constructed in the 1970's were built as "schools without walls," meant to allow children to circulate among "learning stations" for different lessons. Whatever the original merits of this design, a number of urban schools without internal walls now provide little architectural structure for teaching and maintaining discipline with predominantly low-income African American student bodies.

Finally, the condition of a school's facilities affects academic work. Adequate heating, ventilation, and air conditioning are necessary for comfortable teaching and learning, and their failure or absence pose health problems to asthmatics and others. Leaky roofs or windows, lead-contaminated drinking water, and peeling asbestos pose a range of distractions and health risks.

Community Involvement

School systems normally make decisions about new construction with little public involvement. Once schools are built, systems treat their maintenance or improvement largely as administrative matters. Parents may become concerned about facility problems, but because few school systems have regular public discussion of facility conditions, parents are left to present their views as episodic complaints. School officials may discount parents' concerns by observing that community members lack solid, systematic information about conditions or students' needs. Such responses, if made in good faith, raise questions about what knowledge should influence system conditions. More generally, they pose the question of how community members should organize their knowledge and themselves to affect system decisions. Some observers of school reform have looked for community activism as a spur to policy change and stimulus to student learning (Bryk, et al., 1998; Cibulka and Kritek, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2000; Hess, 1991; Noguera, 2001; Sarason, 1995; Stone, et al.,, 2001).

Community organizations are the main vehicle through which parents and neighborhood residents try to influence public policies and practices (Bobo, Kendall, and Max, 2001; Fisher, 1994; Kahn, 1999; Staples, 1991). Analysis of the 1960's community action programs suggests

that community action is shaped by three "logics" (Marris and Rein, 1982; see Baum, in press). A normative "logic of participation" encourages everyone interested in an issue to join public activity to do something about it. Yet only a small number of people participate in community organizations. For one thing, few issues arouse widespread interest. In addition, participation has opportunity costs: attendance at meetings with uncertain, perhaps long-term results must displace other activities that may bring definite, short-term rewards. Moreover, activism requires skills and self-confidence. Middle class professionals are more likely to participate in community organizations than people who have lower incomes or less formal education, single parents who must care for children alone, or those whose native language is not English.

Further, education differs from most other issues community organizations consider in an important respect. Because education is virtually a public monopoly, few outside school systems have educational expertise or experience in planning or running schools. To the contrary, ordinary citizens are intimidated by the complexity of curriculum and pedagogy and, even when they are deeply concerned about schooling, doubt they have the knowledge or authority to say anything to policy makers. Professional educators, for their part, tend to claim they have all expertise necessary for teaching children, and system officials commonly resist sharing information with outsiders. Thus education discourages community involvement.

Whatever the extent of participation, how and what those involved decide are governed by a "logic of action": participants look for some action on which they can agree, almost irrespective of its intrinsic merits. In this respect, community organizations are like many organizations that treat decision making as a "garbage can" (Olsen, 1976). Participants throw together problems they want to solve, interventions they want to enact, and roles they want to take, mix and match some that most people like, and rationalize the result as deliberate problem solving.

The selection from which community members choose their actions in education is typically sparse. Laypersons have most confidence in identifying problems, less certainty about solutions for them, and little assurance about their own roles in improving things. Although parents may be concerned that their children are learning little, they find it easier to talk about the quality of facilities, an administrator's demeanor, or the vagaries of class scheduling than curriculum and pedagogy. Still, even if they can match a simple "solution" to a complex problem, they often stop because they cannot find a role for themselves in system decision making. As a result, community participants have difficulty taking action.

Researchers, planners, and funders would prefer that community organizations involved in education follow a normative "logic of research" in choosing whatever actions they pursue. They should systematically analyze available evidence on problems, survey possible interventions, and choose actions that reasonably fit problems at hand (McDonald, 1992, 1993; Podl, et al., 1992). Indeed, the proponents of this position would assert, if community organizations engaged in research, they would develop the expertise and confidence to participate and act.

Most community organizations, however, are poorly, if at all, funded, overextended, and busy. Program management and fundraising leave little time, resources, or expertise for research. Some community organizations plan, but few do systematic research. Moreover, in the education field there is no network of technical assistance organizations to which a community group can turn. For all these reasons, parents and other community members normally have little information for interpreting school conditions or making a case about them to system officials. Their activities are likely to be opportunistic, and they will be unable to match the sophistication of the system's

data in discussing issues.

Nevertheless, community members have organized to improve local schools. Progressive era reformers focused on school administration, disciplinary practices, and student health. Some parents lobbied for better facilities (Reese, 2002). More recently, lower-income parents and community members have organized to address a wide range of issues (Gold, Simon, and Brown, 2002; Gray and Weeldreyer, 2001; Mediratta and Fruchter, 2001; Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2001; Williams, 1989). Their agendas include disciplinary policies, resource distribution, tracking, high stakes testing, curriculum inclusiveness, youth empowerment, safety, teaching quality and relationships, language access, school relations with children and parents, superintendent selection, school privatization, and facilities. A growing number of organizations are using research to analyze issues and promote interventions (Mediratta and Fruchter, 2001).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

This paper presents the case of the Southeast Education Task Force, a Baltimore community organization established in 1995 to improve 16 neighborhood schools. The Task Force has organized parents, developed a full-service community school, provided a school consultation on student discipline, shaped the Empowerment Zone education agenda, prepared a community plan on education, and developed a community school facilities plan, in addition to implementing various other projects (Baum, 1999, 2000, 2001, in press; Gray and Weeldreyer, 2001). The case presentation here focuses on the preparation of and efforts to implement the facility plan. The organization engaged in research in developing the plan and appealed to research in urging the school system to implement it.

The paper analyzes the case with a focus on two questions. First, what conditions led to the community organization's engagement in research? Second, in what ways was the organization able to use research in influencing school system decisions?

The study is based on 11 years of research. From 1991 through 1994 I engaged in field research to study a Southeast Baltimore community planning process, which recommended forming a community organization to improve schools (Baum, 1997). In 1995 I was co-founder of the Southeast Education Task Force as part of a partnership between the University of Maryland's Urban Studies and Planning Program and community activists.

I have studied the Task Force through a combination of field research and action research. Observant participation, including note-taking, interviewing, and document analysis, has provided data about the organization and its activities. Observation of its actions has provided data regarding educational issues, the dynamics of the local school system, and the community organization's capacity to act. I have shared reflections with other participants and have discussed with others their perceptions of the organization, its activities, and its effectiveness.

THE SOUTHEAST EDUCATION TASK FORCE

Southeast Baltimore is a declining urban industrial area. It was once the place of first settlement for immigrants and became the city's industrial center. Home to vital working-class white ethnic communities in the mid-twentieth century, it was hard hit by the departure of manufacturing soon after. Employment declined, families with resources moved to the suburbs, businesses closed down or moved, and houses and stores fell vacant.

Income for the 1990 population of 78,000 was low: 16 of the 26 Southeast census tracts

had median household incomes below the modest city median of $24.045, and seven were under $20,000. Forty-four per cent of households rented, up from 42 per cent in 1980. Racially, 72 per cent of residents were white, 25 per cent African American, and the rest American Indian, Hispanic, or Asian (Baltimore City Department of Planning, 1992). However, because relatively few white families had young children and because some of them went to Catholic schools, 62 per cent of students in Southeast public schools were African American, and only 31 per cent were non-Hispanic white (Southeast Education Task Force, 1999).

Southeast Baltimore has 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, and a high school. High-stakes tests presented a picture of little success in 1994, just before the Task Force started. On the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program test, an average of 9 per cent of Southeast third graders performed at a "satisfactory" level, 11 per cent of fifth graders did, and 5 per cent of eighth graders did. Only six of the eleven elementary schools had more than 10 per cent scoring "satisfactory" in even half the subjects in the third and fifth grades. Only four had at least 20 per cent "satisfactory" in even one area (Baltimore City Public Schools, 1994). In nearby suburban Howard County, percentages were in the 40's, 50's and 60's (Maryland State Department of Education, 1994). On the nationally normed CTBS, fifth grade Southeast reading scores were at the 36th percentile, and fifth grade mathematics scores were at the 45th percentile (Southeast Education Task Force, 1999).

A Southeast community plan advocated forming an organization to study and improve the schools (Southeast Planning Council, 1993). In early 1995, with support from the U. S. Department of Education's Urban Community Service Program, I joined some activists in forming the Southeast Education Task Force. Bobby English, a community leader and director of the Julie Community Center, a family service center, became Task Force chair

The first two years included a number of accomplishments. The Task Force surveyed principals, teachers, parents, and students at the schools. Community members and educators endorsed an agenda of building school-community relations, improving school safety, strengthening programs, and increasing resources. Parent organizers worked at three schools. University faculty and students consulted to a school on student discipline. The Task Force joined federal and state education officials and academics to influence the local Empowerment Zone's education agenda (Baum, 1999). English, in a dual role as Task Force chair and Julie Center director, put health and social programs in an elementary school as the start of a full-service community school. Several hundred community members and educators participated in these activities.

Nevertheless, during much of this time a core group of 15 struggled to define an action agenda and a role for themselves in school reform. Though most were middle class, college educated professionals, they had trouble grasping school issues. The superintendent had pledged help, but his staff withheld information. Principals saw little benefit from a community group and gave it little mind. The more Task Force members thought about the schools, the more they recognized the complexity of issues and their own limited understanding. They had trouble recruiting community members with the interest, time, and confidence to participate. Toward the end of 1996, people talked about giving up.

In late 1996, the Task Force convened Southeast principals and presented ideas for community initiatives. The administrators had mixed reactions to the proposals but strongly endorsed a role for a community organization that would, among other things, support them with

the system administration. The discussion gave Task Force members the confidence to proceed. They went on to articulate priorities, which became the basis for a community plan on education. They added projects. They recognized that what they knew about already--families and the community--affected children's education, and they concentrated on family and community interventions, leaving curriculum and pedagogy largely to teachers and principals.

A CASE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES PLANNING

Several Task Force members became interested in school facilities, because they presented issues people could understand. Rundown buildings, collapsing ceilings, unsafe drinking water, and no play space were clearly problems. Schools without air conditioning were a discomfort and health hazard during warm months. Overcrowded schools, particularly those without classroom walls, distracted children, turned accidental brushes into fights, and hampered teaching and learning. In neighborhoods without an elementary school, young children had to walk long distances, often across dangerous streets, to and from school.

K-8 Schools

Task Force members began to think about how facilities' location and design were related to teaching and learning. Ed Rutkowski, a long-time community activist, co-author of a book on Southeast's "urban transition zone" (Pollock and Rutkowski, 1998), and founder of a community organization and a community development corporation, became taken with K-8 schools.

K-8 schooling was in the Baltimore air in the early 1990's. The school system, a local foundation, and parent groups considered its potential. Some looked at how students in grades 6 through 8 did in middle schools and K-8 schools. Scant evidence on the city's few K-8's suggested that students there did better but also showed that those students came from families with higher socio-economic status, a familiar correlation. Parents who wanted K-8's tended to emphasize smaller school and class size and proximity to home. In addition, though no one said so publicly, neighborhood K-8's would keep white children longer in predominantly white schools.

Rutkowski headed up Task Force interest in K-8's in early 1997. Task Force members concluded that reconfiguring Southeast elementary and middle schools into K-8's would avoid a painful transition to middle school, lower the dropout rate, decrease violence, and make schools safer. Rutkowski focused on numbers: could students be reallocated in a way that would give existing elementary and middle schools reasonable K-8 enrollments? He got University of Maryland Professor Alex Chen to map where students lived and experiment with zone boundaries.

I was skeptical about the effects of grade reconfiguration alone in improving education, and I wanted to look at data on the academic performance of middle grade students in K-8's and middle schools. A canvass of education experts and review of published studies produced sparse, inconclusive evidence. Many K-8 schools were private or religious, and many of the public K-8's were rural. It was hard to draw conclusions about urban students. At the same time, much of what seemed to contribute to good academic performance and student behavior in K-8's had less to do with grade configuration than the schools' small size, ongoing relations between teachers and students, positive climate, and good teaching--conditions that could be implemented in middle schools, as well (Eccles, Lord, and Midgely, 1991; Southeast Education Task Force, 1997).

When I presented these findings to the Task Force, Rutkowski expressed the view that Southeast conditions were distinct and that K-8's there would produce noteworthy results that

future resource could document. Chen was beginning to produce useful maps, and Rutkowski organized an Ad Hoc K-8 Committee to try to establish K-8's in Southeast Baltimore. The group elaborated a rationale for K-8 schools, and Rutkowski elicited interest in an area assistant superintendent and some principals.

School Facilities

Around this time, the school board decided to take a comprehensive look at the system's facilities. In March, 1998, 3D/International, consulting engineers, issued a report. Their study, focused on buildings' physical condition, shed no light on the feasibility of K-8 schooling, which concerned how buildings could be used. At the same time, the staggering price tag of $606,000,000 to bring 180 schools up to standards caught everyone's attention and pushed the board further in taking an overall look at the system. Because the school-age population had declined and had shifted within the city, the board launched a comprehensive rezoning initiative. That touched on questions the Task Force cared about.

In September, the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) Rezoning Task Force Curriculum Subcommittee issued draft standards for types and sizes of spaces schools required. The Subcommittee proposed standards for different school levels, including, eventually, K-8's. The rezoning offered Task Force members an audience and decision points for promoting their interests. Everyone on the Task Force knew of schools with deficient, harmful conditions. Those that lacked air conditioning were oppressive and dangerous to asthmatic students in the hot months. Three elementary schools were severely overcrowded. They were designed without classroom walls, but they were not the only Southeast schools where the absence of walls created constant noise and distraction. Some schools lacked playground space, libraries, or both, and one did not have a cafeteria.

The Task Force decided to conduct its own research, visiting schools to see whether the engineers' report accurately described conditions and whether schools had the space the Curriculum Subcommittee considered necessary for good programs. Eight of 16 principals participated. During early 1999 an ad hoc facilities group analyzed the documents and principals' responses, drafted a summary, invited principals and area executive officers (formerly, the area assistant superintendents) to discuss findings, and contemplated a report to the school board. Bobby English would lead a presentation on short-range needs while Rutkowski would launch a long-range facilities planning process.

Task Force members appeared before the school board in June with a report on "Critical Needs for Capital Improvements in Southeast Schools" (Southeast Education Task Force, 2000). It declared such "critical immediate needs" as overcrowding; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning problems; open classrooms without walls; lack of playground space; and faulty exterior lighting and offered "do-able solutions" for each.

After English and representatives of schools with facility problems presented the report to the board, Colene Daniel, the board remember with primary responsibility for facilities, met with the Task Force and the schools. During the summer, Daniel, administrative staff, school staff, parents, and Task Force members worked on problems. Air conditioning and outside lights at one school were fixed. However, space limitations at another made it impossible to build an addition to relieve overcrowding, and the board decided, instead, to reduce enrollment by sending students who lived outside the zone to their proper schools. The space that turned out to be too small for

an addition was resurfaced for playground use.

Long-Term Facilities Planning

Developing a Plan

Rutkowski's Long-Range Capital Improvements Committee began to develop a plan for all Southeast school facilities. During the summer, the committee went over the area in detail, considering how school boundaries could be drawn to reduce overcrowding and make K-8 schools feasible. They divided Southeast into four sectors, each with distinctive social characteristics, population trends, and, perhaps, school preferences. As they proceeded, they found an area north of Patterson Park, in the "urban transition zone," that had many children but no schools. They wanted a school built there.

The committee knew best the area around Patterson Park, one of the city's grand parks, in the center of Southeast Baltimore. They knew less about the area in the west, where many lived in public housing, or the east, which mixed public housing residents and immigrant families. They felt most confident about recommendations for the middle area, and they planned public forums in each sector, to give educators and residents the chance to respond to initial ideas and suggest others. The first would be in Canton, south of the park, on September 18, 2000.

Six days before that meeting, BCPSS issued recommendations from its facility utilization study. It proposed closing 12 city schools. BCPSS would build two pre-K-8's and a middle school and would reconfigure 24 schools into pre K-8's, magnet middle and high schools, a zoned high school, early childhood centers and 7-12 schools. No Southeast school would be closed. To the contrary, the system expected rising enrollment in Southeast and would build a new school there. It would be a pre-K-8, intended to reduce enrollment at three overcrowded elementaries and a huge middle school that would be razed and replaced by a smaller school. Other schools would continue pretty much as at present, with a few changes. Rutkowski's committee viewed the recommendations favorably.

When the Canton education forum convened, the 100 attendees included Carmen Russo, who had just become system CEO; Elizabeth Morgan, chief academic officer; and Gary Thrift and Patricia Abernethy, assistant executive officers for 13 of the 16 Southeast schools. Two school board members, two city council members, five State legislators, two of the mayor's staff, three principals, five pastors, two foundation staff, two community organization directors, and a couple of citywide education activists joined the meeting.

Rutkowski presented the draft plan, in which K-8's were prominent. The Task Force proposed building a new K-8 northeast of Patterson Park. It wanted an elementary school currently being expanded to be made into a K-8, and it recommended that the middle school that would be razed be replaced with a K-8. It proposed reconfiguring three Canton area schools into K-8's. Plans for the far west and east remained to be filled in.

Parents talked up the safety benefits of K-8's for children going to school near home. A middle school teacher gave a positive review to a K-8 in a nearby neighborhood that, like Southeast, was racially and economically mixed. Administrators called attention to details and tradeoffs in K-8 models. Parents and teachers from overcrowded schools emphasized the need for a new school and rezoning to make schools manageable.

At last CEO Russo spoke. She had been on the job only ten weeks, she said, but she knew about facilities and Southeast. She called the forum a model for other communities. And she

wanted the community's help, lobbying with the governor and State legislature to get funding BCPSS had requested. The Task Force looked ahead to other forums.

After this meeting, once again I contacted education experts and searched publications for research on K-8 schooling. Two BCPSS K-8 proponents, asked for the evidence on which they based their positions, both sent copies of the earlier Task Force report on K-8 research. In the end, three years had not provided any more conclusive evidence. In a new "K-8 Fact Sheet," I emphasized to the Task Force that what mattered more than grade configuration were characteristics of good schools, often found in K-8's but, for the most part, implementable in any configuration. While continuing to advocate K-8's, Task Force members began to fill in details with these features.

Getting the Plan Implemented

After forums in all sectors, Rutkowski's committee completed their long-range Southeast school facilities plan in February, 2001 (Southeast Education Task Force, 2001). Bobby English, Ed Rutkowski, and I then presented the plan to CEO Carmen Russo and Southeast area executive officer Patricia Abernethy. Russo noted that the system's plan included a new Southeast school, which it proposed making a K-8 with a math-science-technology emphasis, and which depended on State approval to move ahead. The State awaited specification of a site.

English turned to K-8 schools. She acknowledged that research was inconclusive but underlined the virtues associated with good K-8's, such as small size, community ties, and long-term relations between teachers and students. Abernethy responded that research did not favor K-8's over middle schools. Still, Russo said, she took community preferences seriously. Even so, she noted that redesigning elementary school buildings for middle grade use was costly. She concluded with a request for help tying down a site for the new school, and Rutkowski and English pledged to find one.

Task Force members identified a location that was near where students lived and potentially available and recommended it to Russo, who informed Yale Stenzler, executive director of the State's Interagency Committee on School Construction. He responded with a more fundamental concern, whether enrollment projections justified a new K-8 school at all. New State Rated Capacity (SRC) figures for school buildings were higher than previous numbers and permitted more students in the schools. .

Russo, convinced the SRC's had little relation to conditions in overcrowded schools, particularly those with few classroom walls, invited Stenzler to join her in visiting three Southeast schools to see how space was really used. As a result, he concluded that the usual method of determining capacity could not be used for schools like these, and he proposed working with BCPSS to develop a comprehensive plan for six existing schools and the possible new school.

Rutkowski and English advanced the cause of the new school politically by inviting Stenzler to meet with them and members of the State legislative delegation, who noted their support for the community's preferences. Rutkowski and English bolstered their case technically by assembling data on population changes and enrollment trends. They discussed the influx of immigrants attracted by a resettlement center and noted homeownership initiatives.

Over the next year, discussion went back and forth between BCPSS and Stenzler's office. The State wanted to be sure projected long-term enrollments justified a new building. Task Force members kept in touch with Stenzler and worked with the school system to make the case.

Though uneasy about enrollment projections, Stenzler recommended construction of a Southeast Baltimore K-8 to the State Board of Public Works, which approved it in May, 2002.

Still, the site was uncertain. Task Force members had identified several possibilities, getting the mayor's support for one, but each had problems. The Task Force convened a community meeting to evaluate and prioritize sites. The school system hired a consultant to work with community members and select a location. Meanwhile, in November, Baltimore voters approved bonds that would pay for the city's contribution to construction of the school, among other projects. However, budget crises in both BCPSS and the State raised questions about when the project could proceed. While the consultant moves ahead with site selection, fiscal uncertainty has put the school in limbo.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Community Engagement in Research

Meagerly funded community organizations are normally too busy implementing projects and looking for money to have time for research. Thus they are constantly at risk of taking an uninformed position. The field of education puts them especially at risk, because issues are complex, school systems discourage public discussion and participation, and community organizations have few places to educate themselves. Yet the Southeast Education Task Force engaged in research on a number of occasions.

First, I conducted two research reconnaissances on K-8 schools. Both were inconclusive, except to indicate that K-8 schools seemed to do well with students because the schools had several features of generally good teaching. Task Force members who wanted K-8 schools did not alter their preferences in response to the first report, but some began to emphasize school features after the second. Second, Alex Chen mapped student residences and experimented with K-8 zones that fit school capacities. His work, in finding feasible zones, encouraged Task Force K-8 advocates to continue, and they presented the maps to the school board and others in the system to advance their cause.

Third, Bobby English, using an engineers' survey of school conditions and standards for space use, organized interviews of principals and school site visits that provided an assessment of needed short-term repairs and renovations and contributed to a long-range facilities plan. Fourth, Ed Rutkowski directed a planning group that drew on State Planning enrollment projections, Interagency Committee school capacity figures, Chen's maps, and local knowledge about population changes and homeownership trends. He and English organized community forums to elicit community members' ideas and preferences. The analysis shaped a school facilities plan.

Fifth, a research assistant studied the school capital improvements planning and budgeting process. Her report directed Task Force attention to Yale Stenzler early on and guided strategy later on. Sixth, Rutkowski and English called on others who knew neighborhood properties and land use and population trends to identify school sites and justify the new school proposal. Seventh, English, Rutkowski, and others drew on their knowledge of local political relations to organize support for the new school proposal and site.

The institutional and political research and the plumbing of local knowledge are commonplace for community organizations, often their main research. Some community organizations engage in data analysis, interviews, and site visits like those that went into the school repairs report and facilities plan, but these activities require considerable time or, alternatively,

money, both scarce. English and Rutkowski contributed a great deal of time, as an extension of their professional roles. The mapping and K-8 research reviews, unusual for community organizations, were possible because the university had funding to assist.

These episodes suggest lessons regarding when community organizations are likely to conduct and use research. A first lesson goes back to the Task Force's two years of talk that eventually made work possible. Even though people had no idea what to do, they kept trying to educate themselves--by surveying school staff and families, convening meetings, and discussing what they had seen at schools. As the Task Force initiated projects, members reflected on their progress. Crucially, they persisted through the first years because they had leadership that took knowledge seriously and cared about its action implications. English formally led, but others also wanted to base decisions on information. Their college and professional backgrounds distinguish them from many who participate in lower income communities, but their training per se was less important than their interest in reflecting on what they did and tacitly treating projects as action research. The university partnership fostered this interest by introducing faculty and students who could engage in research, but also just took knowing seriously.

Second, an organization must have the capacity to engage in research. Volunteers can collect local information, but they lack time to engage in ongoing or systematic research. Moreover, few residents, particularly in lower income communities, can readily analyze data or interpret published research. Community organizations need staff for continuing research. In this case, extraordinary volunteering, along with funded university assistance, made research possible.

Third, an organization will study a particular issue when it considers it researchable. People must believe that additional information would be useful in deciding what to do and that it is possible to get that information. They must feel confident they have relevant expertise and time. The K-8 and facilities issues satisfied these conditions.

Fourth, an organization is more likely to engage in research when others on whom it depends will base their action on knowledge. The school board commissioned a facility assessment and launched a comprehensive rezoning initiative to get information about schools and students before making decisions. The Task Force tried to influence the system by collecting information that contextuated Southeast positions in the system's framework.

The research reviews on K-8 students suggest a qualification to these generalizations. The research did not lead Task Force members to reconsider their commitment to K-8 schools. The main reason is that, as laypersons who felt unable to make knowledgeable suggestions about curriculum or pedagogy, they seized on K-8 schooling as a formula for setting middle grade education right. Once taking that premise, they assiduously calculated enrollments and capacities, drew maps, and identified new school sites. Moreover, even though the university research cast doubt on the simplicity of the formula, they took support from other, softer research circulating in the school system: reports that eighth grade test scores were higher in K-8's than in middle schools. The university research eventually had an impact, when some Task Force members began to emphasize the elements of good schooling suggested by that research. These episodes indicate that a community organization may resist using research insofar as it jeopardizes an opportunity to act. Thus the logic of action outweighs the logic of research.

Using Research to Influence School System Decisions

The Task Force invoked research to get the school system to support three facility

priorities: school repairs and renovations, construction of a new school, and creation of K-8 schools. The efforts had mixed results.

The Task Force used research successfully in getting repairs and improvements. It persuaded the school board to fix air conditioning, repair outdoor lights, and resurface a play area. Assembling principals, teachers, and parents, the Task Force gave the board information that described problems and identified solutions, and the system had money to respond.

The school system and the Task Force independently concluded Southeast Baltimore needed a new school. Moreover, they both wanted it to be a K-8. The Task Force did not influence BCPSS' initial decision, though its agreement reinforced the system's position. However, the Task Force conducted and used a combination of technical and political research in working with the system to influence State decision making. English, Rutkowski, and others gave local and State school officials information about properties, population changes, and homeownership trends. They organized local political support for one of the sites, and they organized political lobbying for State endorsement of a new school. Without this research-informed Task Force effort, the school system might have relegated a new Southeast school to a back burner, or the State might not have improved construction

The Task Force used research on K-8's to less evident advantage. To begin with, the research was inconclusive, though, ironically, the only systematic research summary BCPSS had came from the Task Force. It is unclear who in the system read the report and what conclusions they drew from it. If anything, it seems to have reinforced general interest in K-8's. In fact, in September, 2001, CEO Russo, after expressing skepticism about K-8 research to the Task Force delegation earlier, announced the creation of 17 K-8 schools. Research, she said, supported them: eighth grade test scores were higher in city K-8's than in middle schools. However, none of these new schools would be in Southeast. If, as Russo told the Task Force, she took community preferences seriously, she had forgotten what Southeasterners preferred.

Thus the community organization used research to influence the school system's allocation of funds available for facility improvements and to influence State education decision makers in supporting a system proposal. It did not succeed in influencing system policy--about designating new K-8 schools--though organized effort could affect future decisions. These episodes suggest lessons about when community organizations may use research influentially with a school system.

First, generally, research can be influential when it helps solve an identified problem. The Task Force worked within the parameters of the school system's comprehensive rezoning proposals, and it assisted BCPSS in justifying a new school and finding a location for it.

Second, research can be influential in introducing a new problem when it also points to a solution for that problem. The report on short-term improvement needs coupled each problem with one or more remedies.

Third, with a system like education, where issues are typically couched in technical terms, a community organization will have more influence with its research if it takes the technical formulations into account. Thus the report on short-term improvements began with a statement that the Task Force had analyzed the engineers' facilities report and the Curriculum Subcommittee's space standards, and the Southeast facilities plan acknowledged BCPSS enrollment numbers and State building capacities.

Fourth, one type of information that community organizations have that can give them influence with schools and other large systems is local knowledge--about people, places, social

relations, culture, and plans. In particular, an isolated system like the public schools knows little about many community aspects, from housing to land use to transportation to public safety. Hence community members can help translate general policies into something implementable. For example, the Task Force presented information on properties and neighborhood associations.

Fifth, another type of information that community organizations can use influentially with or against a school system is political. Community groups know neighborhood leaders and elected officials. They know who has interests in what, how to form coalitions, and how to organize. In this case, the Task Force used simple political research to reinforce their case with the school system, the mayor, and the Interagency Committee.

The main failure to influence the school system involved getting Southeast schools reconfigured into K-8's. Yet the failure was not one of research, so much as of action. It was not technical information, but political information, regarding Southeast preferences, that might have persuaded the CEO to include Southeast in the new round of K-8 schools. The Task Force could have persisted in pressing the administration. The episode suggests additional circumstances when community organizations' use of information can influence a school system. When technical research about a policy is ambiguous, political information--about a community's interests--may influence a system to implement the policy. When a system considers interventions that are essentially experimental, community preferences can be influential because they tell the administration where the interventions may get a boost from local support.

Community Organizations, Research, and School System Accountability

At best, accountability refers to an organization's "doing the right thing." A school system, for example, takes educational research seriously, and administrators do whatever they can to introduce and support staff and involve students and parents in implementing, monitoring, and evaluating programs and practices based on tested knowledge. A system that operates this way should be especially likely to stimulate and support children's learning. The problem is that tested knowledge is unsystematic, often ambiguous, and generally linked to local context. Some interventions rest on demonstrably better ideas than others, but there is a broad area of uncertainty, where initiatives should be treated as action research.

At worst, accountability is purely political, where one organization seeks to get another to do what it wants, regardless of the intellectual basis for its preferences. Thus political pressures may force a school system to adopt and implement policies that make little sense, in general, in relation to its students, or both. Rarely is a request of a school system couched in such crude terms, but anxiety about children's education in the context of inconclusive research has led to many school reforms where the determining factor seems to have been political.

In any case, community organizations neither generate sophisticated systematic educational research nor wield great political power. They generally defer to school systems on curriculum and pedagogy, with the expectation that educators take research seriously. Humbled by the limitations of their technical knowledge, they say little about what teachers should do in classrooms. Community members concentrate their public requests on issues they feel they understand, such as facilities, school safety, and parent involvement. Though their preferences are not necessarily based on or consistent with formal educational research, they see themselves acting on what they know. They may have considerable local knowledge, regarding community conditions and how policies work at schools, that system administrators lack and could use.

In this context, a school system's accountability to community organizations has two meanings. One, taken for granted in the case here, is that the system do its best to educate children. The other is that it respond favorably to periodic requests based on local knowledge. These may range from small, discrete changes in a school, such as replacing lead-contaminated drinking fountains with water coolers, to extensive initiatives, such as the Task Force capital improvements plan for Southeast Baltimore.

The case here, illustrating success in using research to hold a school system accountable for implementing parts of a community agenda, points to two reasons why school systems may respond favorably. One is that they depend on local knowledge, much more than administrators acknowledge, for making programs work. The other is that a school system is far more likely to do what a community wants when it does not involve the classroom than when it intrudes into professional educators' prerogatives. That condition challenges community organizations.

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