

# Vital Voices

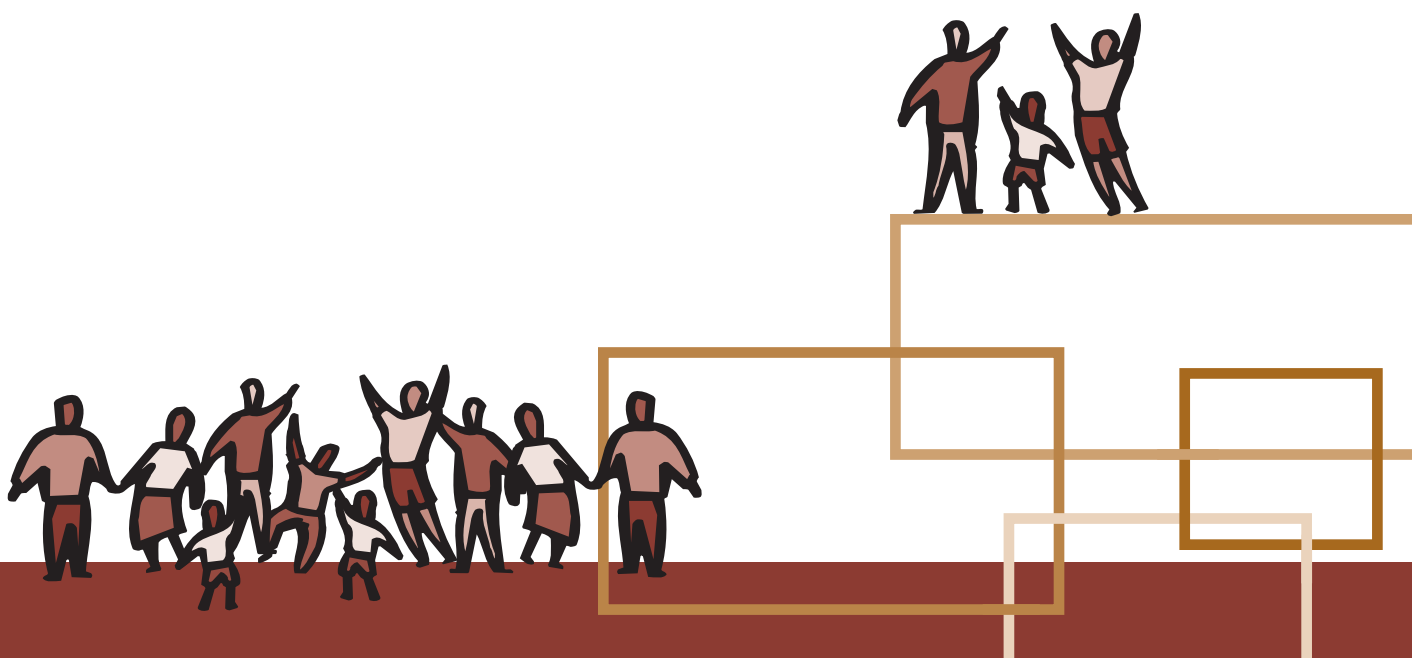
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Building Constituencies for Public School Reform

A Report to the Ford Foundation

Academy for Educational  
Development

Chapin Hall Center for Children at  
the University of Chicago



**The Ford Foundation’s Constituency Building for Public School Reform Initiative** aimed to increase civic capacity to promote high-quality education for all students. Based on the understanding that sustained school reform requires an informed and mobilized public, the initiative provided over \$30 million between 1995 and 2000 for projects engaged in constituency building, research and evaluation, and communications and media efforts.

**The Constituency Building Study** created a forum for seven grantees and 14 local colleagues to share and reflect on their work. The study proceeded through a series of conversations among the participants, listed below, and the researchers. As recounted in **Part I of the study report**, these conversations explored participants’ views of their work; their goals, strategies, and challenges; and their achievements. **Part II of the report** looks at the major tasks of constituency-building work and discusses a range of strategies used by participants to achieve their goals. Throughout, the report uses case examples to illustrate constituency-building and reform efforts.

### Constituency Building Study: Study Team Members

Ford Foundation CBPSRI grantees and affiliates (grantees in italics)	Representatives
<i>Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform</i> , Chicago, IL Chicago ACORN, Chicago, IL Philadelphia Education Fund, Philadelphia, PA	Anne C. Hallett Madeline Talbott Rochelle Nichols Solomon
<i>Interfaith Education Fund</i> , Austin, TX Austin Interfaith, Austin, TX The Metropolitan Organization, Houston, TX	Carrie Laughlin Claudia Santamaria Joe Higgs
<i>National Coalition of Advocates for Students</i> , Boston, MA California Tomorrow, Oakland, CA Intercultural Development Research Association, San Antonio, TX	Joan First Laurie Olsen Aurelio Montemayor
<i>Parents for Public Schools</i> , Jackson, MS Parents for Public Schools Rural Initiative, Fountain, NC Parents for Public Schools of Jackson, Jackson, MS	Kelly Allin Butler Amina Shahid-El Charles Lindsay
<i>Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence</i> , Lexington, KY Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Pineville, KY Center for Professional Collaboration, Cumberland Gap, TN	Robert F. Sexton Lutricia Woods Connie Wright
<i>Public Education Network</i> , Washington, DC Charlotte-Mecklenburg Education Foundation, Charlotte, NC Portland Public Schools Foundation, Portland, OR	Wendy Puriefoy Tom Bradbury Cynthia Guyer
<i>21st Century School Fund</i> , Washington, DC Senior High Alliance of Principals, Presidents, and Educators, Washington, DC Washington Parent Group Fund, Washington, DC	Mary Filardo Cathy Reilly  Jerald Woody, Sr.

Groups in italics received support directly from the CBPSRI. The others are members of regional or national networks or coalitions that received initiative funding.

# Voices for Equity and Excellence

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**T**he public school is a central institution in the lives of families and communities in America. Many people say that public schools are essential for the practice of democracy, and they play a pivotal role in the country's economic strength. In addition, as our society becomes both more complex and more fragmented, schools can provide common ground — cutting across racial, class, ethnic, language, immigrant, and other social groupings and bringing people together around a common purpose. But for many children in both rural and urban neighborhoods, and especially for those from low-income and racial and ethnic minority families, schools are not meeting basic educational needs.

Study participants assert that quality schools demand that all community members — including parents, students, and businesses, as well as educators — take responsibility for the education of their children. In addition, participants believe that:

- All children can learn to high standards and have the right to quality education.
- A democratic society provides the tools for constituents to participate in the public institutions that affect their lives.

**Across the country, families, community groups, businesses, and congregations are demonstrating that ordinary people can be a powerful force for education reform.** Constituents are collaborating with educators to set standards, recruit qualified teachers for low-performing schools, and create new policies and programs. They also are using their rights of free speech and assembly and their votes to hold schools accountable.

**Educators, too, are assuming new roles.** Teachers are leading schoolwide reforms, principals are partnering with community groups to support parent participation in decision-making, and superintendents are joining with community members to develop new visions for their school systems.

**Constituency-building organizations are helping to foster this movement by providing ways for individuals and community groups to learn more about the education system, acquire new skills, identify local issues, develop relationships, and take on new roles.** Although study participants may use a particular crisis or issue as a starting point, they do not view their work as a short-term response to a specific problem. Instead, they work to change the way public institutions function in the long term — how decisions are made, whose voices are heard, and which issues are considered legitimate.

Some participants aim to do this by building civic capacity broadly, forging relationships among diverse populations, and facilitating their pursuit of common goals. Others support families frequently excluded from quality education and work to make real not only the promise of equal treatment in schools, but also the promise of a meaningful voice in shaping public debate and decision-making. In both instances, by fostering the public's role in and responsibility for public education, constituency builders and constituents are working to strengthen schools, communities, and the practice of democracy.

# Overview: Role and Impact of Constituency Building

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Constituency building serves the following purposes. Each is essential to achieving, monitoring, and sustaining reform of education policy and practice.

## **Building Understanding and a Sense of Shared Interests**

Study participants seek to expand stakeholders' understanding of the education system and their ability to effect change. Broadened perspectives enable constituents to identify common interests and work together for reform.

*In Austin, Texas, parents and teachers worked together to improve bilingual education by establishing new programs and district policy requiring translated textbooks and higher priority on recruiting bilingual teachers (see the report, page 18).*

*In Portland, Oregon, educators, parents, community groups, and businesses joined forces to pass a \$75 million education bond measure (see page 19).*

*In Kentucky, a broad coalition contributed to enactment of statewide, comprehensive standards-based reform, which has resulted in improved academic performance at every grade level (see page 20).*

## **Creating Political Will and Holding Public Education Institutions Accountable**

To achieve reform, study participants say that constituents need to exert political pressure at the school, district, and state levels and to sustain that pressure over time. Participants also press the need for ongoing reform and for constituency-building groups that provide a stable, independent base for activism.

*In Washington, D.C., parents, educators, and other community members sustained pressure through three mayors and four superintendents in order to build a new elementary school building, develop and implement a Master Facilities Plan, and substantially increase the capital development budget (see page 23).*

## **Changing Roles, Relationships, and Power Dynamics**

Study participants work to expand how individuals see their roles in schools and help them take on new roles and form new relationships. In doing so, constituents can alter the power dynamics in an education system.

*In Salinas, California, a team of educators examined the achievement gap between immigrant students and others and led reforms that produced measured improvements in academics and discipline, as well as immigrant students' English language skills (see page 25).*

*Parents in Jackson, Mississippi, spearheaded the district's transition to school-based management (see page 27).*

# The Work: Fostering Collective Action

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Study participants assert that individuals who join together are more effective in creating reform than those who struggle alone. Many constituency builders take on the challenges of engaging individuals who have never before pursued joint action, and of uniting people across social divisions.

Diversity among constituents ensures a broad range of experience and knowledge, and can enhance a group's leverage as well. People often think of diversity in terms of race and class. But constituency builders face the challenge of uniting groups across immigrant status, language, culture, neighborhood, school zone, and institutional lines, among many others. Moreover, diversity is multilayered; there are divisions within groups. Some of the most challenging relationships to build are between people working within the education system and people based outside of it. Study participants try to help parents, educators, and others carve out new, collaborative roles.

To engage constituents and foster their ability to take joint action, study participants:

- Create mechanisms and arenas that open new experiences for constituents — to interact with people they might not meet in their daily routines, reflect on their experiences in and expectations of schools, and extend their personal spheres.
- Provide training, support, and opportunities to take on new roles — in leadership positions, collecting and analyzing data, and interacting with policymakers.
- Mentor individuals and support activist networks so people stay involved.

## Challenges to Working Collectively

By invoking one set of traditional values — equity, inclusiveness, and the common good — constituency builders often come up against another set of equally orthodox values: individualism, freedom of choice, and market competition. To build cohesive groups, they must help constituents:

- Find common ground within a highly fragmented society.
- View their personal experiences within a systemic perspective.
- Take joint action in a society that values individualism.
- Stay focused — and keep others focused — on educational excellence and equity amidst constant economic, political, and social change.

Moreover, just as they seek equitable schools, study participants seek to address educational, experiential, and other differences among constituents to ensure that everyone has a fair say in the group's decisions.

# The Work: Shifting Power

Study participants and constituency groups use various strategies to promote and sustain education excellence and equity. Some reform efforts start at the school level and others with state policy, but always the goal is systemic change. Some constituency builders work to make decision-making broadly inclusive, while others focus in particular on helping ill-served families build their power and assert their needs.

## Assert Individual Rights

Constituents employ constitutional and legislative rights, including freedom of speech and assembly, to assert and build power. For example, demonstrations can show broad support for change and demand action from officials.

## Build Relationships for Shared Power

One of the biggest challenges for reform efforts is transforming schools that have a culture of isolation, even among school staff, and decision-making power concentrated in the hands of a few. Among a variety of strategies that seek a sharing of power, study participants:

- Use data or research to stimulate discussion and expand people's views of parents' and community members' roles in education.
- Forge relationships with principals, who can foster a school environment that is open to collaboration.
- Use peer networks and other means to build educators' capacity for collaboration.

*Chicago* parents worked with schools to enroll children in a free health insurance program. In the course of the campaign, parents built relationships with teachers and principals that then enabled them to raise fundamental educational issues, such as the problem of teacher vacancies, and to collaborate with educators to address the problems (see pages 26 and 68).

A *Philadelphia* organizing group gave \$5,000 minigrants to parent-led teams to conduct reading projects in partnership with schools. The grants provided incentives for schools to work with parents (see page 69).

## Expand the Power Base through Coalitions

Through coalitions, constituents can develop new relationships, expand their sphere of influence, and mobilize more people for collective action.

## Create More Inclusive Governance Structures

Constituents seek to institutionalize new roles and power dynamics through policies that require broad participation in decision-making. Such policies have resulted in immediate changes, but participants emphasize that ongoing support is necessary to help constituents exercise their new authority and rights.

**Using these approaches, constituents make their voices heard in the institutional policy decisions and practices that affect their lives.**

The Constituency Building Study was a joint project of the Academy for Educational Development and Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago and was conducted by Janice M. Hirota (of Chapin Hall), Lauren E. Jacobs (of the Academy), and Jean Thomases (a consultant). The Ford Foundation provided funding for the study and the report.

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## A few of the voices heard in *Vital Voices*:

*“You can’t declare democracy and then disband. To enable people to participate in democracy, some people need specific help to come to the table.”*

— A national director

*“Some of this work is about how to change perceptions about who cares about kids, who feels invested, who thinks education is important.”*

— A local constituency builder

*“I think the thing that has kept those [individuals] in is their sense of their own development, that they are different people today than they were before, and that they are actors, that they are public persons who have to be dealt with.”*

— A local organizer

*“If there is not any mechanism for [parents and other stakeholders] to learn skills to engage districts, each other, and bureaucracies, then it falls apart because all they’re doing is knocking their heads against walls.”*

— A local organizer

*“Many educators do not discuss their practice. They work in isolation, often in schools that don’t value collaboration. If the educators don’t talk with each other, then they are even less prepared to talk with parents about teaching and learning issues.”*

— A local constituency builder

*“The work of constituency building is primarily local, and then it’s got to be linked and built so that it has a national resonance.”*

— A national organization director

Copies of this executive summary and the accompanying report are available free from the Academy for Educational Development, 100 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011, (212) 243-1110. The documents also are available in PDF format at [www.aed.org/scs](http://www.aed.org/scs) (see publications) and at [www.chapin.uchicago.edu](http://www.chapin.uchicago.edu).