Social Movement Organizing and Equity-Focused Educational Change: Shifting the Zone of Mediation

Michelle Renée, Kevin Welner, and Jeannie Oakes

In the first edition of this handbook, we recommended significant shifts in the way education change is understood and pursued. Specifically, we argued that reforms seeking to disrupt historic connections among race, social class, educational opportunities, and schooling outcomes are likely distorted or abandoned altogether during the implementation process. To succeed, such “equity-focused” change must move beyond conventional change to address a series of unique political and normative challenges (Oakes, Welner, Yonezawa, & Allen, 1998). A related recommendation from that earlier chapter was that the processes of formulating, adopting, and implementing include the active participation of members of less powerful communities as well as the professionals and elites who typically lead reforms. Finally, we joined many others in recommending that education leaders be held accountable for providing all students with a high-quality education and, in particular, for ensuring that the least well-off students are provided with the learning resources they need. Here too, however, we argued that the form of accountability most likely to support the implementation of equity-focused change is the accountability of policy makers and school officials to the public and, most notably, to members of marginalized groups whose educational chances depend on such reforms.

An emerging body of research documents how social movement organizations around the nation have, over the past decade, furthered all three of these recommendations. This updated chapter use Welner’s “zone of mediation” (Oakes et al., 1998; Welner, 2001) to illuminate how social movement organizations are beginning to shift the boundaries, structure, and substance of local- and state-level education reform. The zone of mediation describes the potential of these organizations to bring greater balance to policy deliberations, increasing the probability of the initiation and sound implementation of equity-focused change.

The chapter begins with an explanation of the zone of mediation—describing the nature and use of the concept. We identify the types of forces that shape the zone and describe the potential role of social movement organizations as one of those

J. Oakes (✉)
Presidential Professor of Educational Equity, UCLA; Director, Educational Opportunity and Scholarship, The Ford Foundation, New York
e-mail: j.oakes@fordfound.org

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forces. We then review recent studies that document how social movement organizations are building on the legacy of the civil rights movement to advocate for more equitable school policies and practices. Next, we apply the theoretical construct of the zone of mediation to two examples from our work in California – a statewide “opportunity-to-learn” campaign led by a coalition of community-based and legal-advocacy organizations and a grassroots movement in Los Angeles to make college preparatory courses the default curriculum for all students. We conclude with an analysis of three elements that we think are key to the future success of social movement organizations in shifting the zone of mediation to make schools more equitable: (a) the practice of participatory inquiry, (b) the need to address the political and normative aspects of education reform, and (c) the importance of efforts being grounded in the theory that schools are a key component of the larger political economy.

**Reintroducing the Zone of Mediation**

The equity-focused reform process is unique. These reforms tend to face daunting normative and political obstacles at both the initiation and implementation stages. Quite often, the environment for potential equity-focused reforms is simply not hospitable toward forward movement. In our studies of detracking reforms, for example, we repeatedly observed this inhospitality; teachers and school leaders have explained to us that the politics of schools and neighborhoods would never allow for meaningful changes to elite, high-track classes (Oakes, 1992, 2005; Welner, 2001).

A decade ago, when we wrote our chapter for the first edition of this handbook, we criticized the dominant educational change literature for failing to adequately account for the normative and political barriers standing in the way of such equity-focused reform. That literature, we contended, assumes well-meaning actors who, if given the technical tools and shown the way, will move forward with school improvement efforts. While this dynamic might exist for purely technical reforms, it is rarely recognizable for reforms that strongly implicate issues of race, class, and language-minority status.

To help illustrate the forces – particularly technical, normative, political, and inertial forces – that create the environment surrounding a potential reform, we described a zone of mediation:

[Schools are] situated within particular local enactments of larger cultural norms, rules, incentives, power relations and values. These forces promote either stability or change, and they accordingly set the parameters of beliefs, behavior, and policy in schools. The intersection of forces around a particular issue shapes the zone of mediation for that issue. Such forces may include such far-reaching items as legislation, judicial decisions, foundation support, demographics, housing and nutritional needs, economic and market forces, social/state political climates, educational influence groups (such as teacher unions), district history, individual players within districts, their political ambitions, and the media. (Welner, 2001, p. 95)
Each reform proceeds within a unique context. This context, ... the zone of mediation, is shaped by a myriad of forces. When forces are added, subtracted, strengthened or weakened, the zone shifts. With each shift, the zone becomes more receptive or more hostile to the reform. From this perspective, the reform process is a battle over contextual turf. (Welner, 2001, p. 223)

The zone framework calls our attention to the forces that continually shape and reshape the context for reform. Each new reform rests atop multiple layers of social and political history, as well as past experiences with education reforms.

The zone framework also highlights why a reformer attentive to just technical interventions will likely fail to advance equity-focused change. Such change requires a fundamentally different understanding than do changes in the overwhelmingly technical realm – for example, changing approaches to teaching mathematics, acquiring and using new instructional technologies, or even most reforms designed to foster healthier school cultures. These technical changes are not simple, particularly when they deviate from the culturally established “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), but compared to equity-focused change, they do not implicate substantial normative and political issues. That is, they tend to require only relatively small changes in core normative beliefs about who can learn and in the need to overcome political opposition related to issues of race and social class. If reformers create an environment where technical needs are met (i.e., where school structures changes and resources are put in place), but they neglect the political and normative environment, an equity-focused change is unlikely to be successfully initiated or implemented (Welner, 2001; see also Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

We've also criticized mainstream school change literature for “emphasiz[ing] concerns that are normatively and politically neutral, such as the need for schools to become ‘learning organizations’ where teachers and administrators act as ‘change agents’ skilled at dealing with change as a normal part of their work” (Welner, 2001, p. 12; see also Oakes & Rogers, 2006). This same approach can be seen in recent attempts at so-called “whole school reform,” which is similarly focused on carefully planned organizational change (see Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002). In the service of implementing the school improvement plan, whole-school reformers address such items as getting the pieces in place, creating buy-in, instituting staff development, acquiring resources, and developing and empowering leadership. While careful planning, resources, buy-in and leadership certainly do help to create a more hospitable environment for reform, this is what we call a “neutral” reform approach. When it comes to equity-focused reform, these neutral elements are insufficient to create a healthy change context.

In this regard, we think it important to draw a distinction between school improvement, which depends overwhelmingly on a healthy within-school culture, and third-order change (Welner, 2001), which depends not only on within-school culture but also greatly depends on the context surrounding the school. Third-order changes are “fundamental changes which seek to reform core normative beliefs about race, class, intelligence and educability held by educators and others involved with our
schools” (Oakes et al., 1998, p. 968). While school improvement is intended to better accomplish current school goals, third-order reform is intended to shift those goals to become more equity-focused.

Third-order changes tend to directly oppose and confront prevailing external forces and, therefore, are most likely to fall outside the zone of mediation. Moreover, the process of implementation often results in a watering down of reforms’ equity-focused aspects. We call this process “downward mutual adaptation.”

The changes [to an equity-focused reform] that arise as a result of interaction with pre-existing school context will almost always be in the direction of less equity. That is, the pressures from the school and the community will likely favor the dominant societal actors (the local elites) at the expense of the reform’s intended beneficiaries. (Welner, 2001, p. 228)

As explained throughout this chapter, these concepts of the zone and of downward mutual adaptation illustrate why political mobilization is crucial for the success of third-order, equity-focused reform. Community organizing and other forms of political mobilization can help shape a zone of mediation in the direction of more equity. The principal at a school with a recently initiated detracking reform, for example, is more likely to push forward with the reform if any voices of discontent are balanced by voices praising the effort.

This chapter fleshes out these ideas, again considering the equity-focused reform dynamic and again applying the zone framework to help explain the importance of addressing norms and politics. Our specific emphasis in this chapter concerns social movements. In our chapter a decade ago, we illustrated the zone concept while describing the role of court orders. Like such mandates, social movements and community organizing can play an important reform role, and we contend here that this role has generally been misunderstood and underestimated and has too often been ignored.

Our current emphasis on social movements should not, however, detract from our broad contention about the zone of mediation: many scholars and policy makers have fallen into the trap of looking to just one type of “force” – whether technical, legislative, judicial, or social movement – as having the sole potential to bring about change. By pushing social movements to the forefront, we are in no way minimizing the importance of other forces shaping the zone; rather, this chapter serves to introduce social movement organizations as one critical and increasingly active force.

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1Larry Cuban (1992) set forth a framework with a two-part typology for educational change, distinguishing between changes of different magnitude. He categorized changes that simply improve the efficiency and effectiveness of current practices as “first-order” or “incremental” changes, and he categorized those changes that seek to alter the basic ways that organizations function as “second-order” or “fundamental” changes. Our “third order changes” are fundamental (second-order) changes that also seek to reform educators’ and community members’ core normative beliefs about such matters as race, class, intelligence, and educability.
**Reshaping the Zone Through Social Movements**

The role of social movement organizations in equity-focused education change is perhaps best understood in the context of recent social movement theories, which focus on both political processes and identity formation. Pursuant to this approach, social movements are first and foremost identified by the presence of protest, or “contentious actions” (Tarrow, 1998). By definition, social movements challenge the technical, political, and normative aspects of the existing political system. Social movement organizations are also defined as organizations that engage in forming new collective identities (Whittier, 2002). That is, at the same time that social movement organizations aim to transform the external political system through protest, they also aim to transform the role of individuals and groups in that system (generally by increasing the power of traditionally marginalized groups). And social movement organizations share common features of all organizations: internal structures, regular participants, defined goals, and technical skills and resources (Della Porta & Diani, 1999). Social movement organizations vary significantly – some are multinational, are well funded and engage in multiple issues; others are small and focus on just a single local issue. Most exist somewhere in between.

Current social movement organizing for school equity builds on the long history of activism in African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American communities. The Civil Rights Movement is perhaps the most well-known social movement in American history. Though the Civil Rights Movement was focused on achieving equity for African Americans across all sectors of society, educational equity was clearly at its center. Similarly, prior to *Brown*, Latino communities in California and elsewhere organized and litigated to fight segregation and inadequate educational opportunities (Donato, 1997). Beginning at the time of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which annexed the American Southwest, and continuing to the present day, organizing in Latino communities has included student protest, leadership development, and the creation of Latino community organizations (Delgado Bernal, 2003; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998). Some of the established organizations that currently work on education reform around the nation, such as the NAACP and MALDEF, have direct roots in the Civil Rights Movement.

A small but growing body of literature is beginning to document the recent wave of social movement organizing focused on education reform. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) is perhaps the best-studied example of modern education organizing. The IAF began with Saul Alinsky’s work in Chicago’s poor neighborhoods in the 1930s, helping ordinary people organize to solve local community problems. Self-interest, collective power, and relationships were central to Alinsky’s organizing approach. Drawing from labor organizing movements, he taught neighborhood residents to identify problems in their communities and use confrontational tactics such as sit-ins and boycotts to improve their lives. In Alinsky’s view, collective power was the only tool available to poor people for wresting concessions from the rich and powerful and for countering their use of wealth and political position to maintain their advantages (Alinsky, 1971). These ideas remain at the core of contemporary organizing, although today’s grassroots efforts also reflect the legacy of...
the Civil Rights Movement, which infused organizing with an emphasis on learning and leadership development (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Payne, 1995; Ransby, 2003).

Shirley (1997, 2002) and Warren (2001) provide extensive case studies of the development and impact of the Alliance school network built by the Texas IAF. Ernesto Cortes and the group's organizers built on local movements to form the Alliance Schools Project in Texas. Local parents and community members learned to use contentious action to develop what they called "fear and loathing relationships" with elected officials, which held those officials accountable for improving schools in some of the state's most impoverished neighborhoods of color (Shaw, 2001). At the same time, however, the Alliance Schools Project augmented their repertoire of strategies beyond direct confrontation to include mutually supportive, if sometimes confrontational, relationships between communities and local schools.

Over time, this productive combination of "relational" strategies — powerful community engagement and strong accountability — was recognized and supported by the state legislature and department of education. The network of Alliance schools has been granted financial resources supporting teacher professional development and student academic assistance. Teachers, principals, and parents within the network of schools meet to collaborate, learn, and campaign for additional resources, helping to enhance and sustain the reform. Notably, throughout the evolution of the project, the work has maintained its organizing edge — with community members judging educators and officials by actions and results (rather than promises), giving them credit when they have advanced the group's agenda and criticizing them loudly when they have not.

Setting aside for a moment the normative and political context, one can identify within this reform elements that are often advocated by mainstream school reformers: collaborative school environments, professional development, resources to help students succeed, and even waivers from restrictive top-down rules. These can be thought of as the "technical" elements of the Texas IAF reform. But describing the reform only in terms of those technical elements neglects the reality that in most jurisdictions normative and political forces, as well as inertial forces, would likely keep this reform from going forward; what differed in Texas was the social movement (Oakes, 1992; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Welner, 2001).

The Texas IAF challenged the forces that created the preexisting zone of mediation as well as the inequitable education system in Texas. The participation of community members, parents, teachers, and others who developed the Alliance schools brought about the technical changes, but they did so by also bringing about political changes (community members gained an authentic role in school decision making) and normative changes (IAF members countered stereotypes, increased the social capital of their community, and helped to shift fundamental ideas about the cause of inequity in Texas schools). That is, these political and normative changes made possible by organizing strategies shifted the zone to make it more hospitable to the technical changes. While the technical knowledge likely existed prior to the social movement, the reform could not feasibly have been initiated or implemented without that movement.
The impact of social movement organizing on the zone of meditation is also illustrated by the normative changes resulting from the activities of Comité de Padres Latinos (COPLA), a community organization of Latino parents in Carpentaria, California. Delgado-Gaitan (2001) describes how engaging in school reform “changed [the parents’] perception about their lives from one of deficit to empowerment [which] led to the cultural changes in the family, the community and in their personal lives” (p. 175). These are not isolated, insignificant examples. A national study by Gold, Simon, Mundell, and Brown (2004) located over 140 education organizations with an active membership base, working on equity, building cross-community alliances, developing democratic leadership, and aiming to improve the civic participation and power of low-to-moderate communities. After synthesizing information about these organizations, they concluded that organizing “creates the political will to address problems that would otherwise go unattended for lack of an organized constituency demanding attention to them” (p. 705). Most recently, Mediratta and her colleagues (2008) found that by creating political contexts (zones of mediation) hospitable to equitable education change, community organizing in eight communities around the country produced tangible effects on policy and resource decisions, school-level improvements, and student outcomes.

This emerging body of literature documents the increasing engagement of social movement organizations in education reform, as well as the ways in which social movement organizations intentionally and explicitly address the political and normative aspects of reform and thereby reshape the zone. Yet, as we explained above, no single force is responsible for shaping the zone; in each of the case studies we encountered, social movement organizations interacted with other forces (many hostile to the reform efforts) to reshape the zone and redefine their schools.

To further illustrate the role of social movement organizations, we present two case studies of social movement organizing from our research in California (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Renee, 2006). These examples demonstrate how the organizations act as a force and how they interact with other forces (economy, history, courts, politicians, school administrators, etc.) to shape the zone. The first focuses on a statewide campaign to ensure all California students have an equal opportunity to learn. The second is an example of education reform at the local level—a coalition of grassroots organizations formed to advocate for the implementation of a curriculum policy extending college preparation to all students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Both cases involve the joining together of grassroots, advocacy, legal, and research organizations to form coalitions capable of generating enough power to alter technical policies, political relationships, and normative beliefs.

Case Study #1: Education Adequacy and Opportunities to Learn in California

By the turn of this century, California’s once first-rate education system had crumbled. The state ranked below almost every other state in the number of counselors and teachers per student; hundreds of schools and thousands of classrooms were
overcrowded; only 69 students of every 100 who were in 9th grade 4 years earlier actually graduated from high school, and only 27 of those 69 graduates had passed the courses required for entry into any of the state’s 4-year public colleges (Rogers, Oakes, Terrizquc, & Valladares, 2007). Layered on top of this inadequacy was significant inequality; the state’s growing Latino and African American student populations were far more likely to bear the brunt of resource shortages and lack of educational opportunity. Subsequently their rates of graduation and college preparation lagged far behind those of Whites and Asians.

Little meaningful reform had been forthcoming to counter these problems. Students ill-served by the schools 20 years earlier found their own children to be equally ill-served, or worse. And, as easy as it was for some policy makers to recognize and decry inequalities and other weaknesses in the school system, it had been extraordinarily difficult to initiate and implement policies that substantially reform the system. To some extent, this is because change must overcome inertial forces, such as educators and others who want to continue doing things the way they’ve always been done. To some extent, too, it is because of normative and political forces.

Challenging these forces in California were forty-eight students and their parents, supported by a team of advocates, who filed a lawsuit (Williams v. State of California) in the spring of 2000. These families argued, on behalf of a class of over a million students, that California’s governor, State Board of Education, and State Superintendent of Public Instruction failed to provide them with qualified teachers, basic educational supplies, and safe classrooms and school facilities. Their case alleged that the state violated the students’ constitutional right to an education. The plaintiffs, who were nearly all African American, Latino, and Asian Pacific Islander students attending predominately non-White schools, also argued that students of color and low-income students disproportionately experienced the lack of basic educational resources. Their bottom line was that all students must receive certain basic resources in order to learn and that the state had a legal responsibility to ensure that schools are adequately resourced.

As is generally the case with major education rights litigation, a cadre of public interest law firms represented the interests of the Williams plaintiffs. ² Unique to Williams, however, was the extent of engagement from the very outset between the lawyers and a group of grassroots community advocates and educational researchers. Aware of past long-term failures of much equity-focused litigation, this coalition determined that sustained community engagement was critical to maintaining public pressure on policy makers and in particular for ensuring that the equity intent of any new laws or regulations survived through implementation. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the legal team set aside staff time and organizational resources to support the learning and mobilization of community organizations engaged with the Williams litigation. The result was that the inertial, normative,

²In this case, the firms included the ACLU of Northern and Southern California, Public Advocates, and MALDEF, as well as pro bono counsel from the San Francisco firm, Morrison & Foerster.
and political forces shaping the zone of mediation were all challenged – by the litigation itself, but also by grassroots organizing that targeted political and normative resistance to change.

For a group of California social justice organizations, *Williams* was an opportunity to collaborate with each other, building their own base of members concerned about education, and helping to address the inequalities in California’s education system. A newly formed collection of local community organizations, state chapters of national grassroots organizations, research institutes, and advocacy groups approached philanthropic organizations with a proposal for a collaborative campaign to further the education justice goals of the *Williams* litigation. Two statewide collaboratives were formed – the Campaign for Quality Education (CQE) and the Educational Justice Collaborative (EJC). The CQE is a loose coalition of California education justice organizations that meet to build alliances and coordinate statewide campaigns. Its structure and development were facilitated by Californians for Justice, a statewide student organization. The EJC is a collaborative effort between UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) and over 30 activist and advocacy organizations, with the express goal of improving the equity of California schools. The EJC does not run campaigns. Rather, it provides the time and space for different organizations to study issues, form relationships, exchange ideas and strategies, and build organizational capacity to engage with policy makers and the media. These two statewide collaboratives overlap in membership as well as in their focus issues (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

As the *Williams* litigation made its way through the courts and the eventual negotiated settlement, California’s educators, students, and policy makers were debating a related policy: the impending implementation of a new high school exit exam. Organizers participating in the CQE and EJC began to look for ways to address this combination of issues. At a grassroots level, students, parents, and advocates pointed to the unfairness of denying high school diplomas to students denied opportunities – those who attended poorly maintained and under-resourced schools. From their perspective, the exit exam seemed to be punishing students for politicians’ failure to adequately fund schools. As these community groups began to develop campaigns, they collectively turned for assistance to the researchers at UCLA’s IDEA (including authors Renee and Oakes) affiliated with the EJC.

During these meetings, we heard them articulate their concerns and recognized the match between their theories and the “opportunity to learn” theories discussed in the education literature. Specifically, we heard in these ideas the call for resource and practice standards needed to ensure that all students have the opportunity to perform at a high level (Guiton & Oakes, 1995; O’Day et al., 1993). In daylong retreats with these community activists and advocates, researchers shared studies on opportunities to learn, and the community activists applied the research concepts to their campaigns around *Williams* and the high school exit exam policy. The research was helpful to them, but it was not received without critique; many lamented that the published research had missed key components of equal educational opportunity, such as the need for standards to address access to culturally relevant curriculum, respectful teachers, and dignity. The process of learning about research and,
more importantly, of engaging and exchanging ideas with researchers allowed organizers and advocates to grapple with key concepts and apply empirically derived knowledge to their campaigns.

Armed with the “opportunity to learn” framing, several EJC organizations embarked on multiple education equity campaigns across the state. As one example, professional legal advocates at the organization Public Advocates used the opportunity-to-learn framing to develop legislation to create opportunity-to-learn standards.\(^3\) At the same time, the CQE focused its opportunity-to-learn campaign on delaying the high stakes consequences of the high school exit exam. The mobilization against what they termed “the diploma penalty” began in 2002 and continues as we write this. It has included many forms of protest: rallies, petition drives, policy advocacy, public testimony, publication of reports, and litigation.

The impact of this work is neither straightforward nor easy to measure. The campaign to derail California’s high school exit exam had an important “win,” in the form of a 2-year delay in the requirement that high school students pass the exam in order to graduate. Nevertheless, the diploma penalty was implemented for the Class of 2006 – a result at direct odds with a key goal of the organizations. Yet the implementation did include exceptions for English Learners and special education students, something the organizations and others fought hard to bring about. The campaigning also resulted in new state funding and education programs to assist students not initially able to pass the exam. But the impact of this social movement organizing can only partially be measured by dollars spent, legislation passed, or test scores raised.

We have, in the past, described how the success of equity-focused reform efforts is found, in part, simply in the struggle to improve schools (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Renee, 2006; Welner, 2001). During that struggle, educators and others learn about their own values and beliefs, challenge accepted norms and politics, and develop technical skills, as they pave the way for future efforts. Similarly, a large part of the success of the organizing against the California High School Exit Exam is found in the broader, ongoing political and normative arenas. Students and parents from low-income communities of color forced their concerns and ideas directly into this state-level policy debate. Their steady and determined protest and demand to be included provoked a very public debate around the implementation of the exam and the inadequacy of California’s public schools. Young people testified at the State Board of Education, community organizers lobbied the legislature, and the media covered much of the protest. The result was a shift in the zone of mediation surrounding state education policy. The parameters of a feasible exit exam policy correspondingly shifted. The resulting zone – in particular, the new political context – became more hospitable to conversations about the adequacy and equity of the education system.

\(^3\) Though the legislation was introduced in the California Senate, it did not pass (SB 495, 2003; SB 550, 2003).
Organizing also created a normative shift. By being physically present in the debate, low-income parents and students directly challenged the deficit notion that the achievement gap is the result of their apathy or low desire for an education. Instead, the public and policy makers were confronted with the reality that parents and students were not only concerned but were also demanding that the education system change. One visible result was that policy makers began talking more about providing all students in California with basic learning resources alongside their more conventional concerns about the “achievement gap” and “failing students.”

The Williams litigation itself resulted in a more traditional, technical change, although the plaintiffs did not secure a legal victory that established these opportunities to learn as a constitutional right. Instead, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger settled the Williams lawsuit at the outset of his first term in office. The settlement included nearly a billion dollars set aside to correct the most egregious resource shortages in the state’s lowest performing schools. It also included significant new accountability requirements for monitoring students’ access to basic education resources that make state and county governments more accountable to students and parents. Importantly, and in contrast to much earlier litigation focused on civil rights and education rights, the settlement did not end the involvement of the plaintiffs and their supporters. Grassroots organizations around the state continue to use the new complaint process created by the Williams settlement as a tool for engaging parents and students in improving schools. This new process allows parents, students, and community members to file a grievance about inadequate educational resources or unsafe school conditions. School and county officials are required to respond to and, as appropriate, fix the problems.

In this way and others, Williams brought about ongoing political change in addition to the structural, technical changes in state policy. The relationships and alliances built during the litigation have continued, as groups work toward the equitable implementation of the settlement. Advocacy organizations have helped draft implementing legislation in the California legislature. When these organizers and advocates come across technical problems, they turn to the research and researchers they know and trust. Grassroots organizations have testified, written letters, and met with elected representatives to ensure that the legislation moves through the policy process. Acting in concert, these organizations – advocacy, grassroots, and research – are developing community-led research projects as well as student and parent campaigns to ensure that the equity intent of the legislation is maintained through implementation.

In our earlier work (Oakes et al., 1998; Welner, 2001), we warned that a zone of mediation hospitable to equity-focused reform could not be maintained unless one of two things happened. Pursuant to the first possibility, the forces that originally created the hospitable zone remain in place, although we have viewed this possibility as particularly problematic when reform was initiated with court involvement. A second possibility involves the emergence of new force or (preferably) set of forces to sustain a hospitable political and normative environment. The California case study illustrates the potential of this latter approach.
Case Study #2: College Preparation for All in the Los Angeles Unified School District

The second case study takes place during the same timeframe as the opportunity-to-learn campaign described above. Although education adequacy and the California High School Exit Exam were dominating state policy debates, grassroots organizations in Los Angeles were beginning to look for ways to engage in education equity reform at the local level. If the data about student opportunities and outcomes looked bad statewide, they paled in comparison to those in Los Angeles. The second largest school district in the nation, LAUSD, educates more than 700,000 young people, including high percentages of low-income students and English learners. In 2002, the district produced only about 48 graduates for every hundred 9th graders 4 years earlier, and only 20 of these hundred 9th graders graduated from high school qualified for a 4-year college. These low numbers of college-prepared students were not terribly surprising, given that most of the LAUSD high schools provided the college preparatory course sequence to only a fraction of their students. Moreover, many of the district’s college preparatory courses were being taught by teachers without the proper subject matter certification, took place in overcrowded schools and classrooms, and often proceeded with inadequate curriculum materials. As in the state, LAUSD students of color and low-income students disproportionately experienced these resource shortfalls (UCLA IDEA, 2004).

In 2003, community organizers in Los Angeles decided to challenge these inequities. Early on, they contacted researchers at UCLA IDEA and asked for data regarding high school graduation and college preparation rates in the communities’ schools. Community organizers, parents, and students were outraged when they saw, across the large district, the stark disparities in access to college preparatory coursework. The data (presented on straightforward maps and tables) showed that schools in low-income communities of color offered significantly fewer opportunities offered significantly fewer opportunities for students to graduate high school prepared to enter California colleges and universities. At the time these meetings were taking place, the United Way published a “Latino Scorecard” grading the quality of life for Latinos in Los Angeles. The education system received a “D” grade.

Moving from outrage to action, the organizers pursued approaches to change LAUSD policy to make a college preparatory curriculum the default curriculum for all students – students would have to affirmatively opt out in order to enroll in classes with a less-challenging curriculum. The organizers quickly found an ally in LAUSD School Board President Jose Huizar and his chief of staff, Monica Garcia. The region of the school district President Huizar represented had some of the lowest rates of college preparatory offerings, undoubtedly influencing his decision to take on the issue. Community organizers guiding the emerging campaign made a concerted effort to broaden the base of their coalition – reaching out to other community organizations, the teachers union, and school district insiders. They organized themselves into key teams to create a policy proposal, develop political support in the district and community, and produce a media campaign around the issue. For a year, they worked to increase the sense of urgency around the issue and to build a critical mass of supporters.
Prior to the school board vote, the organizations involved in this effort formalized their collaboration by officially creating Communities for Educational Equity (CEE). By June 2005, CEE had helped President Huizar draft and pass a districtwide resolution making the college preparatory sequence of courses the default curriculum for all students; this sequence also became a graduation requirement beginning with the high school graduating class of 2016. Members of the community had built effective alliances with researchers, teachers, administrators, and elected officials, changing the nature of policy discussions and solutions. Their involvement and the alliances they formed helped policy makers to understand the academic desires and needs of their communities, building a zone of mediation—a policy making context—that was hospitable to this equity-focused reform.

Yet passing this resolution turned out to be just the beginning for the CEE. With their sweeping new reform in place, CEE organizers are ensuring that the equity intent of their resolution survives implementation. Most of the pressures and forces that preexisted their reform effort—that created a relatively inhospitable zone for the reform—were undoubtedly still in place, so if the CEE’s own pressures had disappeared, the zone might have quickly shifted back. Implementation of the reform would then have looked very different from the CEE intent.

Accordingly, CEE members pushed to ensure that community organizations had an official role within the LAUSD team charged with implementing the reform. They also insisted that their concerns continue to be addressed by district officials during the reform’s implementation. In addition, the CEE organizations collectively, and successfully, applied for a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. With significant support from this foundation, and with input from the community as well as education researchers, CEE has developed an effective community-based implementation strategy at eight core families of schools (high schools and the junior high and elementary schools that feed into them). The goals and new resources for these “collaboratives” were celebrated at a widely reported joint press conference held by the CEE groups, the LAUSD superintendent, and city officials. In each of these sites, the community groups now have both dollars and legitimacy as they use social movement strategies (relationship building, contentious action when needed, and constant monitoring) to fight for changes in schools’ structures, curriculum, and teaching.

This ongoing effort—the “insider” involvement of the community groups on district implementation teams and their “outsider” monitoring of that implementation—has taken place with much less public attention compared to the initial campaign. But this long-term commitment to the issue has elevated the reform to a different level of sustainability and potential success. These community members and the ones discussed in the first case study realized that state policy debates, local outrage, and their increased capacity to collaborate change the nature of the policy discussion, shifting the zone to one now open to new equity-focused reform efforts.

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4Resolution to Create Educational Equity in Los Angeles Through the Implementation of the A-G Course Sequence as Part of the High School Graduation Requirement (Board President Jose Huizar, author), passed 6-1 by the LAUSD Board of Education in June 2005.
They researched reform ideas, built collaborations across organizations, agencies, and political offices, and thus increased their ability to disrupt established norms and politics. The result on a technical level was unambiguous: the passage of a resolution that structurally changed the curriculum of the second largest school district in the nation. But this was only the most visible success. At a political level, community concern was legitimized and responded to, from policy development through passage and now into implementation. On a normative level, a policy that prepares all children to have the choice to go to college challenges deficit notions about who is capable of high academic success. Another normative and political shift arises from the long-term engagement of low-income communities and communities of color, defying common beliefs that these communities are not invested in the education system.

Conclusion

Community organizations and community involvement are really about the full participation of all voices—of all segments of that community. In our earlier discussion of top–down reform, we warned that court orders and policy mandates provide, at best, temporary disruptions of an inequitable status quo. Once the mandate disappears, the reform’s survival depends on the presence of some other set of forces that will create a hospitable zone. We argued that to remain receptive to an equity-focused policy, reformers must build a normative, political, and technical foundation (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Welner, 2001). The needs and concerns of all parts of a school’s community should be considered. Although the voices of so-called “local elites” (Oakes & Lipton, 2002; Wells & Serna, 1996) have long been heard, the same is not true of voices representing students of color and those whose parents have less wealth and formal education. As described in this chapter, community organizing has the potential to create balance among all these voices and concerns and, as a result, the potential to create equitable schools.

References


