

Community Organizing for Urban School Reform

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS
AUSTIN

430,000 teachers, principals, administrators, and staff—one hundred thousand people more than all ten of the largest corporations in Texas combined. The Houston Independent School District employs more people than any other single source of employment in Houston. And, although the rhetoric of change is easy to espouse, the grinding work of school change—reconceptualizing teachers' and parents' roles and responsibilities, learning new ways of engaging the community, developing innovative methods of instruction and assessment, and cultivating a more flexible sense of one's roles and responsibilities—requires a talented and patient mobilization of people and resources. As of this writing, there are over one hundred Alliance Schools in Texas, and many of them are in the process of just beginning to engage their communities. Thus, although we must be aware of the impediments to change, we also must learn from the factors at this early stage of the Alliance School process that appear to promote experimentation and success.^{1,2}

10 The Pursuit of Success

How is it that some urban schools have been able to work effectively with Texas IAF organizations? What are the features of the collaboratives which have produced higher academic achievement, improved personal and social aspects of students' lives, and enhanced neighborhood stability and security? Without implying that the lessons of schools such as Zavala should be applied directly to other settings, what can we learn from a Zavala Elementary School that should inform our approach to school reform in other low-income communities?

To answer these important questions, we need several layers of analysis. First, we must highlight unique features of the IAF theory and practice of politics that fueled school change in settings like Zavala. The rigorous methodology of IAF organizing—from one-on-one's to house meetings to Walks for Success to parents' assemblies—should be disaggregated to illuminate the efficacy and interdependence of each of the component parts. A second layer of analysis concerns the Texas IAF strategy for building social capital. On the one hand, schools could draw upon many civic institutions to develop social capital, such as neighborhood associations, corporations, and nonreligious nonprofit organizations. On the other hand, religious institutions appeal to a unique facet of the human identity and play a specific role in American life. Analyzing the interface between the church and the school, as mediated by the IAF organization, can help us to understand why this model of organizing has helped to change the culture of urban schools in the Texas context, and how it has helped to cultivate social capital between clergy, students, parents, teachers, administrators, and neighbors.

A third layer of analysis focuses on the issue of test scores. The Texas IAF has avoided some of the major contemporary quagmires of

school reform, such as arguments about site-based management and literacy strategies based on whole language or phonetics. The reason for that abstinence has less to do with the importance of the issues than their intractability and the difficulty of demonstrating concrete results that will meet the agenda developed in house meetings. Instead, Texas IAF organizations have focused on the interface between parental engagement and academic achievement. That concentration has enabled schools which previously had been trapped in vicious circles to engage in the reflection and experimentation which could enhance the cognitive and social development of low-income youth.

The Internal Dynamics of Texas IAF Culture

IAF organizers are fond of saying that "all organizing is reorganizing" to indicate that all communities are already organized, even if their form of organization is such that they are controlled by forces outside of the neighborhood. It should be clear that for IAF community organizing to succeed, change must occur on a theoretical as well as on a practical and political level. To begin to identify the special kind of social change that is promoted by Texas IAF collaboratives, we must reconceptualize traditional forms of inquiry about education.

Consider the trap involved in the simple question, often asked by principals, teachers, and administrators: how can we increase student attendance and academic achievement? The question is a legitimate one, but it is typically encumbered with a narrow definition of "we" that brackets out vital community resources such as parents, clergy, police, realtors, bankers, philanthropists, and providers of public health services. By excluding those resources, a worthy goal is undermined, leading to frustration, scapegoating, and disengagement.

Texas IAF leaders and organizers ask a different question: *how can we create and develop a political constituency and political leaders to organize the community to improve our schools and community?* This question presupposes a different criterion of success, one that is measured by the formation of an articulate, well-informed, and organized community which engages in powerful and effective public advocacy on behalf of its children. In the case of schools, that advocacy includes the opportunity for all children to receive strong educations—not just the scions of the affluent. In the case of the community, advocacy includes the chance to live in safety with adequate housing and health care. Success

in this instance is predicated upon leadership development, political participation, the creation of a constituency, and the strengthening of community-based organizations. That political success can then generate further improvements relevant to academic achievement, immunizations, community policing, after-school programs, job training, and home ownership.

Why does this reframing of the question of success matter? The Texas IAF teaches that the definition of success should be developed through conversations with parents and clergy and not through the programs—however well-intended—of even the most sophisticated experts. When the Texas IAF first began working in schools, its leaders and organizers were most concerned with the quality of instruction and curriculum. Through house meetings, Texas IAF leaders learned that parents had different priorities. Parents were not worried about the advantages of a whole language versus a phonetics-based approach to literacy; they were obsessed with their children's safety in the community. Morning-side parents resented a convenience store which sold alcohol to their children; Zavala parents were terrified of the drug dealers in the housing projects; Ysleta parents wanted traffic lights and warning signals to help their children cross busy Zaragoza Street; Smith parents wanted a greater police presence in the neighborhood and community policing in the school. Rather than pursue their initial interest in pedagogy and curriculum, the Texas IAF took the parents' concerns seriously. They then taught parents how they could become political actors who could not just improve safety in their neighborhoods, but also develop the skills to acquire programs which will give their children at least a shot at reaching a decent quality of life in the twenty-first century.

It doesn't take much to observe that *politics* is a dirty word for most Americans today. Yet as long as *all* political activity is vilified, there is no chance of developing an integrated philosophy and strategy of school reform and neighborhood stabilization. Instead, one falls back to the failures of the last two decades, in which the reform of the school is bracketed off from the dynamics and troubles of its surrounding community. One ends up with schools like Ortega Elementary in Austin—a hothouse of reform and innovation surrounded by an eight-foot-high fence topped off with barbed wire to keep out the gangs and drug dealers that bully the law-abiding citizens of the neighborhood. One ends up with an illusion of success rather than the real thing.

By reconceptualizing success along the lines of Texas IAF collabora-

tives, we recover the original meaning of the word *success* itself. *Success* is a derivative of the Latin *succedere*, meaning "to go from under." By resisting the lure of technical expertise *per se* as the *sine qua non* of school reform, Texas IAF organizations literally "go from under" by taking seriously the aspirations low-income citizens have for their children. There is of course a synthesis with sustained and critical analysis in the forms of training and seminars. Nonetheless, house meetings are viewed as the generative point of origin of Texas IAF educational organizing.

We begin, then, by reconceptualizing the definition of success in school reform to posit that the development of a political constituency and political leadership is the first task of serious educational reformers. The next step is to state that the process through which problems are attacked matters. If political leadership and a political constituency are created, but those leaders and those constituents delegate their concerns to political representatives and corporate leaders, one cannot achieve the sense of ownership of the reform process generated among low-income parents in the Alliance Schools.

The first factor explaining the successful school reforms sustained by the Texas IAF is inextricably interwoven with the organizations' approach to civic engagement. One of the most important axioms defining that approach is the "iron rule" to "never do for others what they can do for themselves." The iron rule is indispensable if one is to avoid the famous "free rider" problem in social relations, in which individuals capitalize on the work of others without expending any energy themselves. Community organizers, parents, teachers, principals, and clergy all have to worry about free riders in their schools, families, and congregations. The IAF's insistence on the importance of the iron rule derives from the realization that too many free riders will destroy the community organization by scattering its resources and undermining its accountability. If the community organization is to have a chance to get off the ground, it must strictly separate itself from potential free riders and a culture of entitlement.¹

That theoretical emphasis and the practice that accompanies it give the Texas IAF credibility with community stakeholders. The IAF must develop an alternative culture of civic action, accountability, and reciprocity if it is to amass power and respect in the volatile and contentious world of urban politics. The constant repetition of the iron rule, which harmonizes well with the dominant Jacksonian political culture

in Texas, has been one route to gaining that respect in the urban Southwest.

Once the Texas IAF has helped a school and its community to garner their resources, vocalize grievances, broker reforms, and gain political credibility, it usually is not long until organizers move on to another challenge in the community. This independence, a logical expression of the iron rule, gives Texas IAF organizations a broad base of support in schools in working-class neighborhoods. Educators are reassured that the purpose of the Texas IAF is not to take over a school but to help it through a transition.

The pedagogical analogue to the Texas IAF organizations' movement of engagement and removal is the constructivist principle of "scaffolding" and "fading." Once organizers have helped the community to build a "scaffold" for their own self-mobilization, they will typically "fade" by devoting their attention to other concerns where they are more deeply needed. For some educators, including several at Davis High School in Houston, TMO's withdrawal after the first Walks for Success occurred too rapidly; others, such as principal Emily Cole, recognized that Robert Rivera and his colleagues had determined that the school had become strong enough to sustain and develop its strong community partnerships on its own. TMO did not leave its work on the Near North Side; it refocused it upon health care in elementary schools and citizenship classes for parents. Lupe Meils, a parent leader at Ysleta Elementary in El Paso, grasped the logic of this movement when she said, "We're learning for ourselves that we can organize ourselves. If EPISO was to leave tomorrow, we could take the skills we've learned and go on." Ysleta principal Dolores de Avila agreed, "We've internalized the process."²

If the iron rule's emphasis on autonomy and respect is a key aspect of the Texas IAF's success, another important aspect is the emphasis on relational power, a culture of conversations, and connectedness. When Texas IAF leaders and organizers visit homes for one-on-one conversations, house meetings, or as part of the Walk for Success, they do not approach parents with an agenda to sell, although in certain cases they do want parents to know about programs which can benefit their children or themselves. But first and foremost, a successful house meeting is one in which leaders and organizers learn from the community about its most salient issues. When Julia Lerma first began working for Metro Alliance, she spent a full six months just visiting community leaders,

local clergy, teachers, and principals before she began formulating an agenda in collaboration with the community leaders. Six months may seem like a long time for this kind of work, but for working-class citizens it indicates something important in terms of follow-through and commitment, which builds a base of trust and solidarity that will be needed for the political struggles that lie ahead.

A third strength of the Texas IAF resides in the kinds of pedagogical interventions leaders and organizers use to help communities identify and circumscribe their grievances to focus on one winnable issue. Organizers are not *laissez-faire*; they do not promote whatever concepts the community brings forth. A culture of conversations means that the organizers and key leaders listen to the grievances of a community and work with the community to redress those problems. When EPISO first became active at Ysleta Elementary, the parents were bitter about many facets of their school and community. Maribeth Larkin helped the community to choose the most salient problem—traffic and safety—and to keep that in the foreground for an entire year. Austin Interfaith leaders and organizers discovered that the major issue vocalized by parents concerning their East Austin community dealt with the high volume of drug dealing in two public housing projects near Zavala Elementary. The leaders and organizers observed that the community was too afraid of the dealers to confront them, and rather than press the parents to take on an issue that clearly frightened them, worked with them on the more winnable issue of health care and academic achievement for children in the community. Taking on the issue of crime is still an important priority, but one that awaits the development of a more confident public voice for neighborhood residents and their leaders.

One vital part of Texas IAF organizing for community engagement is its emphasis not just on training parents, but also on working with educators to make schools more proactive. In Texas IAF training sessions, teachers are taught not to dismiss parents for their lack of formal education but to capitalize on ways in which parents' life experiences can be infused into the curriculum. Even when parents lack literacy, they can encourage children's imagination by telling them stories; they can find ways to get their children involved in measuring while cooking; they can practice English expressions together if they come from a Spanish-dominant home. By speaking to parents in such a way as to communicate that they are essential partners in the educational enter-

prise, parents feel valorized, want to spend more time in the school, and are more likely to complete their formal schooling in adult education programs.

Many Texas IAF training sessions are held for parents and educators. They include such diverse topics as changes in the global economy, the key role that education will play in enhancing children's life chances, and the need to move beyond drilling and memorization to develop more multifaceted approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment. Some training sessions are devoted to study and debate, based on materials such as the Texas IAF vision paper or presentations by prominent educators. All of the training sessions work to build a more cohesive sense of community and to teach neighborhood and school leaders the key strategies that they will need to develop if they seek to be effective political actors.

Other types of training help leaders to develop the political savvy to get the results they seek from power holders. COPS organizer Joe Rubio held a training session at Flanders Elementary School in San Antonio in December 1994. In that training session, Rubio and session participants reviewed what had happened over the course of the four changes in school superintendents in the previous year and a half; this turnover had seriously undermined the school's efforts to gain a multipurpose center that would include a gymnasium. During the training, teachers and parents developed a strategy of one-on-one meetings with school board members and the incoming superintendent to ensure that the over four hundred children at Flanders would receive a multipurpose center before the district began to think about allocating its funds to other projects.

Teaching political savvy can involve educating parents about subtle but important political dynamics. "When we were first meeting with the district, Sister Maribeth didn't scold us parents, but she told us not to smile so much," Lupe Meils of Ysleta Elementary recalled. "We were trying to be too friendly." Organizers and leaders can serve to remind parents not to overreach themselves and become confrontational with administrators in ways that damage rather than contribute toward long-term successes. At Ysleta Elementary, when a parent made a strong verbal attack upon Superintendent Trujillo, Maribeth Larkin told the parent, "You need to depolarize," meaning that it was important to talk one-on-one with the superintendent afterward to make sure that

he knew that the comments were not intended to be personal attacks. Odessa Ravin has had to work with parents to establish limits and to clarify with them that even though they can play substantial roles in governance, staff development, and curriculum issues at Morningside, they cannot use the school's openness as a platform for attacking the legitimate authority and expertise of the principal and her faculty. Part of community organizing for urban school renewal involves educating parents in the specific ways in which they can build effective relationships that will contribute to the long-term academic success of their children.

One of the most important facets of Texas IAF organizing that promotes its success is the development of an interclass, multiethnic organizing base. On the one hand, there is no question but that ethnic solidarity assisted with the founding and development of COPS, Valley Interfaith, and EPIISO at a time when Mexican Americans were thoroughly subordinated to Anglo-American political and economic hegemony. On the other hand, it is virtually impossible to find examples of ways in which exhortations based on racial or ethnic solidarity have played any role at all in Texas IAF education organizing.

It certainly is not the case that awareness of ethnic differences is not salient in community organizing in urban Texas. Many IAF leaders have commented that the first time they have ever been in a specific church or neighborhood populated by groups of a different ethnicity was during a Texas IAF action. When Robert Hemphill, who is African American, first did community outreach in the *Segundo Barrio* of El Paso, he had a difficult time establishing contact with parents who refused to believe that he was the new principal of Alamo Elementary School, and many teachers and leaders have expressed anxiety about their first ventures into low-income communities.

Ethnic differences are not just a matter of identity and perception but also of social organization. To take the example of religious institutions, there is a world of difference between the relationship to the community held by a Black Baptist minister who starts a church from scratch and a Mexican American priest who has the international and hierarchical organizational edifice of the Catholic Church to rely upon. Black clergy typically play a dual role as both religious and political leaders in African American neighborhoods; Mexican American or Anglo clergy almost never personify that linkage in their civic capacities. Differences in

family structure, rates of attendance in religious institutions, proficiency in English, labor segmentation, and a host of other issues separate the major ethnic groups which populate urban Texas, and those differences must be recognized as part of any organizing effort.

Because of the real differences which exist among ethnic groups, IAF organizations have sought to transcend ethnic barriers by emphasizing universal themes. Building broad-based organizations with strong Black, Anglo, and Hispanic delegations in large multiethnic urban centers like Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston is a daunting challenge, and much mutual suspicion and distrust between groups must be overcome to develop organizational strength. Yet for Ernie Cortés, the value of shaping broad-based organizations is obvious if the goal is building political power. "The reality is that the United Farm Workers and the United Auto Workers organized millions more Mexicans than La Raza Unida," Cortés commented. "Everybody knows who the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union is today; nobody remembers the Jewish Bund. You can get media attention if you confine yourself to your own ethnic group, but you can't get power." Cortés' emphasis on broad-based organizing situates him in a broad and inclusive tradition of Mexican American activists, such as Bert Corona and César Chávez, who expressed disdain for organizing strategies that relied strictly on ethnic identity. For the many citizens who are more concerned with finding common ground with others than with emphasizing their ethnic differences, Texas IAF organizing is a welcome way of experiencing solidarity across class and ethnic lines.³

Another reason for the successes of Texas IAF organizations in schools is related to their approach to issues of governance in schools. Texas IAF collaboratives offer an alternative to orthodox models of parental involvement, which assume that the reigning culture of the school is legitimate and that parents only need to learn and apply better parenting skills to improve their children's academic achievement. One of the more famous approaches to parental involvement in recent years was devised by James Comer and applied by his colleagues at Yale University to the public schools of New Haven, Connecticut. Comer implemented a tripartite model of parental engagement to schools in low-income African American communities with dramatic educational results. His model created a school governing structure with parental representation, worked to integrate parents into the life of the school, and created "men-

tal health teams" with parental representation to nourish a humanistic, child-friendly atmosphere in the school. Another important recent innovation in parental involvement was implemented in Chicago, where parents have become empowered decision makers who hire not only the teachers in their neighborhood schools, but also the principal.⁴

Both the Comer model and site-based management with significant power allocated to parents represent significant alterations in the traditional culture of schools and bold efforts to improve community participation in educational settings. When viewed from the vantage point of Texas IAF collaborations, however, they each reveal shortcomings. Neither approach seriously conceptualizes the necessity of *educating* parents to develop political *organizations* which address interrelated issues of housing, jobs, schools, and crime in their communities. According to Father Will Wauters, of Santa Fe Episcopal and the Metro Alliance, "If you're only organized internally in the school with site-based management, you're not able to think strategically about how you can influence the school board or city council. You need a broad-based organization that has a strategy to identify different needs in the school *and* the community to do that."

The most striking contrast between the Comer model and the various site-based decision-making plans and the Texas IAF collaboratives has to do with the different emphases placed upon training and structures of school governance. One of the worst tragedies of the well-intended drive for site-based management can be seen in the goal displacement which occurs when administrators, teachers, and parents battle over issues concerning the distribution of power in a school and fail to attend to the needs of the children in their charge. Although research suggests that parental participation is key in enhancing children's learning, too much emphasis on the ties between parents and a school can obscure the other educational relationships, such as those between teachers and children, which lie at the heart of the learning enterprise in the school.

In spite of the assumptions that one might make about Alinsky organizers and the radical heritage of the IAF, the Texas IAF has been discrete in the battles over site-based management that have characterized American public schools in the 1980s and 1990s. Instead of focusing on *structures* of governance, Texas IAF leaders and organizers have provided *training* to help individuals to maximize their political power in ways that will enhance their long-term goals. In this respect they have

recognized an insight articulated by Seymour Sarason, who suggested that "forms of involvement in decision making are in some ultimate, practical sense less important for realization of the spirit of involvement than degree and quality of the mutual trust and respect characterizing that involvement." The Alliance Schools have avoided the goal displacement that occurs when conflicts over governance take precedence over children's gains in safety, health, and academic achievement. Intriguingly, the Alliance Schools appear to mirror Catholic schools in this respect, in which parental involvement has never involved parents dictating to teachers what the curriculum should be or how their children should be assessed. By avoiding those conflicts, Texas IAF organizations have kept their attention fixed on children's academic achievement, issues of neighborhood safety, and the other myriad concerns that have emerged out of house meetings, assemblies, and training sessions.⁵

Another reason why the Texas IAF collaboratives have expanded is related to the financial strategies developed by the organizations. Unlike many of the school restructuring initiatives of the past decade, Texas IAF collaboratives typically have placed few financial demands on school districts. Almost all of the programs sponsored by Texas IAF organizations—such as school health programs, after-school programs, code compliance task forces, community policing, housing for low-income citizens, and the Alliance Schools—draw on financial resources other than the school district. Those financial resources include virtually every sector of society: banks in San Antonio, Tenneco in Houston, the police department in El Paso, and the Texas Education Agency in all of the Alliance Schools. In each case the school district benefits by acquiring additional resources which provide new educational opportunities for its pupils at no additional cost to schools.

By harnessing those new financial resources, IAF organizations have enabled financially strapped districts to enhance education without draining their revenues. In February 1995 I attended a meeting of EPISO leaders with an assistant superintendent of the Ysleta Independent School District who suggested that EPISO repeat its successful support of House Bill 72 in 1984 by organizing busloads of citizens to travel to Austin to advocate increased state funding of education. Given the death threats which EPISO organizers first faced when they arrived in El Paso in the early 1980s, the district's acceptance of their presence, appreciation of their contribution, and encouragement of their mobiliza-

tion are nothing short of amazing—unless one understands that EPISO is helping the district to accomplish its work more effectively without placing onerous demands on the district's limited funding.

Building Social Capital

Assume that James Coleman's hypothesis was correct, and that one reason for the poor academic performance of American public school students is the declining social capital of their families and communities. In Coleman's account, lack of social capital can be measured by an absence of concentrated and stable adult supervision and tutoring of children at home and a lack of dense social ties between students, parents, teachers, and the community. The net effect of social decapitalization is to undermine the stability and prosocial norms of the family, congregation, school, and workplace.

The Texas IAF has sought to build social capital in urban neighborhoods to promote environments conducive to the stability and success of working-class youth. That strategy has three broad facets. *In the community*, the Texas IAF has led one-on-one house visits, conducted house and parish meetings, held Walks for Success, and battled for safer streets, code compliance, housing, and job training. *Within schools*, the Texas IAF has sought to bring teachers out of their isolation from one another and encouraged the development of dense social ties through innovative arrangements in which teachers form into teams, develop advisory periods for their students, adopt block scheduling, and create after-school programs. *Between schools and the community*, the Texas IAF has conducted training sessions which promoted dialogue between teachers and parents, helped to bring community policing and housing fairs into the school, and wrought changes in the physical capital of the school by developing parents' centers for adults and health clinics for the children.

We can isolate specific moments in the case studies presented in this book in which schools' cultures changed from vicious circles of civic disengagement to virtuous circles of trust, solidarity, and reciprocity. Once parents and teachers at Zavala had won their health clinic, they saw each other differently. Significantly, they did not see themselves differently because of a more tolerant disposition; they had *earned* each other's respect through their common commitment and struggle to im-

prove the conditions of Zavala's children. Similar processes of *earning* trust and respect occurred when Ysleta parents and teachers collaborated to create school safety zones, when Smith parents and teachers demanded community policing and greater code compliance, and when Alamo parents worked with their children's teachers and principal to revise the school's suspension policy and to help to shape the school's curriculum. In all of these cases, parents were *at the center* of political action and invigorating social capital formation; they were never passive and never allowed themselves to be marginalized. Much of the euphoria described in these case studies can be interpreted as a legitimate psychological release of tension as schools and communities have evolved from cynicism and isolation to cultivate new norms of reciprocity and social trust.

The case studies indicate a wide number of different strategies for building social capital. As one would expect with a community organizing group such as the Texas IAF, the most common strategies for accumulating social capital did not develop within the boundaries of schools, but rather in urban neighborhoods. At Morningside Middle School, social capital was first built between the principal, clergy, and parents; it was then imported into the school, which served as a base for social capital formation in the community by taking action against a store serving alcohol to under-age youths and an apartment complex which was a center of drug dealing and gang activity. At Zavala, parents initially refused to become involved in the school around issues of academic achievement; the transition from a vicious to a virtuous civic circle occurred only by waging conflict against opponents of a school-based clinic. Once that hurdle was crossed and social ties had been strengthened, a host of reforms internal to the school, such as Zavala Young Scientists and the after-school program, enabled the school to concentrate its social capital formation within its campus. Other schools also experienced conflict as an important phase of social capital formation; both Ysleta and Beacon Hill had to embarrass public officials into taking action around traffic safety and code compliance, respectively. Once officials had been shamed into serving their constituents, however, the polarization essentially terminated and virtuous circles of cooperation and public service replaced disengagement and civic neglect.

Social capital formation in the case of the Alliance Schools does not necessarily involve conflict. Jefferson Davis High School and its neigh-

borhood schools in Houston have experienced some opposition from teachers opposed to block scheduling or district officials unsympathetic to the flexibility entailed in school innovation, but the general evolution of Davis and its community have not been marked by the dramatic conflicts experienced by Zavala or Beacon Hill. Part of the smoothness of Davis' evolution may have to do with the collaboration it has enjoyed with the powerful Tenneco Corporation. Financial capital, when properly deployed, can promote social capital formation in schools and communities and human capital formation in individuals. Regrettably, far too many urban schools suffer from inadequate financial capital.

The Texas IAF has not simply accumulated social capital within schools and communities; it has also built social capital by bringing different schools and communities into relationship with one another. Jefferson Davis High School spearheaded the effort to build social capital between its neighborhood schools so that each child can learn at his or her grade level, thus preventing the slippage that undermines the success of urban students. The elementary schools in San Antonio have developed joint strategies for creating after-school programs, community policing, interdisciplinary curricula, and housing subsidies. The health clinic and after-school program that began at Zavala in Austin have spread to other elementary and middle schools throughout the city. As trust and accountability between schools and the community are enhanced, educators feel emboldened to take calculated risks to serve their children more effectively. Block scheduling, interdisciplinary curricula, parents' centers, and multi-aged classrooms are but a few of the internal school changes which have resulted from new social ties between Alliance Schools within a city.

The Texas IAF has also built social capital between schools, governmental agencies, the community, and the private sector. In the Alliance Schools, social capital has been developed by law enforcement officers who do community policing, health-care providers who staff preventive care clinics, bankers and realtors who help working-class citizens to become homeowners, and corporations that donate volunteer time and finances. These groups form a community of citizens dedicated to enhancing the educational opportunities of urban youth. When all of those relationships are brought out of their isolation from one another and mediated through a community-based organization, they strengthen and reinforce one another, changing and enriching each of the constituent parts.

While Texas IAF organizations have played key roles in developing social capital in urban schools, their social base in religious institutions has given them a particularly powerful springboard for school reform and community revitalization. Although there are important differences between the congregations which constitute Texas IAF organizations, IAF leaders and organizers have been able to identify shared concerns in issues of political import to their communities. According to Ernie Cortés, "There's enough common ground among our traditions that we can carve out enough space to create a public square that has moral tradition that isn't sectarian." In the language of social capital theory, Texas IAF organizations promote shared norms grounded in Judeo-Christian traditions of social ethics. Those norms are translated into political practice on issues ranging from public education to quality housing to employment. As evidenced in Cortés' exegeses of passages from the Old Testament in IAF training sessions, the underlying norms which animate those traditions emphasize social justice, reciprocal obligations among individuals, the value of political empowerment and accountability, and the obligation of more affluent citizens to attend to the needs of the poor. Cortés and other Texas IAF leaders elaborate a theological and political critique of opposing norms embedded in the unilateral and unaccountable exercise of power, the privatization of social relationships, and the balkanization of the polity on ethnic and class lines.

The Texas IAF has scrupulously avoided issues of school prayer, creationism, and sex education, which have captured headlines in the media and pitted public school officials against clergy. Instead, Texas IAF organizers have sought to recognize the intrinsic integrity of both the public schools and religious institutions, while using the best in both sectors to upgrade the academic achievement and social conditions of low-income urban youth. Sectarian issues, which could divide low-income African Americans from Latinos, or Protestants from Catholics, must be avoided if the Texas IAF is to maintain its credibility as a broad-based organization with deep roots in low-income communities.

The IAF's social base in religious institutions has led some commentators to view the IAF as more conservative in its current manifestation than it was under Alinsky's leadership, when liaisons with northern unions lent groups such as the Back of the Yards Council a more militant edge. In point of fact, however, religious institutions in the United States have never been monolithic and have always been animated by radical and liberal parishioners and clergy. Archbishop George Mundelein,

Bishop Bernard Sheil, and countless parish priests were core supporters of Saul Alinsky's first work in the Back of the Yards Council in Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s. That tradition continues today in the form of socially committed clergy such as Archbishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio, who is on the national board of trustees of the IAF and has supported COPS and Metro Alliance in numerous political struggles over the past two decades.⁶

Tapping into the institutional strength of religious institutions in the city for purposes of school change can clearly activate a powerful and commonly overlooked resource for educational reform. Research shows that not only is church attendance strongly correlated to a reduced high school dropout rate, but also that young people whose neighbors attend church experience indirect blessings from that contact in terms of increased economic opportunities, law-abiding conduct, and abstinence from drugs. In addition, research also shows that religiosity is a singularly powerful force which can help children adapt in positive ways to stressful life circumstances. For low-income parents, membership in religious institutions not only offers a sacred cosmology and set of robust ethical guidelines, but also enhances the academic achievement of the young and provides them with an orientation which can recognize and take advantage of legitimate economic opportunities. One can question whether Morningside Middle School ever would have turned around had ACT leaders and organizers failed to begin their work with recognition programs that were rooted in African American churches and had Odessa Ravin not demonstrated such tenacious leadership in visiting local churches to recruit support. Likewise, the appearance and testimony of Catholic clergy at a meeting of the Austin School Board represented a turning point securing the health clinic at Zavala Elementary School.⁷

If one seeks to develop policies which are based on the strengths of working-class communities and sees churches as one cornerstone of community resilience, an important policy offshoot would be to organize clergy to develop educational programs in their churches, as occurred in the Morningside neighborhood. Catholic churches, of course, have a strong educational component in their parochial schools, but that does not necessarily help the majority of their youth, who attend public schools. Among urban African American churches, only 44 percent of their clergy allow use of their buildings for nonchurch programs; of

those churches, less than 5 percent house school-related or educational groups. Clergy who wish to improve the education of young people in their congregations and neighborhoods could enhance their community leadership by expanding the use of the church as a forum for the academic development of the young.⁸

Educational activism can serve the internal needs of a church for recruitment of new parishioners; many parents joined their current churches as a result of the church's engagement with Alliance Schools in their neighborhood. It is of course imperative that church members respect the division between church and state, but there is no damage done to that boundary if a parent is impressed by a minister during a house meeting and elects to visit his or her church to determine if it offers spiritual solace and community. Reverend Davis in Fort Worth credits his visitations with ACT with enriching his own ministry; after using surveys designed by ACT to elicit parent sentiment about Morningside Middle School, he posed similar questions to his congregation and made house visits to many church members. Close to 90 percent of all Hispanic Catholics in the United States are not active in parish activities; clergy who wish to increase parish participation may discover that school collaborations offer one way to revitalize their congregations. Many parents in Texas IAF organizations testify that their social activism, channeled through their churches and the public schools, has deepened their appreciation of religion.⁹

If churches benefit from their collaboration with the Alliance Schools, the Texas IAF's need to identify community leaders has been excellently served by its institutional base in religious institutions. For those Texas IAF organizations which have been branded as radical in the media, as EPISO was in the 1980s, the church affiliation has also been an essential source of legitimization of the organization's presence in the community. Even when IAF was organizing in low-income neighborhoods among constituencies who have little to lose, many parents and teachers recalled that their initial reaction to Texas IAF organizers was one of fear, driven by the anxiety that Texas IAF organizers might abuse the trust of the community for their own purposes. Those fears have been allayed as parents have observed their neighbors and clergy articulating issues which have long irritated their community—and harvesting results.

If religious institutions can provide a resource for the improvement of public schools, one may well wonder why that resource has been over-

looked in so many contemporary discussions of school reform. First and most obviously, there is the longstanding American commitment to a separation between the church and the state, which necessarily limits the role of clergy in public schools. Clergy who would misuse their influence to advance a sectarian agenda in public schools could deeply damage, and indeed destroy, community belief in the impartiality of public schools, and that fear undoubtedly has held back principals and teachers in the past from approaching clergy. Second, clergy often are reticent to expand their mission outside of their church or congregation. Since all Protestant denominations are self-supporting financially, and most Catholic churches rely heavily on donations raised by their parishioners, it lies within the clergy's self-interest to focus their efforts on the congregation which makes their livelihood possible. Third, although religious institutions enjoy high levels of respect from many citizens, their reputations are not entirely positive. "The only thing churches are capable of running are school buses," former Houston mayor Louie Welch told a TMO leader, "and they don't do that very well."¹⁰

Finally, in spite of the positive examples given in this account, one cannot expect churches to provide a magic elixir that will solve all educational problems. In Wendy Glasgow Winters' study of low-income African American mothers and urban schools, she found no significant difference between the alienation from school experienced by church-going versus unchurched families. When further research is conducted, one may anticipate that the results will require considerable nuance and differentiation to develop the most productive school and church collaborations.¹¹

Only those clergy who have a strong foundation of support in the community can afford to expend vast quantities of time in Texas IAF organizations. "In the first five years with ACT I almost abandoned most of my work in the church," Reverend Davis of Fort Worth commented. "And I could only do that because of the strong volunteer staff at Mount Pisgah." Davis' leadership is especially noteworthy because research indicates that a sizable minority of Black Baptists oppose political activism among their clergy. Important issues of personal credibility, power, and independence are also involved in developing effective relationships between schools and churches. Clergy, like anyone else, can be reluctant to expend vast numbers of hours in schools, particularly when they cannot really control the decisions which are made by principals and teachers.¹²

Researchers have not helped to advance the collaboration between religious institutions and schools. There is a vast literature on the interface between the home and the school, but research on the interface between the home, the school, and religious institutions is comparatively sparse. Researchers just as much as practitioners need to challenge themselves to explore new territories which use secondary associations to reweave the fabric of social relationships for urban youth.¹³

One must engage in entirely new sets of challenges, both theoretical and practical, when examining new ways of strengthening relationships between religious institutions, schools, and community. It would be a strange distortion of religious observation to go to church to improve academic achievement. If "faith is the state of being ultimately concerned," as Paul Tillich suggested, then the challenge of religious faith is such that one must plunge deeply within oneself and one's community to discover and develop hitherto uncultivated relationships with a calculated disregard for their extrinsic and material benefits. That which is of "ultimate concern" cannot become an instrument of a more trivial concern without damaging one's personal identity and religious faith. In examining religious questions, many educators and school reformers enter unfamiliar territory. Out of that engagement can emerge social capital, but it would be a tragic extension of our culture's obsession with marketplace values to suggest that our children should be religious so that they will have a greater chance of being successful.¹⁴

The Texas IAF strategy for building social capital suggests that we reconsider the cultural taboo that implies that discussions about politics and religion are breaches of decorum and inappropriate topics in public schools. It would indeed represent a rupture of trust and civic integrity to use schools as a platform for one-sided, partisan politics or sectarian religious preaching. But schools could gain if they would help parents, students, and teachers to develop a culture of conversations which engage and enliven our religious and political traditions. How those relationships with those traditions could be strengthened lies beyond the scope of this book and should be the topic of invigorating debate. That debate in and of itself might accomplish a great deal in overcoming the trivialization of education and citizenship which afflicts far too many public schools.

It should be clear that the Texas IAF has developed an unusual and potent strategy of social capital formation in urban schools and neigh-

hoods. An important caveat is necessary at this point, however. It would be a profound misinterpretation of the Texas IAF's work to wager that one could introduce policy reforms to build social capital in schools and low-income neighborhoods without serious parental and community engagement and produce the same results. This point is of the utmost importance because of the unfortunate proclivity of many educators to dash from the diagnosis of problems to program design to implementation. The Texas IAF's emphasis on cultures of conversations, house meetings, parish meetings, and simply vast quantities of time to build personal relationships and social trust is not a populist quirk but a profound understanding that social capital can neither be built nor be effective without deeply engaging a community that will be impacted by policy decisions. To illuminate this essential point, consider three experiences of failed social capital formation in urban schools.

First, in 1993 the city of San Antonio designated two schools as the recipients of after-school programs in school districts in which COPS and the Metro Alliance had no member churches. COPS and the Metro Alliance were fully engaged in their own districts and did not organize the affected communities; nor did the school districts make any efforts to train parents, teachers, administrators, or clergy in the skills and norms needed to organize the programs. The lack of social capital in the communities led to unstable programs which floundered in their conceptualization and implementation and which the districts terminated in less than six months. "One of the reasons that our programs have been successful is because we helped the city to identify communities close to our churches where the parents would understand the programs," Joe Rubio of COPS commented. "In the other communities no one had gone in and done the legwork required to build similar relationships."

A second case of failed reform occurred in Austin. Leaders and organizers in Austin Interfaith worked with principals from two elementary schools in the 1990-1991 school year who claimed to want parental engagement. To their chagrin, they found that the principals insisted on approaching the community in a paternalistic way which reinforced rather than changed the existing school culture. Although Austin Interfaith was able to create some benefits for the schools in terms of programs and improvement of infrastructure, its leaders and organizers felt marginalized by the principals and incapable of developing the relationships of reciprocity and trust which could lead to parental engagement.

As a result, the Texas IAF organization broke off its relationship with both schools at the end of the year.

A third case of failed reform resulting from lack of social capital in schools and communities occurred in Houston. After Jefferson Davis' success with block scheduling, a host of other public high schools all over the city converted to ninety-minute class periods. Yet none of the other high schools preceded the transition to block scheduling with the intensive neighborhood visitations, Walks for Success, and parents' assemblies that created the social capital on the Near North Side which supported innovation and change at Davis. Because most of Houston's principals failed to fully engage their teachers and their community in making that transition, several faced angry criticisms from parents and teachers who felt themselves victimized by unilateral leadership. In addition, many principals have introduced a form of block scheduling in which students maintain six classes but those courses are staggered on a schedule which meets only on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday or on Tuesday and Thursday. As a result, the development of social capital through intense personal relationships is mitigated. "I don't understand why schools have taken up that other kind of block scheduling," Susan Carrizal, a student at Jefferson Davis said. "How can the teachers ever get to know their students that way?" In other words, block scheduling has been disseminated throughout the Houston Independent School District, but most communities feel little ownership of the program and the underlying philosophical commitment to building a sense of community has been compromised.¹⁵

Texas IAF organizations do not just build social capital in schools and community; they must also attend to their own internal civic culture. The multifaceted relationships between parents, religious institutions, and schools exhibited by the Texas IAF have recently come full circle to transform its internal structure. The executive committee of Metro Alliance in San Antonio voted in the spring of 1994 to include Pamela Walls and Richard Alvarado, the principals of Herff and Beacon Hill Elementary, respectively, on its executive board. The Texas IAF is expanding beyond its reliance on religious institutions to bring public schools into the heart of its decision-making structure. The benefits of the new diversity have already paid off, as one new church has joined Metro Alliance as a result of its parishioners' successful participation in the housing fairs held in the public schools. If the patterns of past years are fol-

lowed, the San Antonio IAF chapters will lead the way in this important reorganization for other affiliates, thus transforming the internal culture of the Texas IAF, opening new avenues for the recruitment and development of community leaders, and strengthening the organization's ties to urban schools.

Academic Achievement

Although cognitive gains need to be measured on instruments far more complex than the tests used by the state of Texas to gauge children's academic ability, the overall rise in test scores in Alliance Schools does indicate that something is happening to agitate and advance the learning of low-income children. That ability to demonstrate progress in academic achievement has puzzled some observers, who, in spite of the literature linking parental involvement to achievement, have difficulty understanding how the involvement of low-income parents who may themselves be high school dropouts or command limited knowledge of English should increase achievement. A few hypotheses follow about why that linkage is manifest in many of the Texas IAF's school partnerships.

First, one of the major shifts in the cultural change of Alliance Schools involves educating parents about why test scores matter. It is part of the culture of schools in Texas that test scores are not indicated on report cards, and many parents are accustomed to thinking that report cards are the only indicators of academic achievement that matter. Many low-income parents are not aware that poor test scores will be used to track their children to lower tracks of classes once they reach middle school and high school. Those parents who do know something about test scores and tracking may know that colleges and universities do not request TAAS scores as part of the application process. For all of these reasons, many low-income parents have given their children the advice about Texas' tests that Lourdes Zamarron of Zavala Elementary gave her children before the transformation of their school: "I told them not to worry about it, that it really didn't matter," she recalled.

Second, once parents have understood the significance of test scores, Texas IAF organizations have held parent education workshops in which parents learn about how the state's test is designed and how they can help their children to prepare for it. For many parents, those work-

shops are their first opportunity to learn about standardized tests. Many schools have sponsored evening and weekend events in which parents, teachers, and volunteers coach students to prepare for tests.

Third, as part of the parent education workshops, Texas IAF organizers have worked with teachers to discuss the many ways in which parents can support their children's education. Low-income parents need to learn about the educational strategies employed by academically ambitious middle-class parents—limiting television viewing, establishing routines for doing homework, and talking with their children in ways that encourage their creativity and intellectual curiosity. Texas IAF organizers also give workshops which teach parents about the decline of manufacturing industries, the globalization of the economy, and the need to pay much greater attention to children's education than was necessary in the past.

A fourth reason that test scores have improved in many of the Alliance Schools may have to do with the way Texas IAF leaders and organizers approach the issue of test scores with parents. Although the temptation to denounce test scores as reductionist and inauthentic forms of evaluation is immense, IAF leaders and organizers have generally avoided debates about the reliability or validity of knowledge measured on standardized tests. Instead, they have used the low scores that many of the schools have when they first join the network as a lever for confronting a community with issues of academic achievement and creating a sense of urgency on behalf of school reform. Similarly, IAF leaders and organizers have avoided the many mine fields in contemporary school reform around issues such as multiculturalism, phonetics versus whole language approaches to reading, and outcomes-based versus more traditional forms of assessment. Organizers and leaders may have their own personal preferences on those issues, but they have not chosen to use them as a fulcrum for community organizing. By respecting the autonomy of professional educators on complex pedagogical issues, the Texas IAF has helped to create stability and a focus on academic achievement which constrains the democratic tumult which inevitably accompanies increased community engagement.

The initial response of many low-income parents to the Texas IAF workshops on testing and academic achievement has been anger. "Why didn't anybody ever tell us parents what these test scores mean?" one infuriated Austin parent inquired at a workshop in a new Alliance

School in 1994. Yet IAF organizers and leaders have not let the anger dwell on the issue of test scores. Instead, they have used that anger as a point of departure for reflecting on cultural change within schools, so that the unilateral nature of reports from the school to the community transforms into a richer culture of dialogue between parents, teachers, administrators, and students about instruction, curriculum, and assessment.

Although Texas IAF organizers do explain the significance of the tests to parents, they do not do so in an uncritical way. One of the reasons that Ernie Cortés has invited Howard Gardner, Deborah Meier, and Ted Sizer to speak at Texas IAF assemblies is so that parents and teachers can think more reflectively about the limitations of assessment as it is actually practiced in most public schools. In the short run, low-income parents need to learn about the political realities of standardized testing and the way that it is used to track their children into lower level classes. In the long run, they also need to learn that researchers increasingly view standardized tests as just one partial measure of children's intelligence, and a highly reductionist one at that.

One cannot emphasize enough the contextual nature of Texas IAF school organizing. Consider the example of Zavala Elementary in the spring of 1992, when an angry parent asked the teachers to explain the discrepancy between the high assessments Zavala students received from their teachers and the low results on Texas' state-mandated tests. It was of the utmost importance that immediately after that meeting Austin Interfaith organizers and leaders helped Zavala's defensive teachers to reach out to the community to learn more about neighborhood attitudes toward the school, and that Zavala teachers felt that the community was genuinely delighted to welcome them into their homes. It would be a grave misreading of the Zavala case to presume that parents or teachers could agitate the already demoralized staff of an urban school and then leave teachers on their own to find a solution to their dilemma. Such strategies, applied in isolation from the larger dynamic of constructive community building and continual follow-through, would consist of an atomistic and tragic misapplication of the real lessons to be garnered from parental engagement in schools.

11 "A Great Truth Wants to Be Criticized"

It should be clear that the Texas IAF offers an intriguing new approach to American education at a critical juncture in the history of the public schools, when many commentators advocate a wholesale attack on and privatization of public education. Nonetheless, as the aphorism says, "A great truth wants to be criticized, not idolized." The Texas IAF, like all political organizations, gives evidence of shortcomings which require forthright criticism. For heuristic purposes, the areas of critique can be organized into issues of general political strategy, theoretical issues, and issues specific to school reform.¹

To begin with issues of general political strategy, I have noted that one of the major transformations wrought by the IAF since Alinsky's death has been to ground local organizations almost exclusively in religious institutions. On the one hand, that strategy has many merits. Religious institutions enable individuals and communities to tap into powerful community networks, liturgical traditions rich in symbolism and meaning, and systems of belief which can provide powerful touchstones of group motivation and solidarity. Religious leaders can also disarm potential opponents of worthy reforms: the presence of nuns testifying on behalf of the health clinic at Zavala effectively undermined the credibility of opponents who feared that the clinic would promote materials advocating particular kinds of birth control.

On the other hand, however, individuals who are nonchurched or practice nonwestern religions are unlikely to experience the same kind of commitment to the brand of community organizing that characterizes the Texas IAF as do those who are in churches which pay dues and welcome the references to the Judeo-Christian tradition which animate Texas IAF conferences and assemblies. While a majority of Americans