

# Why Organize for Better Public Schools?

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## Introduction

Is improving the quality of education in public schools a top priority for members of your organization or community? If so, then you are not alone. Increasingly, grassroots organizations around the country are organizing around public school issues and winning substantive change.

- ◆ In Sacramento, organized parents proposed and won a program to train and compensate teachers to visit the homes of each of their students, developing relationships with parents and respecting their input. The program was so successful in increasing parent involvement and student performance in the schools that the state legislature funded its expansion statewide.
- ◆ In Albuquerque, New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere, community organizing has stopped or cut back on efforts to turn low-income schools over to unaccountable for-profit corporations;
- ◆ In Chicago, the Bronx and other cities, parents, working with teachers have won new programs to recruit, retain and support high quality teachers in struggling schools.

Even though your organization has successfully won other campaigns, does the prospect of tackling public school issues seem daunting? This action guide is geared toward organizations that already have experience organizing on other issues, and now want to take a look at public education—but need an education primer to get them started. This guide assumes the reader already knows the nuts and bolts of organizing, and wants to learn the public school landscape in order to apply those organizing skills on a new terrain.

## *Why organize around school issues?*

There are a number of reasons why a grassroots community organization may want to organize around public education issues:

1. Public schools have historically been community assets –

often one of the most important community institutions in low-income neighborhoods. As public schools have been allowed to deteriorate, neighborhoods have followed. Organizing around the continued attack on public education can preserve this vital community resource.

2. Schools are a major factor in where families choose to live. Poor schools bring middle class flight to the suburbs, which drains city neighborhoods of resources and power. A fight for good schools is a fight for well integrated, functional communities.
3. Organizing on education issues is an opportunity to reach out to new constituencies and stakeholders, including parents, students, and teachers. Education organizing has proven to be powerful base-building work, particularly in new-immigrant communities.
4. Public education is crucial: the education a child gets from kindergarten through high school will lay the foundation for lifelong learning and a career path. The quality of that education plays a big role in determining how prepared a child is to succeed as an adult.
5. In many cities, children of color and immigrant children are the majority of students attending public schools, yet often their needs are not adequately addressed by the school system. Funding inequities contribute to disparities in schools.
6. Despite the existence of parent-teacher organizations, many parents feel shut out of their children's schools and have limited ability to affect the quality of their children's education.
7. The new federal law —the No Child Left Behind Act— mandates major changes in public schools, driving decisions on a wide range of issues and placing new burdens on local schools and districts.
8. Many community organizations have a track record of organizing to improve public schools, proving that collective power can create change, even in a system that often is viewed as too complex and dysfunctional to be fixed.

### ***Goals of the Guide***

The purpose of this education organizing action guide is to:

- Provide you with historical context to understand the under-

- lying belief systems of our public education system.
- Give you information about how public school systems typically operate, including the key players and funding streams.
  - Help you understand the changes that are taking place because of new federal legislation.
  - Share inspiring and instructive stories of successful education organizing efforts from around the country.
  - Provide tools and resources for you to get started on schools organizing.

### ***Using the Guide***

This web-based guide provide brief descriptions of the different pieces of the education puzzle, with links to more detailed information and additional resources that readers can go to if they want to explore a topic further.

Based on feedback from our volunteer readers, we have not structured the Guide in a linear fashion, with a beginning, middle and end. Rather, we expect that different organizers and leaders will want to approach the Guide differently, reading some sections first and others later, or utilizing some sections and not others. Various pieces of the Guide are therefore presented as individual sections, which may be accessed in the order most useful for you. The sections are:

**[A Thumbnail History of Public Education](#)** highlights key milestones and trends from the founding of this country to the present day. This section explores the ideals as well as the racial and class dimensions of the beliefs that have shaped public education in our nation. The last part of this section looks at some demographic trends in education.

**[Power Analysis](#)**. This section helps outline what you need to know to do a power analysis of the public school system in your community. It describes the key players who have a decision-making role in the system, starting at the individual school level and going up to the district, state and federal levels.

**[School Funding](#)** is the subject of another section of the Guide. This section explains what the various sources for public school funding are, and how those funds are allocated throughout the

system. It also describes some of the legal and legislative battles for equity that attempt to increase support for under-resourced schools.

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB)** is the name of the current Administration's version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This Act guides the distribution and use of federal education funds. Our NCLB section provides an overview of the federal No Child Left Behind law and includes some discussion of the law's implications for local public schools.

**Case Studies.** This Action Guide includes three case studies of organizing campaigns on education issues. The case studies reflect a variety of organizing approaches, strategies, and choice of issues. The organizations profiled are: [Power U in Miami](#), [Youth United for Change](#) in Philadelphia, and [Sacramento Area Congregations Together](#).

**Where to Find It** is a resource section with links and suggestions for finding more information on many of the topics covered in the guide. Additional resources can always be found on the education pages of the Center for Community Change website ([www.communitychange.org](http://www.communitychange.org)).

The Action Guide for Education Organizing is web-based initially, because we want your feedback on what information is useful and timely, and what additional chapters or discussions might be useful as we expand this resource. We hope that you'll provide feedback to us as you use this Guide.

## Acknowledgements

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## The Center for Community Change

Founded in 1968, the Center for Community Change is a national nonprofit organization committed to helping low-income people, especially people of color, change their communities for the better. The heart of the Center's work is helping grassroots leaders build strong community-based organizations, which we believe are the building blocks of change in low-income communities.

Every year, the Center provides an array of hands-on assistance to more than 200 organizations in low-income neighborhoods and rural communities nationwide, helping them get started, develop effective boards, raise money, organize their communities, set priorities and devise practical strategies. CCC helps them develop and win policy reforms and launch programs to improve housing, increase access to good jobs and revitalize their communities.

The Education Team provides sustained technical assistance to community organizations working on public school reform. The Team publishes a quarterly newsletter, *Education Organizing*, that reports on grassroots campaigns and strategies on education



issues. Leigh Dingerson, on the CCC staff, is the Team Leader for the Education Team, editor of *Education Organizing*, and served as coordinator of the Action Guide development.

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