Community engagement as a central activity in new charter schools

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A VOLUME IN FAMILY-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS
CHAPTER 4

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A CENTRAL ACTIVITY IN NEW CHARTER SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the New Orleans Public Schools experienced state takeover and a massive expansion of charter schools (Perry & Schwam-Baird, 2010). This chapter will explore the work of two interrelated groups of citizens who opened up two new charter schools during the post-Katrina period. The stories of these two schools provide lessons relevant to a variety of issues active in contemporary urban education reform in New Orleans and elsewhere. The chapter interprets the development of these new charter schools through community-organizing approaches. These include: (a) the conception of community engagement as distraction or core activity in student performance and school culture, (b) the need to negotiate competing interests and objectives within the
charter school landscape (i.e., community engagement, test performance, social-emotional development, etc.), and (c) variations in philosophies and styles of individual school leadership.

**POST-KATRINA EDUCATIONAL REFORMS**

The stories of the Morris Jeff Community School and the Homer A. Plessy Community School are two unique cases of diverse, open-access charter schools that came out of the rapid expansion of charter schools that began after Hurricane Katrina. In the aftermath of the storm, the state legislature wrested control of all New Orleans public schools performing below the state average (more than 90% of the schools) from local school board control and gave them to the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) that was designed to turn around low-performing schools before returning them to local control. The RSD wanted to turn its schools over to charter operators. However, when interest lagged in comparison to the rapid return of students, the RSD ended up running many schools. In the radically decentralized patchwork system of schools in New Orleans, some schools were operated by the locally elected board (mostly magnets or other higher performing schools), some directly by the RSD, and others as charters overseen by nonprofit boards. Test scores have continued to rise and advocates for market-based reforms have lauded New Orleans as a model worthy of replication (Brinson, Boast, Hassel, & Kingsland, 2011; Osborne, 2012). At the same time, reform critics have decried the loss of democratic control over public schooling (Beabout & Perry, 2013; Buras, 2010). Others have identified the risks that a decentralized and test-centric charter school system presents to at-risk and low-performing students (Carr, 2008; Wolf, 2011).

**FRAMING THE TWO STORIES**

Literature in the area of community engagement in schools has tended to address schools as strategic sites for broad community empowerment activities (Shirley, 1997; Cortés, 2010; Warren & Mapp, 2011) or efforts to improve equity within existing schools (Fabricant, 2010; Oakes & Lipton, 2002). This emphasis carries the danger of perceiving engagement as something done in or to “those schools” rather than a central activity that should guide the practice of educators. Viewed in this context of a central activity, educators, such as the authors of this chapter, become aware that community engagement is part and parcel of schools just as knowledge of content and pedagogy. While some critics have lamented the failed promises of school-based community initiatives (Schutz, 2006), we also see numerous references to the benefits to students and the surrounding community of strong school-community links (Beabout, 2010; Khalifa, 2012; Taylor, 2005; Warren, 2005).

We argue from the assumption that effective and equitable community engagement is an objective that holds much promise (Evans, 2011). We take exception to the “build it and they will come” approach to community engagement favored by much of the charter school movement both in New Orleans and nationally (Mathews, 2009). Instead this chapter examines how these two New Orleans charter schools emphasized community engagement from the moment of inception for the development and implementation of the new school. In a school reform environment in which this type of engagement has often been seen as a distraction rather than as an asset, these perspectives will provide insights into community-based developments in education reform (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). And perhaps our work will provide clues and insights to important new educational goals that are not captured by our accountability systems. In contrast to a dominant policy discourse that emphasizes scaling up successful schools in multiple geographic locations (See Blank interview in Chapter 2; Reckhow, 2010), we have selected two schools that are identified as community-based and have a particular emphasis on community decision-making. In composing this chapter, we have sought to discover why and how they acted out these beliefs in the design and operation of an urban charter school.

We situate this chapter within the rapidly expanding literature on community organizing for school reform (Fabricant, 2010; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Shirley, 1997; Warren & Mapp, 2011). These authors argue for why strong community engagement and community organizing are sensible activities for school people and school reform. They support holding public institutions accountable to the people they serve, ensuring that institutions prioritize equity among shareholders, and guaranteeing that schools are places that practice and value democracy.

The significant existing literature describes instances of how community organizers direct their attention to improving preexisting public schools. Often such literature addresses a homogeneous or lower socioeconomic population. A smaller area of the educational organizing literature examines the use of organizing approaches in the process of new school creation, such as charter schools or autonomous district-run schools. For example, Ishimaru, Gordon, and Cervantes (2011) detail the community-based design process used by the People Acting in Community Together (PACT) organizing network in San Jose, California. A small team of paid organizers in that city sought to create small, autonomous schools and settled on the creation of charter schools as the most politically feasible strategy. Also in California, Martinez and Quartz (2012) conclude that the creation of
strong interorganizational relationships may be necessary, yet still insufficient, if education organizing is to go beyond creating more schools to creating excellent ones.

Our aim and contribution is to describe community organizing as an approach to new school creation in racially and socioeconomically diverse settings. The two schools profiled below both opened with an explicit mission to serve a student body more representative of the population of the city, rather than the predominantly low-income, African American population of the city's public schools. While much has been written about community engagement in public schools serving predominantly low-income students of color, below are two brief histories of racially and socioeconomically diverse schools where community engagement is a fundamental activity.

Additionally, this chapter capitalizes on the unique, and politically polarized, context of reform in post-Katrina New Orleans, in which charter schools were created rapidly and now serve nearly all K-12 students in the city. Much of the existing critique of post-Katrina school reform rejects the emphasis on private money or on educational and business elites to carry out the reform agenda. Such an emphasis removes the engagement of the local community members and local educators who are inextricably linked to the future of public schooling in the city (Buras, 2010; Torregano & Shannon, 2009). In stark contrast to the opening of most charters in the city, the schools profiled here began as community organizations and grew over time to become public schools. And while the inclusion of socioeconomic and racial diversity creates its own political challenges (Cucchiara, 2013), expanding the constituency for public education is likely to be a worthwhile trade-off. As states become increasingly receptive to making room for charter schools, we are concerned that new charters develop into public schools in line with earlier notions of democracy and the common school (Kahlenberg, 2012). These new charter schools should serve our country's democratic goals rather than be blunt instruments that steamroll local decision-making in the narrow-minded pursuit of annual test score gains. Our hope is that this chapter will lend some support to those in other locations who are seeking to open new public schools using community-organizing approaches. Our hope is that our work will enhance, rather than restrict, the voice of the community in the design and operation of its public schools.

DATA SOURCES

In preparing this chapter, we draw from semistructured interviews (Kvale, 1996) with 26 individuals involved in the creation of the Morris Jeff Community School and the Homer A. Plessy Community School. Both schools are community-based charter schools in New Orleans, Louisiana. Participants included the principal of each school, multiple board members from each school, and community members who were involved in the creation of each school. This interview data are supported by documents (the school's charter application, school marketing materials) as well as our daily experiences as a board member (Beabout) and staff member (Boselovic) at the two schools being studied.

A brief overview of the citywide context of reform, which birthed these two schools, serves as a preface to the stories of how each came into being.

THE MORRIS JEFF COMMUNITY SCHOOL

An Open-Access Charter

In the 2013–2014 school year, the Morris Jeff Community School served more than 400 students in preK through fifth grade in a former Catholic school building located on oak-lined Esplanade Avenue. Since opening in 2010, Morris Jeff has gained some national attention as an open-access charter school that has explicitly set out to recruit a racially and socioeconomically diverse set of students. In contrast, the goals of most charter schools in New Orleans focus on the improvement of academic achievement and higher college completion rates for the largely low-income African American population that make up most public schools students in the city (Carr, 2012; Kahlenberg, 2013). While the city of New Orleans is extremely diverse, its schools have historically tended to be more segregated. A recent report notes that the public school population in New Orleans is 89% African American despite the fact that the city is only 66% African American (Cowen Institute, 2012). The description that follows outlines the reopening of the school after it was closed by the school board and taken over by the State of Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina. While this description is bound by our current focus on both the why and how of the school’s organizing approach to school reform, this idea of diversity provides an important context for understanding the school and for the organizing approaches that were used in its creation.

A History of Its Predecessor: Morris F. X. Jeff School

The Morris F. X. Jeff Elementary School had served as a public school in the Bayou St. John neighborhood since 1904 (Beabout, 2013). The school opened as a coeducational Whites-only school named McDonough #31,
transitioned into a majority African American school after the district was desegregated beginning in 1960, and was renamed to honor Morris F. X. Jeff, Sr. in 1995. Mr. Jeff was a revered educator and community leader in New Orleans until his death in 1993. He was one of the first African American graduate students at the University of Michigan, led the colored division of the New Orleans Recreation Department to national prominence, and was the king of the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club in 1974.

This history is included here not simply as context for the reader, but because this history was known by those who participated in the reopening of the school beginning in 2007. The people participating in the school’s reopening included a principal at the school, former staff members and parents of the school, and Morris Jeff’s daughter, Jolene, who continues to serve on the school’s governing board. While the school has undergone significant shifts in leadership, demographics, and curriculum since 2005, the long history of the school was a part of the reopening in ways uncommon to other post-Katrina reopenings (see Carr, 2013a, pp. 1–4; Hess, 2010; Torregano & Shannon, 2009). This recognition of history during a time of great change undoubtedly enhanced trust among those involved in the reopening of the school. When many schools were renamed between 2006 and 2009 by newly approved charter operators, this renaming of schools contributed to the sense—particularly strong within the African American community—that charter school reform was a White appropriation of real estate and jobs that had been hard-earned by the Black community. Whereas many charter schools sought to establish a break from the past with a new school name, the Morris Jeff group symbolically maintained linkages to the school’s past and the struggles of the African American community because the group retained the former name. This has important implications for organizing approaches to reform that will be addressed in our discussion of implications below.

**Neighbors Dig In**

Residents in the neighborhood of the shuttered Morris F. X. Jeff building were consumed with rebuilding houses, careers, and lives in the immediate aftermath of the storm. At the same time, New Orleans began holding public meetings to create a school facilities plan that would guide the construction and renovation of school buildings in the new system. One of these meetings was held in the neighborhood of the Morris F. X. Jeff building. Neighbors, concerned with the future of the school, attended to find out about the future of their neighborhood school, one that had stood empty for 2 years.

At this public hearing, individuals were seated at tables that were labeled according to the public schools across the Mid-City neighborhood. Some were parents wanting to find out about their local school, some were post-Katrina arrivals to the neighborhood seeking to engage with others in the rebuilding process, and still others were longtime community members who wanted to see school buildings restored and reopened. A new neighborhood resident, a local college theology professor, became excited by the turnout at the Morris Jeff table. At the end of the meeting, he passed around a sheet to collect names and contact information. This information led to several house meetings that were subsequently organized to collect data from neighborhood residents about their wishes for the school building.

One community member who was a professional community organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation attended these meetings. He brought his experience on mobilizing groups to advocate for themselves on public issues. Another neighborhood resident was a former local newspaper reporter who had begun working to organize parents across the city after Katrina. She recalled entering her first Morris Jeff house meeting and being pleasantly surprised by the diversity of people and the lack of “professional activists” that she had encountered in other public meetings. In this meeting, she did not see just one or two leaders doing all of the talking. Her opinion was that some people assumed that they had a right to drive a particular agenda and that right led to less dialogue and the squeezing of minority voices. Instead, at this meeting she witnessed young parents, Black and White, interested in reopening their neighborhood school. Shè met former students and teachers interested in what was happening as well as many neighborhood residents without children who desired to see the largest building in their neighborhood be put back to productive use.

This group voiced multiple, and even conflicting, visions of the future of the building. While developing leadership capacity remains a central component of community organizing approaches to reform (Warren & Mapp, 2012), this group was careful to recognize leaders who were already comfortable in that role, as well as develop the capacity of community members with leadership potential. This undoubtedly created more diverse leadership and allowed a “community of difference” to be created (Shields & Seltzer, 1997; Tierney, 1993). This diverse leadership made the school better equipped to sustain itself and negotiate internal and external conflict as the group became better organized between 2007 and the school’s opening in August 2010.

**Direct Action and Formalizing**

From the in-depth conversations at house meetings and door-to-door polling of neighbors conducted by the same handful of volunteers, leadership...
noted the overwhelming consensus that the community wanted to restore the elementary school. This knowledge began a process that unfolded on three interrelated paths: (a) convincing the school authorities responsible for the facilities master plan to reopen the Morris Jeff site, (b) articulating a shared vision of what this school might look like, and (c) building the structures and power to bring this vision to pass. Inclusion of all three paths became crucial. Whereas traditional activism has some potential to succeed on the first path, only organizing, with its emphasis on building leadership and power, has the potential of achieving all three. As Industrial Areas Foundation leader Ernesto Cortes has said, “our problem is not that we don’t have the ideas… the problem is that you don’t build schools without power… we have a mantra, power before programs.” (Cortes, 2012). And so following this advice, the group set out to build a quality school for their neighborhood.

At house meetings and in a large community meeting in a church hall, groups of neighbors, Black and White, rich and poor, natives and transplants, were asked to talk about the type of school they would like to see. The values that emerged from these discussions included academic rigor, accessibility, advocacy, diversity, and world (Morris Jeff Community School, 2010). In 2008, the group formed a diverse steering committee that would take responsibility for group activities, filed for federal tax-exempt status, and in 2009 created a nonprofit corporation in the state of Louisiana. The group settled on the name Morris Jeff Community School—an explicit attempt to meld the rich history of the school that brought these neighbors together with the new, community-governed charter school that was being created. Committees of volunteers were formed to further the group’s goals in the areas of fund-raising, principal selection, curriculum, and community engagement. This formalization, while essential to creating a new public school, also meant interfacing with the policies and oversight of the state. This task would test the group’s strength, just as state politics had tested other unconventional public schools in the long history of school reform in New Orleans (Carmichael, 1981; Ferris, 2012). The group’s ability to build leadership capacity within its ranks has played and will continue to play an important role in the life of this school.

Building Leadership Capacity

A key aspect of Morris Jeff’s organizing approach was a commitment to building internal leadership capacity. At the broad organizational level, the school benefited from a board retreat funded by the local reform support organization, New Schools for New Orleans, as well as support from the Louisiana Recovery School District that allowed the founding principal to leave her previous position and work at the district office during the school’s planning year. More informally, the school’s leaders (both principal and board) were supported by an active network of charter school advocates in New Orleans. Members of this network shared advice on applying to the state for a charter, recommendations for potential board members, and operational guidance from finance to possible school facilities. Without the support of these charter school advocates, the community would have been hard-pressed to successfully open the school.

However, the relationship between charter school reformers and the Morris Jeff group evolved into an uneasy dance. Charter advocates did not seem to share the Morris Jeff commitments to diversity and shared decision-making. In fact, Morris Jeff did not receive an important start-up grant, a grant that was awarded to nearly every other post-Katrina charter school. During the school’s interview for the grant, the reviewers seemed unsatisfied with Morris Jeff’s vision for student diversity and the fact that the school plan left the door open to inviting a teachers’ union into the school. At the same time, the charter advocates considered that the Morris Jeff group had large community support, recognized leadership capacity, and could serve as a means toward opening more charter schools in the city. But the positives did not outweigh the negatives, and the grant was not awarded to the Morris Jeff group.

A unique feature to this school was the wide base of leadership development. The school engaged its leaders in the development of personal skills that made all members of the group stronger. The group defined its leadership as including the formal board and principal, members of the larger steering committee, as well as many newly recruited individuals who wanted to help reopen the school. In one instance, nearly 20 group members met at a community member’s house on a Saturday for training on how to solicit individuals and local businesses for donations to the school’s first large fund-raising event held in August of 2009. In another, the group organized trips to schools around the state to examine the various curricular options that might be adopted by the reopened school.

In the winter of 2010–2011, a community retreat was held at a local church for teachers, parents, community members, and school leadership to enhance communication skills and trust within the group. The retreat involved more than 50 participants in activities ranging from sharing personal life histories to trust walks involving relatively new acquaintances. Given the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the adults, trust building and interpersonal communication were key activities. Whereas board meetings and more formal grant-writing and charter-writing activities privileged those with more formal education and professional experience, this retreat leveled the playing field. The professional facilitator, an African American college professor, ensured that the goal of each activity was to deepen members’ understanding of others in the room.
These leadership development activities built the capacity of the group in two ways. First, they increased the group's self-knowledge—that is, members became more aware of the skills possessed by other members, which made problem solving more efficient. Second, they developed new skills (solicitation, data collection, etc.) so that individual members became more skillful and more able to support the group's efforts.

Beliefs and Living Them

Since opening in August 2010, the Morris Jeff Community School has grown from 180 students to more than 400 and has tripled the number of staff. The school moved from one temporary location downtown to another one closer to its Mid-City home before moving into its permanent, newly constructed home in December 2014. The board has held annual elections and brought on a number of new members, many of whom were not involved in the original planning and design. As intended in its original charter application in 2009, the school leaders completed the authorization process of the International Baccalaureate Organization in 2013, becoming the only elementary school in the state with that distinction (Lingenfelter, 2013). In 2013, the staff, acting on the school’s value of advocacy, sought and received recognition from the board to create the first charter-school teachers union in the city: the Morris Jeff Association of Educators (Drellinger, 2013). The school has remained a fairly representative cross section of the city of New Orleans: 54% of students identifying as African American and 42% as White.

As the school matures, we perceive that its commitments to community control and democratic decision-making will be tested. With the school settled into its new Mid-City location, it needs to balance conflicting neighborhood, school, and family priorities. As the school cements its reputation as an academically high-performing school, school leaders may not be able to maintain its racial and socioeconomic diversity as one of the few public schools with a sizable middle-class population. As the school continues to develop its curriculum, extracurricular programs, and leadership pipeline (both formal and informal), leaders will need to balance the inevitable tension between organizational inertia and engaging new community members.

HOMER A. PLESSY COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Background

In its first year of operation, 2013–2014, the Homer A. Plessy Community School served approximately 125 students in preK (age 4 years) through second grade. While 82.4% of the student body qualified for free and reduced price lunch status, the demographics of the first-year class were as follows: 60.8% African America; 29.6% White; 5.6% biracial, and 4% Hispanic. In line with its initial vision, approximately two thirds of students currently enrolled at the school live within the surrounding downtown neighborhoods. Similar to Morris Jeff, the demographics of Homer Plessy present a notable contrast to the current and historic demographics of most nonmagnet New Orleans public schools.

In its first year, the school operated in an old high school facility, Francis T. Nicholls, which was built in 1940 as a WPA project and was subsequently renamed after Frederick Douglass in the 1990s. The building is located on St. Claude Avenue, which serves as the boundary between the St. Claude and Bywater neighborhoods—what are referred to, along with nearby St. Roch and Marigny, as the downtown neighborhoods of New Orleans.

Developing a Neighborhood School From the Ground Up

Unlike Morris Jeff, Homer Plessy opened as a completely new school in the years following Katrina. The history of the Homer Plessy School, from conception to first-year operation, begins with one group of parents and community members coming together. Their story demonstrates one pathway in which schools have been reopened in the city since 2005. The school’s formation entailed interactions with both the state-level Recovery School District (RSD) and the locally-elected Orleans Parish School Board, the dual governing bodies concerned with the provision of public education in New Orleans.

The individuals involved in the creation of Homer Plessy played out an interesting story in contrast to many other charter schools. During the past 10 years, the school choice and portfolio management models appearing in American cities have largely been premised on a need for greater school autonomy, diversity of school options, and parent choice (Bulkey, Henig, and Levin, 2010). In contrast, individuals involved with Homer Plessy employed community-organizing strategies not autonomy; centered on a focus, namely an educational arts-based educational philosophy; and articulated an idealized role that this school’s founders believed the school should play in their own neighborhoods.

The movement that would eventually create Homer Plessy started as multiple sets of individuals gathering at local meetings following Katrina to discuss the fate of schools in the city. These meetings consisted of regular neighborhood association meetings as well as those concerned specifically with the School Facilities Master Plan that would be finalized in November.
Developing a School Mission Based on Place and Culture

The Charles J. Colton School had been located on the boundaries of the Marigny and St. Roch neighborhoods of downtown New Orleans. The Colton building had been informally converted into a creative space for artists and writers to convene and share their work as they returned to the city after the storm. As part of the School Facilities Master Plan projects, however, the Colton building was scheduled to undergo a $15.6 million renovation and be reopened as a public school (Chang, 2011).

The geographic location of the school, in the mind of many of the Homer Plessy supporters, provided a unique opportunity to bring together students and families from a variety of different racial, socioeconomic, and historical backgrounds in a common educational experience. In the long history of desegregation and public education in New Orleans, the downtown neighborhoods were home to William Frantz Elementary and McDonogh No. 19, the two schools that received the first Black students into previously all-White institutions on November 14, 1960 (Inger, 1969). Additionally, on Press Street, less than a mile from the Colton building, Homer A. Plessy (of the 1896 Supreme Court case, Plessy v. Ferguson) was arrested on June 7, 1892 (Baker, 1996; DeVore & Logsdon, 1991). Later on in the story of the school’s development, these precedents inspired the leaders of the Homer Plessy movement to develop an educational mission based around the community’s distinctive cultural and historical legacy.

Many community members, including parents, soon-to-be parents, and non-parents alike, expressed feelings of dissatisfaction with the current options of public schools in the downtown neighborhoods of New Orleans. Many of these schools operated under what has become the normative understanding of charter schools: college prep curriculum, strict disciplinary policy, and high percentages of low-income and minority students (Beabout & Jakiel, 2011). Not surprisingly, the other group that desired this building was KIPP New Orleans Leadership Academy, an existing RSD charter elementary school that was part of a prominent national charter management organization and often the poster child for the no excuses brand of urban charter schools previously described. At the time, KIPP New Orleans Leadership Academy was located in the Frederick Douglass building, one mile away from Colton.

In attending these meetings, many of the individuals who would later be involved in the formation of Homer Plessy sought to develop an educational model in contrast to the no excuses charter school model. These individuals intended that the new public school created at Colton would provide a real choice for residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. Although there were a handful of schools in the city that diverged from the no excuses school approach, they were located uptown and were few in number. Also, these schools garnered high student application rates and possessed waiting lists that commonly were hundreds long. Plessy parents were opposed to the rigid discipline policies in many of the no excuses charters. Instead, they wanted a curriculum that was less paternalistic and less focused on remediation for students below grade level. From these city meetings, more regular public meetings began to be held at the St. Roch Community Church, where individuals interested in the evolving school idea met regularly to discuss how best to advocate for the kind of school that they desired in their neighborhoods.

What developed over the course of 2011 was an increasingly public confrontation between the community group and KIPP New Orleans about who could serve as a better educational provider in surrounding neighborhoods. In late 2011, the RSD ultimately awarded the Colton building to KIPP New Orleans. After these community meetings, as well as intermittent meetings with state superintendent Paul Pastorek and RSD superintendent Paul Vallas, the community members that had advocated for a neighborhood school at Colton felt betrayed by state-level leaders and policymakers. They believed that these state leaders had ignored their expressed desires and had favored the national charter management organization rather than allowing another provider into the downtown school choice landscape.

From Community Advocacy to School Leadership

This was the turning point for the group of individuals involved in this struggle. They changed from a group intent on steering the decisions of public officials to one focused on building their own school. Frustrated over the long and arduous experience surrounding the Colton renovation and assignment, community members decided to continue their efforts by writing a charter to start a new community-based charter school in downtown New Orleans. These individuals comprised the core group that would see the school through from its beginnings as a group of concerned and invested parents and community members to the formal board of an independent charter school. Looking back, many of these
individuals expressed dismay in their interviews with us that they had to build a school from scratch to serve their needs. Few had extensive formal experience or network connections within the New Orleans education landscape prior to their involvement in building what would become Homer Plessy.

At the same time, these individuals expressed that by going through this process of standing up to an unattractive school option, the group was able to develop a clearer vision of what their desired school might look like and how it might operate within the community more generally. The strain of advocating for a community school in downtown New Orleans ultimately resulted in a group of individuals who were deeply committed to developing a school for their own children as well as those of the neighborhood more generally. Led by a pastor, university staff member, an architect, and a local arts teacher, the group had a lack of concrete educational administration experience. This limitation forced all individuals to contribute to the school-building process in unique ways. From matters that were small tasks, such as making group dinners, to more formal responsibilities like consulting with educational experts and policymakers, the group built trust that allowed it to navigate tasks a less-connected group might have been unable to meet.

**Building a Community School From the Ground Up**

After undergoing the difficult experience of seeing the RSD award the Colton building to KIPP, the Plessy board decided not to pursue other possibilities with the RSD. Instead, the board chose to apply for a charter through the local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). On January 22, 2012, their charter received conditional approval for a 5-year term. The school’s charter designated it as an OPSB Type 1 charter, which encompasses new schools run by a nonprofit entity that can enroll any district student (Gowen Institute, 2010). Its location for its first year was the Frederick Douglass building—the space that KIPP New Orleans Leadership Academy occupied before moving into the renovated Colton building. This location would be temporary, housing the school for its first year.

Once the school opened in the fall of 2013, the organizational transition began from the leadership of the school’s board to the school’s principal and first-year teachers and staff. During the interviews, the board members, school staff, and community members addressed the difficulty to transform the movement for the creation of the school itself to the operation of a first-year school on a day-to-day basis. This seemed to be particularly true in regards to leadership and finances.

The promises and perils of operating a community school built from the ground up are matters that the school board, leadership, and staff confronted on a daily basis during this first year. With limited outside funding, the network of community support that the school’s founders established in the three-year process of bringing the school to fruition will be important in sustaining and developing the school’s mission going forward. At the same time, as Morris Jeff served as an established educational provider as Homer Plessy was coming into being, the push for neighborhood or community-based schools in the city grows stronger (Abrams, 2013; Carr, 2013b). More broadly, as the downtown neighborhoods of New Orleans experience growth and gentrification, questions of the school’s demographics and ability to truly serve as a positive community-based and community-integrated institution will, no doubt, continue to be questioned and grappled with in coming years.

**INITIAL CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES**

The authors’ personal experiences as a board member, volunteer, and staff member, as well as interviews with board members, parents, and community members, demonstrate that multiple factors influenced the conceptualizations and practices of these community efforts. Individuals, with all of their varied skills and motivations, were drawn into the process and in so doing their participation changed both the individuals and the group. The needs and desires of the individuals that shaped what each of these community movements looked like when they finally succeeded in opening schools ranged from the most personal, private interests to those reflecting an interest in broad social change at the school, neighborhood, and city levels.

**Personal Needs**

Many of the individuals involved at the two schools communicated an initial interest in helping to create a school for their own child, either in the short or long term. Many participants were dissatisfied with currently available school options and became involved in hopes of designing a school that matched their dreams of a school for their child. The level of commitment of these prospective parents cannot be understated. Their self-interest was clear. Similarly, participants also expressed an initial interest in advocating for the schools based on beliefs related to neighborhood revitalization. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as entire neighborhoods were altered, this sense of commitment to neighborhood improvement was strong.
Another layer of self-interest was clearly evident here. Part of this process of neighborhood improvement also carried a social aspect: The pursuit of schooling opportunities for individuals’ families naturally entailed the opportunity to come into contact with other, similarly-oriented individuals and families in the neighborhood. These deep personal interests would connect the individuals who created these two schools with their neighbors in pursuit of educational, social, and civic goals. Careful attention to the organizing principal of self-interest, rightly understood on the part of organizers was essential as individuals moved to this point. Individuals were motivated by an opportunity to share their own self-interest and listen to the individual interests of their neighbors. When such stories were shared—and they were at the opening of nearly every meeting in the early phases of both schools—individuals connected across lines of race and class. Their social context of being victims of a common natural disaster as well as advocates for the rebuilding of a shared geographic space was very likely a powerful force that enabled individuals to see commonalities in their stories that may not have been possible in a less volatile time. To be certain, while both groups drew on the experience of talented organizers who strengthened social trust, aspects of the post-Katrina environment also built community in ways that would be much harder to replicate elsewhere.

Leading and Being Led

Navigating the lines between participant self-interest and group goals and processes is a crucial aspect of the organizing process (Evans, 2014). In the cases described above, the process of transforming individual desires and needs into community involvement at both Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy involved continued levels of individual commitment as well as group leadership, sharing interpersonal resources, and group dynamics. While natural leaders with organizing and facilitation experience took important leadership roles, particularly at the outset, both groups maintained significant early attention to the identification and support of developing many diverse leaders. The lengthy process of building these two schools, as is to be expected in any community-based organizing effort, led to some turnover in participants. But, most community members remained involved and active. They expressed deep sentiments of belonging and efficacy in the group across the interviews. Both groups were able to effectively bring together individuals with different skills and social networks and transform those into group assets that supported the community efforts while also providing individuals with the satisfaction and incentive to maintain their participation. This open process led to a beneficial cycle of people participating from the margins, feeling success, and then taking on more leadership tasks. As collective self-efficacy builds, the risks of leadership are perceived as smaller and successful outcomes more and more likely.

A challenge within each of these community movements has been to make the transition from a community movement into the long-term goal of a successful, functioning school. Besides the change in the immediate purpose of the group itself, the development of a school entails the inclusion of leaders, teachers, and staff members who will ultimately be the individuals responsible for overseeing and maintaining the initial mission and vision in everyday practice. For this reason, the development of a cohesive group mission was essential in the formation of each of these schools. When founders in both cases handed significant authority to the school’s principal and staff, there was both anxiety at giving up some authority to “outsiders” as well as relief at having more people to help share in the overwhelming amount of work to be done.

Rethinking the School–Community Relationship

The philosophical underpinnings of both Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy lie in an educational and social vision fundamentally different from many other schools within the contemporary education reform landscape. Just as Morris Jeff’s school mission articulates the goal of “transforming public education in the city, and beyond,” both community groups conceived of education as something that principally lies beyond traditional academic education and has implications that extend well beyond the school itself. Both schools might rightly be conceived as manifestations of a vision of deep democracy in a diverse, modern American city. From how they were created, how they were governed, to whom they served, these schools represent a vision of responsive, high-quality, and universally accessible public institutions. At the scale of a single neighborhood and a single public school, small groups of people can create a new enterprise—a school—and can be motivated by their participation.

Additionally, participants in each of these community movements expressed the sentiment that the community itself should provide resources for the stability of the school. In recent years, urban education reform has undergone an increase in private philanthropic funding specifically targeted to privatization efforts to improve student outcomes (Reckhow, 2010). Largely unable to tap into these financial resources, the communities involved here—the community that is discursively created out of the organizing and engagement activities over many years—served as providers of needed resources. In a city with a private school attendance rate near 30%, nearly universal school choice in the public system, and only two
generations removed from a bitter and very public desegregation fight, the idea that an urban neighborhood should be committed to supporting its local public school sounds almost old-fashioned. Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy may serve as examples of another way for urban school reform. In an age of testing, standardization, and best practices, these two public schools question and invite dialogue about the goals of education, favor diversity over efficiency, and put public good over private interest.

The Need for Trust

In order for communities to achieve similar success in their own communities, creating and sustaining interpersonal trust is essential. Trust plus the hard-fought consensus that comes from the formation of trust has the potential to create communities that limit the power of bureaucracies and create a forum for working through enduring differences that are endemic to American cities. In the Morris Jeff case, participants bared their biographical wounds in an impactful decision of hiring a school principal. In the Plessy case, responding to their initial defeat related to the Colton School building forced members to re-examine their involvement and motivations. Navigating this uncertain process built trust that paid dividends down the road. Individuals and community movements that seek educational outcomes necessarily overlap with more general social issues on which the public is divided. Communities seeking to build diverse schools with strong ties to the local community must be ready to first build trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011).

Making Integration Work

Finally, one of the areas of greatest concern for participants from both Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy was the ideal of developing a school model that would create racial and socioeconomic diversity as well as find ways to successfully bring that model into practice, that is, to make the model work. The anxieties that individuals felt in both schools over issues of group inclusion, racialized narratives around education reform, and power dynamics within the school constantly lurked under the surface of nearly every interaction. Both the school staff and the broader community support group at each school had to address their differences through dialogue and persistence (for more on this, see Boselovic, 2016). Future schools that seek to similarly provide educational opportunities premised on any kind of diversity would be well advised to consider the importance of how such a social justice goal could be achieved as much as the educational outcomes desired from such efforts. These two schools concerned themselves with social justice goals more than academic learning. Achieving these goals requires planning, hiring new staff that share these goals, and monitoring the group activity just as a successful academic program does. As “words to the wise,” we share their work to others who may be developing new schools.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Looking ahead to the future development of Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy, as well as to other community-based schooling efforts, a few central research questions developed for our future work. At the center of each of the individual and collective experiences of Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy was a theoretical conception of how community and community engagement were defined. How might a more explicit understanding of these definitions influence the strategies each of these community groups took? How might other similarly minded individuals also develop new community school models? Just as definitions of community varied within each group examined here, the urban environment in which they developed is also changing. In recent decades, many cities have experienced a return of the middle class in the process of redeveloping or gentrifying particular neighborhoods, with specific implications for education policy (Cucchiara, 2013). Given the changing racial and socioeconomic demographics of American cities, are there more opportunities within the education landscape for the development of more community schools premised on diversity?

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Although the experiences of individuals working with Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy fit into national narratives of grassroots public education (Fabricant, 2010; Shirley, 1997, Warren & Mapp, 2011), the local conditions in which these schools developed are certainly unique. Hurricane Katrina served as both an impetus and an opportunity for these schools to develop, a circumstance seldom to be replicated. However, the substantial reforms in governance that have taken place in New Orleans since the storm have garnered national attention and have been mirrored in some form in many other cities (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). Subsequently, many educators and community members in other cities are right to perceive an opportunity for self-efficacy within the push for privatization and the proliferation of charter schools. However, at least in the case of New Orleans, start-up funding and winning charter application approvals have tended to favor existing charter school operators, charter management organizations, and
graduates of charter school incubation programs. This has created challenges for community groups, particularly non-White community groups. Citizens in cities where charters are likely to expand would do well to push for resources to develop the capacity of local educators and community groups to operate charters in exchange for continued expansion.

Beyond larger issues of governance, acknowledging and working through issues of privilege within the school development process was central to the successful opening of Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy. Although ideals of community engagement and neighborhood participation characterized the rhetoric of both schools, defining community engagement—and who would lead these efforts—largely fell along preexisting socioeconomic and, to a lesser extent, racial lines. Without consciously considering how to effectively develop a true community of individuals from diverse backgrounds, the lasting success of a school-community relationship of similar community reform efforts will be in question.

In the case of Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy, the process of developing interpersonal trust by bringing together divergent interests allowed for the cohesion necessary to persist despite obstacles. Without this trust, even the best mission and action plans are bound to be challenged, both internally and externally.

Finally, as the Morris Jeff and Homer Plessy cases indicate, the experience of connecting personal needs and perspective with community goals and possibilities ultimately gave individuals in these two groups a sense of collective self-efficacy. From the beginning, managing the dynamics and development of the community effort was just as important as developing the particular vision for what that school might look like in practice. Communities seeking to create schools emphasizing community engagement as a central activity should pay as much attention to community organizing and constituency building as they do to teaching and learning. This is no small task given current accountability pressures. A promising practice suggested by these cases is for groups, either new or existing, to lay significant groundwork over multiple years to build a strong social network around the school before the school opens. After the school opens, the academic concerns necessarily assume a larger role.

REFERENCES


