Opening the Halls of Power: Implementing a Community Organizing Approach to Parent Engagement in New York City’s Community Schools

Andrew R. King
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OPENING THE HALLS OF POWER:
IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING APPROACH TO
PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN NEW YORK CITY’S COMMUNITY
SCHOOLS

A Dissertation Presented by
ANDREW R. KING

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston,
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OPENING THE HALLS OF POWER:
IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING APPROACH TO PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN NEW YORK CITY’S COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

“OPENING THE HALLS OF POWER”
IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING APPROACH TO PARENT ENGAGEMENT
IN NEW YORK CITY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

December 2022

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Under former Mayor Bill de Blasio, New York City launched a Community Schools Initiative (NYC-CS) in 2014 that now includes more than 300 schools, making it the largest school improvement plan of its kind in the country. Bloomberg, the previous mayor, had championed market-based reform strategies by closing struggling public schools and replacing them with privately run charter schools. In contrast, the community schools model supports struggling schools by providing them with wraparound services to address not only the academic—but also the health, social, and emotional—needs of the “whole child.” Research has shown the NYC initiative has had positive impacts on student performance, test scores, and graduation rates. These services benefited not only students but also their families, drawing parents into the life of the school. From the beginning, a robust parent engagement program was designed to be a central pillar of NYC-CS. My study focused on this crucial component.

Research shows strong parent engagement is crucial for school improvement. Yet urban schools are often disconnected from the families they are meant to serve. Racially-based deficit narratives held by many white school staff about black and brown families, along with punitive discipline policies, alienate parents of color from education systems. In response, different approaches have been formulated to foster meaningful parent engagement, yet many
remain superficial. Education justice advocates have called for transformative approaches which use an asset-based lens, value the knowledge of marginalized parents, and seek to develop their leadership in school decision-making processes.

NYC-CS was shaped by a grassroots visioning process. Many community organizers and parent leaders who led this effort were subsequently hired by the NYC Department of Education to form a citywide Family and Community Outreach Team (FACE). In a distinctive turn, the FACE team took a “community organizing approach” to support parent engagement and leadership in the community schools. Through a mixed-methods study, I investigated and analyzed the processes through which a large urban school district came to adopt such an approach and to understand how it was enacted. In my qualitative research, I conducted in-depth virtual interviews with the FACE team’s Family Outreach Specialists as well as education organizers in order to understand how the family engagement program was developed and implemented. In the quantitative portion, I used Coarsened Exact Matching and linear regression analysis to examine the association between community school status and family engagement levels as measured by parent survey responses.

I found that FACE’s Family Outreach Specialists—many of whom were previously “outsiders” who had protested against DOE policies but who now worked on the “inside”—successfully employed political and community organizing strategies to recruit parents and develop them as active leaders in the schools. Through their Ladders of Engagement program, they door-knocked in the neighborhoods to meet marginalized families “where they’re at”; cultivated trusting one-on-one relationships with parents; used phone banking for large-scale outreach; and drew parents into a participatory planning process through Community School Forums. I analyzed four new community school structures that enhanced the capacity for family engagement: a school partnership with a community-based organization; the hiring of a Community School Director; the formation of a Community School Team; and the hosting of Community School Forums. These processes led parents to: form substantial new relationships with one another (building social capital) and with school staff (bridging capital); in some cases, secure employment in the school system; and in other cases, engage in collective action on a broader civic level. However, the program also ran into significant obstacles, including resistance, scaling up and sustaining the model. In my quantitative analysis, I found that community schools, when compared to matched (demographically similar) comparison
schools, were positively associated with greater increases in parent survey response rates, higher percentages of self-reported parent volunteer rates, and higher ratings on the DOE’s “Strong Family-Community Ties” category.

This study contributes to our understanding of how the community schools strategy and community organizing approaches are able to empower parents and draw them into school leadership and how they can be successfully implemented in mutually reinforcing ways. I demonstrate that these organizing practices, which are often carried out by activists on the “outside” can be brought “inside,” institutionalized, and implemented on a large scale.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I’d like to acknowledge all my participants, Family Outreach Specialists and education justice organizers who agreed to participate in this study. It is your admirable and inspiring work in communities everyday – the blood, sweat and tears—of doing deep outreach to, and relationship-building with, parents and families who are often coping with poverty, racism, and extremely difficult circumstances, that motivated this project. I want to extend a special thank you to Caroline Murray for her role in developing the Ladders of Engagement program and her overarching vision and framing which helped shape the conceptual lens for this study. A special thanks goes to Michael Berger for his guidance and assistance with this project. I also want to thank Natasha Capers and the community organizers who fought to win the NYC Community Schools Initiative in the first place.

I’d like to express my gratitude for the thoughtful counsel of my distinguished committee: Mark Warren, Michael Johnson and William Johnston. Their support, insightful questions and suggestions, and their collective expertise in both qualitative and quantitative methods pushed me to a deeper and fuller understanding of my data. I am especially indebted to my chair Mark R. Warren, a leading expert in the education justice field, who has been my role model for what activist-scholarship looks like. His persistent mentorship, kindness, and steadfast support have seen me through this long, exciting, and at times strenuous journey. I am also grateful for the generous funding support from the UMass Boston Doctoral Dissertation Grant.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In 2014, former New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio launched a Community Schools Initiative (NYC-CS) as part of his broader education equity agenda to address poverty-related barriers to learning in the City’s low-income black and brown communities. The initiative now includes more than 300 schools, making it the largest school improvement plan of its kind in the country and potentially a national model. The community schools strategy includes wraparound services that address the needs of the “whole child” and family. In contrast to the previous ten years of increasing alienation between the school system and low-income families of color, this initiative centered meaningful parent engagement as a crucial element of its approach.

De Blasio’s predecessor, Mayor Michael Bloomberg (2002-2013), was widely seen as a national trendsetter in neoliberal, market reform education strategies (Easton, 2014). The Bloomberg Administration’s approach embodied that of the national corporate education reform movement, which sought to “reform” school systems by sanctioning and closing public schools based on low test scores and setting up charters in their place. Under Bloomberg’s tenure, 160 public schools were closed due to low test scores and 183 charter schools were opened (Easton, 2014).

One underlying feature of Bloomberg’s top-down, competitive “business model” of education was that it greatly undermined parent and community input into school policy and governance—especially in historically marginalized communities of color where school closures and charter schools were concentrated (Easton, 2014; Ravitch, 2010). In Bloomberg’s first year in office, he convinced the state legislature to dissolve the independent Board of Education which had previously governed the NYC school system, while retaining a Panel for Education Policy over which Bloomberg had complete control and to which he appointed the majority of members (Ravitch, 2010, p. 70). In an act which many saw as supremely symbolic, he closed the Board of Education’s office in Brooklyn and placed his newly created Department of Education into the Tweed Courthouse, adjacent to his City Hall office in downtown Manhattan. The Tweed building was nicknamed for the infamous 1870s boss of Tammany Hall, who has long been a symbol of power-hungry corruption (Ravitch, 2010, p.
Bloomberg hired central managers with business backgrounds and little education experience to run the schools (Ravitch, p.73). Additionally, he eliminated the city’s 32 local school boards, which undermined parent involvement in the schools. As Ravitch (2010) explains,

…parents found it difficult to contact anyone in authority about issues that affected their children. Local community educational councils made up of parents replaced the community school boards in each district, but they were seldom, if ever, consulted about decisions that affected schools in their communities. Many parents became frustrated by their inability to influence decisions that affected their children or their school. (pp. 72-73)

Bloomberg, like most charter school advocates, relied heavily on the rhetoric of parent engagement and increasing parent “choice” in order to overcome the obstacles of what he labeled failing urban schools run by intransigent teachers unions. But in reality, far from empowering parents, the punitive approach to school reform – which can involve labeling a struggling school as “failing”, sanctioning it, co-locating a charter school within the same building, and sometimes, closing the original school – has been extremely disruptive and detrimental to school families and surrounding neighborhoods (Lipman 2011; Lipman & Hursch, 2007). In fact, racial achievement gaps and poor outcomes marked Bloomberg’s tenure: In 2012, only 13 percent of black and Latino students graduated ready for college (Easton, 2014). Three quarters of NYC high school graduates enrolling in CUNY community colleges in 2011 needed remediation courses. When Bloomberg left office, only one third of ninth graders (who were in kindergarten when his reforms began) could read, write or do math at grade level (Easton, 2014).

These failed policies gave rise to a strong resistance movement among community and parent organizations, who called for more robust investments in existing struggling schools and paved the way for what ultimately became the NYC Community Schools Initiative.

**The NYC Community Schools Initiative**

In 2014, Bill de Blasio was elected mayor on a progressive education platform to “replace the market reform agenda with a student-centered opportunity agenda” (Easton, 2014, p. 9). The campaign was largely driven by a grassroots educational justice coalition consisting of various community advocacy organizations, such as the **Coalition for Education Justice** and
the *Alliance for a Quality Education*. The approach of the de Blasio administration represented a dramatic shift in education policy from that of his predecessor: he championed a “whole child” approach to student learning as part of his broader equity agenda (NYC Community Schools Strategic Plan). Building on the New York City Department of Education’s (NYCDOE) landmark universal pre-kindergarten program for all four-year-olds, which aims to provide education and enrichment for preschoolers, the administration launched the NYC Community Schools Initiative (NYC-CS). Through NYC-CS, the NYCDOE aimed to implement wrap-around services and programs that “support the social, emotional, physical and academic needs of students…in high need communities that face a myriad of challenges inside and outside of the classroom” (NYC Community Schools Strategic Plan, 2015, p. 4). The schools initially selected to be part of the CS initiative were part of existing programs that focused on dropout prevention and reducing chronic absenteeism in struggling schools. The mayor created an Office of Community Schools (OCS) within the DOE which developed a common framework for community schools across the city, consisting of evidence-based strategies and programs to ensure consistency and quality across community schools while also providing flexibility to encourage innovation (NYC Community Schools Strategic Plan).

The Office of Community Schools provides resources and technical assistance for community schools to implement the following core structures and services:

- partnership with a community-based organization (CBO) and a community school director in every school (employed by the CBO)
- health and wellness services
- extended learning time
- attendance improvement strategies
- real-time data usage
- deepened family engagement practices

These structures and services were designed to develop capacities in schools that would ultimately lead to positive student outcomes such as improved attendance, academic performance, and social-emotional well-being. In 2020, the RAND Corporation conducted a comprehensive impact study to evaluate the first three years of implementation of NYC-CS. They found that the initiative had positive impacts on student attendance, academic
achievement, test scores, on-time grade progression, and high school graduation rates (Johnston, Engberg, Opper, Sontag-Padilla, & Xenakis, 2020).

**Family Engagement in NYC-CS**

A key component of the NYC initiative is its robust family engagement program (Hester & Capers, 2019). My study focuses on this vital element of the overall initiative. Research shows, as described in the literature review below, that a strong engagement program for parents, guardians or other caregiving family members is a crucial factor in improving schools in general. Community schools in particular – because of wraparound services that benefit the whole family, not just the students – have the potential to foster a broader and deeper level of family engagement than traditional schools.

The NYC Department of Education reorganized its offices to support family involvement and empowerment as a key aspect of the NYC-CS (Hester & Capers, 2019). In 2015, the DOE’s Division of Family and Community Engagement (FACE) assembled a Family and Community Outreach Team, consisting of parent leaders and community organizers, who, according to agency documents and knowledgeable experts at that time, were using a “community organizing approach” to develop what they call “transformational family engagement” (Hester & Capers, 2019).

The FACE Outreach Team launched a ‘Ladders of Engagement’ strategy to provide opportunities for parents to engage at different levels. Family Outreach Specialists hired by the DOE adhere to the philosophy that parents should be valued as experts in their own communities. In the first years of the initiative, they worked on building face-to-face relationships with families through community-canvasing in low-income neighborhoods around the community schools. By meeting people “where they’re at,” organizers are able to get parents on the ramp (step 1) by having them commit to attend a school event. From there, families are given many opportunities to participate and, based on their time availability and capacity, to move up the ladders of engagement. They can attend a family engagement orientation (step 2), a community school team meeting or emerging leader training (step 3), volunteer to recruit other parents through activities such as phone-banking (step 4), and ultimately, for those able to commit, become an active parent leader who facilitates meetings and events or serves as a member on a school governing body. Throughout this process,
organizers have multiple contacts with families and closely track responses in a database to determine movement from rung to rung.

**Purpose of this Study**

Research shows that strong family engagement is essential to the life of a school, the health of students and their academic achievement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; McAlister, 2013; Warren, 2005). Studies suggest that full service community schools demonstrate a particularly strong capacity to foster meaningful forms of family engagement and participation through building collaborative partnerships with community organizations to provide wraparound social and educational services to meet the needs of both students and their families (Anderson-Butcher, Paluta, Sterling, & Anderson, 2018; Blank, Melaville, & Shaw, 2003; Castrechini & London, 2012; Maier, Daniel, Oakes & Lam, 2017; Warren, 2005; Weiss & Reville, 2019). The NYC-CS initiative goes a step further in that it has established a Family and Community Outreach team which uses a community organizing model to support and train parents as school leaders in their children’s education. In order to understand how and to what extent this organizing approach to family engagement embedded in community schools works to 1) develop stronger partnerships with families, 2) increase parent participation in schools 3) increase capacity for parents as their child’s teacher and 4) develop parent leadership in school governance, I conducted a descriptive study of the processes through which NYC-CS is engaging families and performed a quantitative analysis of the program’s impacts on family engagement levels. This contributes to the emerging literature on how both community schools and community organizing strategies can build deeper and more powerful forms of parent engagement.

In the qualitative portion of my study, I ask the following research questions: What were the driving forces in bringing the NYC-CS into being and in lifting up the importance of family engagement within that initiative? Through what processes and structures did the Department of Education develop and implement the family engagement component of the community schools? What were the features of their approach that made it effective (or not) in reaching and engaging parents? What were their successes, what were their challenges, and how did they address the latter? How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the family engagement work? In the quantitative research portion of my study, I asked: Are NYC community schools
associated with higher levels of family involvement compared to traditional NYC schools? Does the relationship between community school status and parent engagement outcomes vary by the number of years of program implementation?

In order to answer these questions qualitatively, I conducted in-depth, virtual interviews, by zoom, with a pool of 23 purposefully selected participants, the majority of which were members of the citywide Family and Community Outreach team (FACE) who led parent engagement efforts at community schools covering different neighborhoods across the city. I also interviewed several key leaders of community and education justice organizations who originally advocated for and shaped the NYC Community Schools Initiative, as well as a senior director in the Office of Community Schools who coordinated programming. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed; the transcripts were coded, using Max QDA software, through a set of inductive and deductive codes in order to identify key themes that emerged from the data. In order to answer my quantitative question, I employed a quasi-experimental design – using CEM (Coarsened Exact Matching) and multi-regression analysis – to compare data on school-level aggregate parent engagement outcomes with outcomes of a matched group of comparison schools that were not part of the program.

**Motivation**

My own schooling experiences have had a deep influence on my views about education. I grew up in a neighborhood of Cambridge, Massachusetts that was racially and economically diverse. (In recent years, it has become more gentrified.) I attended Cambridge public schools; my K-8 school was Graham and Parks, which housed the Haitian bilingual program. While the school did not provide “wraparound services” as community schools do, it was dedicated to teaching “the whole child” years before that term became popular. I was in middle school and high school as the education “reform” movement picked up steam, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) high-stakes testing regimen was imposed on public schools, and charters were offered as the answer to schools struggling with poor test scores in low-income communities. My family and many of our friends were active in a statewide movement to stop the imposition of high-stakes MCAS, not because we didn’t believe in accountability, but because we believed that the success of a school was about much more than test scores. I spoke at public events and testified before the School Committee on
this and related school issues. Eventually, the movement was defeated, but many of the ideas we espoused have become more popular today, especially as embodied in the community schools movement.

At the same time, I am mindful of my identity as a white male researcher coming from a middle-class background who does not share many of the same life experiences as the communities I am studying. My research project was carried out in consultation with community participants to what extent possible, in order to make this research useful to their efforts fighting for equitable education and social resources.

I have years of experience working with low-income youth of color in schools and programs in Cambridge, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. In New York City, I directed youth and education policy for a city council office in East Harlem. There, I witnessed first-hand the negative impacts of school closings, program cuts and discriminatory policing on low-income families and neighborhoods. I saw the dire need for increased educational supports and after-school programming for positive youth development and healthy communities. I also coordinated the district’s Participatory Budgeting initiative coordinating neighborhood assemblies in schools and public housing developments where thousands of residents came together to discuss community needs, develop project ideas and vote on how public money was spent. My experience working with marginalized communities helps strengthen my ability to conduct social research in a manner that is collaborative and respectful of participants.

NYC-CS is by far the largest community schools initiative ever undertaken and it is occurring in the largest public-school system in the country. Therefore, its impacts and outcomes have the potential to shape the national education reform debate for years to come. High-quality family engagement is widely understood to be critical to school and student success. This study is important because it will help us understand outcomes and impacts of a citywide comprehensive community school initiative—coupled with a community organizing approach to family engagement—on parent participation in schools. This study will contribute to our understanding of the processes involved in developing meaningful parent engagement and help to identify best practices and barriers to inform ongoing implementation. As a result, the research in this dissertation will contribute to scholarship on effective engagement and empowerment of families whose children attend public schools.
A growing body of research shows that strong family engagement is essential to the life of a school (Bryk et al., 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; McAlister, 2013; Sheldon, 2003; Stefanski, Valli, & Jacobson, 2016; Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Strong school-family partnerships have been shown to improve student learning, improve schools, as well as strengthen families and neighborhoods (Stefanski et al., 2016; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Warren, 2005; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Parents play at least as important a role as teachers in their children’s education, given that students spend more time out of school than in it (Weiss & Reville, 2019). They provide a wide variety of learning contexts for children and serve as role models for their behavior and learning habits (Weiss & Reville, 2019). Epstein (1995) developed the theory of overlapping spheres which highlights the need for schools, families and communities to work in partnership with one another to meet the needs of children (Stefanski et al., 2016). A key principle of this theory is that all three groups of stakeholders have common goals (e.g. healthy and successful students) and that therefore cooperation is necessary. When parents and community members are engaged in the life of the school, they can support teaching and strengthen the environment for learning (Chenoweth 2007; Warren 2005).

A substantial body of research has shown that increasing parental involvement in education has extensive benefits for students’ academic and social-emotional development, including: higher grade point averages and standardized test scores; increased enrollment in more challenging academic programs; higher attendance; increased credits earned and classes passed; improved behavior at school and at home; and better social skills and adjustment to school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Maier et al., 2017; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Sheldon, 2003; Stefanski et al., 2016). At the school level, programmatic efforts to effectively engage and build partnerships with parents and communities help to improve school climate and culture. In an in-depth, 15-year longitudinal study of 200 Chicago elementary schools, Bryk and colleagues identified “strong parent-community-school ties” as one of “five essential supports”
that was critical for successful school turnaround. Despite the evidence for the value of strong parent participation, it is often difficult to achieve. In fact, there is a long history of tension between school systems and families of color and underlying barriers to parent involvement, which I will discuss before I examine the range and types of school parent engagement efforts.

**Barriers to Family Involvement in Schools**

Urban schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged families often exhibit the most barriers to forming strong school-family partnerships. These schools and their districts are often disconnected from – if not outright antagonistic towards – the families and communities they are meant to serve (Warren 2005). Students of color are often pushed out by zero-tolerance discipline policies alienating them and their parents from the school system (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2014; Gregor & Hewitt, 2011; Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Marchbanks III, & Boot, 2011; Mallet, 2016; Moyer, Warren & King, 2020; Warren, 2022). This means that Black and brown parents’ interactions with school staff are shaped by climates in which their children are often disrespected, criminalized, suspended or expelled. Thus, parents facing these circumstances may seldom venture into school unless a real or perceived problem has arisen between their child and the school. Furthermore, many urban schools are marked by stark racial and class divisions between a largely white middle-class teaching force on one side, and low-income black and Latino families on the other (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Warren, Mapp, & Kuttner, 2015). White school professionals often perceive black and Latino families through a deficit lens of racial and cultural biases, some of which may be implicit, which hold that students don’t perform well because they come from “bad parents” or “broken families,” who are stereotyped as lacking strengths or values that the school can utilize. According to Hester and Capers (2019), such biases “impact the way that school staff perceive and respond to students on a daily basis, and affect disciplinary actions, assignment to advanced academic tracks, communication with parents, and many other aspects of school life” (p. 92). Such a deficit-based mentality and school culture may manifest in what Henderson and Mapp (2002) have characterized as the “fortress school.” These deficit-based views ignore the many assets, such as cultural knowledge, wisdom, and rich expertise, that families from these communities can bring to their children’s education and school community. Additionally, working class parents of color—many of whom are immigrants for whom English is a second language—
often have less formal education than white, middle-class teaching professionals and may have past negative experiences with schools, which may lead to a lack of confidence or skills to influence or challenge teachers and advocate for their children (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Heers, Groot, & Maasen van den Brink, 2016; Warren et al., 2009). Disrespect from school personnel can lead parents to feel intimidated, perceive the school environment as unwelcoming (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Heers et al. 2016; Hester & Capers, 2019; Warren, Mapp, & Kuttner, 2015), or sometimes even fear deportation (Warren et al., 2015). Black parents in particular are often critical of schooling practices, and are often excluded from traditional parent engagement efforts when they raise those concerns (Diamond & Gomez, 2004).

Even in the many cases where dynamics are not as charged as those described above, traditional school activities are often not designed to be accessible to parents, especially poor and working class families: many parents report inconvenient school meeting times (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), lack of childcare (NCES, 2019), language barriers (Warren et al., 2015), poor communication, lack of awareness, and “not hearing about things going on at their child’s school that they might want to be involved in” (NCES, 2019; Williams & Sanchez, 2013) as reasons they’re not more involved with their child’s school. While not “fortress schools,” these may be understood as “come if we call” schools which Henderson and Mapp suggest do not actively push parents away, but do not actively engage them as assets or resources either, involving them in token ways when needed.

Outside of schools, families face a host of poverty-related barriers to both student achievement and parent participation in schools, such as an inability to get time off of work or “time poverty” (Williams & Sanchez, 2013), and a lack of transportation and childcare (NCES, 2019; Williams & Sanchez, 2013), and thus may lack the capacity to attend school events or volunteer, let alone be an active member on a PTA or school decision-making body. Similarly, parents who are working several jobs, who lack formal education themselves or who don’t speak English as a first language may be limited in their capacity to support their child’s academic work at home (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Heers et al., 2016; Hester & Capers, 2019). Poor and working-class parents also face a complex array of structural barriers to healthy involvement in their child’s education such as housing insecurity and homelessness (Evangelist & Shaefer, 2019), unemployment, high rates of incarceration among parents of color (Kremer
et al., 2020), and a lack of healthcare or paid family leave benefits (Livingston & Thomas, 2019). At the same time, an increasing emphasis on “school choice” policies place a heavier burden on marginalized parents to navigate ever more complex school systems themselves with little help, and has consequently led to more segregated and unequal school in places like New York City (Ravitch, 2010; Wells et al., 2019). These complex barriers to parent participation are faced by even well-intentioned schools, which often simply lack the extra capacity, resources, staff, training, and cultural competencies required to involve parents in meaningful ways (Warren et al., 2015).

Many schools plagued by the challenges described above, needless to say, struggle to build trusting relationships with families and their surrounding communities, and rarely achieve broad-based participation and a meaningful role for parents in school decision-making (McAlister, 2013; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Warren, 2005). Ultimately, in other words, the factors and conditions described above have produced a weak social fabric for many disadvantaged schools marked by low levels of family engagement and participation and weak school-family-community ties.

In response to the major problems and inequities in public education – as well as to the disconnect between schools and families of color and the lack of power of low-income parents – there have been a number of different reform efforts driven by different groups of stakeholders (Warren & Tynan, 2021). This review focuses on three of the most significant responses to this problem, each described by a separate but overlapping body of literature. One response has been the development of family engagement policies and programs implemented by schools themselves. Another has been the development of community schools which seek to meet the needs of the “whole child” and their families by providing wrap-around services for students and families to address the non-academic barriers to education. Yet another phenomenon has been the emergence of grassroots community organizing efforts aimed at reforming schools, efforts which have mobilized parents, students and families across the country, developed them as leaders in schools, won more resources for disadvantaged schools, and driven school reform processes. I briefly summarize the literature for each below. In order to examine the NYC initiative, I drew theoretical perspectives from all three.
Family Engagement Programs Implemented by Schools

As educators have come to recognize the crucial role of parent engagement in shaping the quality of children’s education, there has been a proliferation of school-run family engagement programs and policies in recent years. A growing number of school districts have opened Offices for Family Engagement and hired parent engagement staff or coordinators (Warren & Tynan, 2022). By 2010, the majority of states had passed laws requiring schools to implement family engagement policies (Warren & Tynan, 2022). As stated earlier, parents and family members can play many roles both at the school and in the home to support children’s education. A commonly used framework for these parent involvement programs were Epstein’s (2001) six types of involvement: parenting, volunteering, communicating, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community. According to Warren & Tynan (2022), this “school-centric, supportive approach to parent involvement” included:

…supports in the home like creating a safe environment and helping with homework; attending parent-teacher conferences and otherwise monitoring student progress; and volunteering in the classrooms or on the school grounds and supporting events, such as field trips, student performances and fundraisers whether through a parent-teacher association or other venue. (P.14)

Typically, family engagement programs are driven by school staff and are “school-centered”—that is, structured around the educational objectives of the school (Warren & Tynan, 2022). This has given rise to the question of how do schools effectively engage families and what are the best strategies they can employ to do this? In their seminal review, Henderson & Mapp (2002) examine what constitutes effective strategies to connect schools, parents and communities. They found significant evidence, firstly, that structured family engagement programs do indeed matter. Whether or not parents perceive open invitations and opportunities for involvement from school staff influences their decisions about participation in their child’s education. Programmatic outreach to and engagement with parents of low-income students can increase parent involvement in supporting learning in both the school and the home, and these family engagement programs often lead to improved academic outcomes. Effective programs should boost parents’ “personal sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school” (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) by supporting their skill development, knowledge and
confidence in their role as parents. One of the central conclusions was that relationships matter: “When programs and initiatives focus on building respectful and trusting relationships among school staff, families and community members, they are effective in creating and sustaining family and community connections with schools” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 43). Mapp’s (2002) case study of parents at an urban elementary school found that when school staff work to build these trusting relationships with parents and family members, and view them as equal partners in the education process, this deepens parents’ desire to be involved and shapes the different ways they participate in their children’s learning (p. 45).

In order to form and sustain such relationships, the authors found, family and community engagement programs should “invite involvement, be welcoming, and address specific parent and community needs” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 43). Research shows, unsurprisingly, that there are positive impacts on parent involvement levels and student achievement when teachers conduct active outreach to parents. The studies reviewed suggest that effective outreach strategies include: “meeting with parents face-to-face, sending materials on ways to help their children at home, and telephoning both routinely and when their child is having problems” (p. 39). Strategies that encourage parent volunteering and participation in school decision-making strongly influence parent involvement in school. Another key finding from Henderson and Mapp’s review was the need for parent engagement programs to “respect the needs of families” and address the specific barriers to participation that many marginalized families face such as lack of childcare, transportation and scheduling conflicts. Thus, the accessibility of program interventions and school-based events is a key factor influencing participation and success; programming can and should provide childcare, food, metro-cards or organized carpools to increase access for a diverse range of families.

Many scholars and practitioners in the field have become more critical of the traditional parent involvement programs in urban schools, arguing that they are often superficial, treating parents as either passive volunteers to support the school staff’s agenda or as clients to receive services (Stefanski et al., 2016; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2015). Such efforts often assign a limited, “individualistic and relatively passive role” (Warren et al., 2015) to parents concerning their own child’s education. Warren et al. (2015) conceptualize this individualistic role as one of private citizen. Many programs are beset by the deficit-based attitudes described earlier—views which white educators harbor towards Black and brown parents, who may be
more critical, confrontational and advocacy-oriented in dealing with school staff than middle-class white parents— and thus often exclude these parents from engagement efforts and partnerships (Warren & Tynan, 2022, p. 15). Such initiatives may be top-down and paternalistic, focused on improving individual parenting skills rather than working to address the underlying power differentials between school systems and working-class families of color. That is, many of these approaches do not explicitly address race or power differentials between school systems and marginalized families of color. “At the other end of the spectrum,” according to Warren and Tynan (2022):

…parents and educators seek to form equitable partnerships in which parents bring resources into the educational process and play a meaningful role in educational and school decision-making…these scholars place racial equity and educational justice at the center for family and community engagement. (p. 13).

A fundamental false assumption, according to Mapp, is that school staff and families “already possess the requisite skills, knowledge, confidence, and belief systems – in other words, the collective capacity – to successfully implement and sustain these important home-school relationships” (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, p. 5). In reality, principals and teachers receive minimal training for engaging parents, while low-income families face multiple barriers and may lack the capacity and technical knowledge to navigate and influence their child’s school system. If such capacities are not developed, engagement programs will not be effective. Mapp and Kuttner’s Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (2013) is designed to guide schools in the development of their family engagement policies and programs drawing on best practices and research. Programs must start with providing opportunities for parents and educators to develop their capacity, which may include pre-service or in-service professional development, workshops, seminars or academies. In order for these interventions to be effective, according to the authors, they must have certain process conditions in place such as being linked to learning, developmental, and collective. The framework also identifies three organizational conditions needed to implement strong family engagement programs: initiatives must be 1) systemic – intentionally designed as central components of education goals around student achievement or school turnaround, 2) integrated – capacity building efforts must be integrated into all major school structures and processes.
such as professional development, curriculum, teaching and learning, and 3) sustained – initiatives are provided with adequate resources, funding and infrastructure support.

Hester and Capers (2019) — who have both been involved in the NYC Community Schools Initiative – describe what they call “transformative parent engagement” as practices that treat parents as 1) experts on their children and community 2) partners in meaningful decision-making around school policy 3) “problem solvers (rather than problem’s to be solved)” (p. 91), and 4) “assets to their children and community, with untapped knowledge and strengths” (p. 91). Such approaches also go beyond basic parent involvement such as volunteering in schools, and place an emphasis on parent leadership development, which empowers parents with new skills, confidence and a sense of agency as public leaders to take collective action around their children’s education. According to Hester and Capers (2019):

They mean engaging and training parents on issues of education policy and practice that are critical for the school’s progress and developing their knowledge about the power structure of the school district as well as skills such as how to advocate with the school district and elected officials, how to organize an agenda and facilitate a meeting, and how to speak in public. (p. 96)

This more transformative approach to family engagement empowers parents and community members as leaders and addresses the key issue of power relationships in education policy (Hester & Capers, 2019; Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren et al., 2015).

In sum, scholars and practitioners have characterized a spectrum of family engagement arrangements, which range from parents and families as passive service recipients, to active and empowered partners who share decision-making power with school leaders. Many parent engagement initiatives may not fall into one or another category but exhibit a range of traditional school involvement activities coupled with more significant decision-making roles and forms of power sharing.

**Community Schools: A Holistic Approach to Education**

Community schools seek to meet the needs of families by providing wrap-around services to address the poverty-related barriers to education. Extensive research has established that poverty has a profound impact on students’ ability to engage, focus and learn in school
Concentrated poverty at the neighborhood level—coupled with unequal school funding based on property taxes—fuels large racial and socioeconomic opportunity and achievement gaps within and among school districts (Owens 2018; Banerjee 2016). The Community Schools movement offers a promising remedy to the issue of under-resourced schools and their disconnection from high-poverty communities and families. Through what scholars and practitioners call a “whole-child approach,” community schools form strong partnerships with local community organizations to provide comprehensive, wraparound social and educational services to address the non-academic needs of both students and their families (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2018; Blank et al., 2003; Castrechini & London, 2012; Chen et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2017; Johnston et al., 2020; Warren, 2005; Weiss & Reville, 2019). The community schools movement in NYC emerged from the work of community-based organizations that had deep roots in local neighborhoods outside the school system. The early Settlement Houses for immigrants in New York City, along with the Children’s Aid Society, had established programming such as “Beacon Centers” to provide safe, recreational spaces for youth development during non-school hours to combat youth violence and delinquency. These advocates, along with grassroots community organizing efforts (which will be described in the section below), led to the establishment in the 1990s of what we recognize today as full-service community schools (Ferrera & Jacobson, 2019; Weiss & Reville, 2019). By providing integrated supports—health clinics and services, after-school and extra-curricular programming, art and sports, extending learning time, adult education classes, and family workshops—community schools are able to address students’ and parents’ academic, physical, social and emotional needs, both inside and outside the classroom (Blank, Melaville, & Shaw, 2003; Castrechini & London, 2012; Johnston et al., 2020; Weiss & Reville, 2019).

In addition to the intrinsic value of helping to meet students’ and families’ basic needs, wraparound services simultaneously address poverty-related barriers to student achievement. For example, low-income students often experience vision problems which can lead to misdiagnoses of learning disabilities, and dental problems, such as toothaches, which are the “second most significant cause, after asthma, of children’s loss of multiple school days” (Weiss & Reville, 2019, p. 11). Unmet healthcare needs can undermine students’ ability to focus, learn
and participate in class (Shi & Stevens, 2005). Interventions such as student-based health centers can improve access to healthcare as well as health and academic outcomes (Shi & Stevens, 2005). Evidence from several large reviews of evaluation studies as well as from individual studies demonstrate that participation in community schools – and the integrated student supports they provide – improve student outcomes in a variety of ways including improved: attendance, grades, test scores, graduation rates, preparedness to learn, and reduction in achievement gaps (Axelroth, 2009; Blank et al., 2003; Castrechini & London, 2012; Maier et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2017). Johnston et al. (2020) conducted a rigorous quantitative evaluation of the NYC Community Schools Initiative and found that it had positive impacts on student attendance in all types of schools (elementary, middle, and high schools), on-time grade progression, high school students’ graduation rates, and a reduction of chronic absenteeism and disciplinary incidents.

Robust family and community engagement are a core feature of the community school model. In addition to the many student benefits, studies suggest that full-service community schools demonstrate a particularly strong capacity to benefit parents and family members who come into the school or CBO to take advantage of health services and adult education classes (Blank et al., 2003; Heers et al., 2016; Maier et al., 2017). This process can foster meaningful forms of family engagement and participation through building collaborative and trusting partnerships between schools, parents, and community organizations (Blank et al., 2003; Heers et al., 2016; Maier et al., 2017). Through their comprehensive family services, collaborative practices, and commitment to serving as neighborhood hubs, community schools demonstrate a particularly strong capacity to form meaningful partnerships with parents that benefit families in many ways (Blank et al. 2003; Hester & Capers, 2019; Maier et al. 2017; Weiss & Reville, 2019). Benefits include: improved stability related to housing, food, employment and transportation (Blank et al. 2003); improved communication with teachers and school staff (Chen, Anderson, & Watkins, 2016); increased capacity for parents in their role as their child’s teacher (Stefanski et al. 2016; Maier et al., 2017; Warren, 2005); providing skills and leadership development for parents (Stefanski et al., 2016; Maier et al., 2017; Warren, 2005); greater participation in school meetings (Blank et al., 2003); expanded knowledge of child development and improved adult literacy (Blank et al., 2003); and increased school advocacy and civic participation (Warren, 2005). While RAND’s 2017 implementation study of NYC-
CS showed that the core structures and social services were being implemented with fidelity across the then 118 community schools—and that 81 percent of school leaders surveyed perceived an increase in parent engagement—surprisingly, the 2020 RAND impact evaluation of NYC-CS did not find statistically significant effects on the select group of parent engagement outcomes which they examined (Johnston et al., 2020, p. 37).

Through their holistic focus on the needs of the “whole child” and family, community schools seek to address the multiple issues and institutional factors associated with family poverty outside the school system by assisting families facing housing insecurity and homelessness, mental health issues, and preventing youth violence. By leveraging outside community resources as well as opening their doors to neighborhood organizations and community members during non-school hours, community schools become neighborhood ‘hubs’ and centers of youth and community development (Blank et al. 2003; Hester & Capers, 2019; Weiss & Reville, 2019). In sum, in addition to addressing the challenges of poverty outside the classroom, community schools are especially equipped to foster strong forms of family engagement and participation in schools (Hester & Capers, 2019; Weiss & Reville, 2019).

In practice, community schools exhibit a range in their quality of family engagement practices. Among the many schools that provide some level of services or that have adopted various elements of the community school model, there remains a broad spectrum in their character and quality of family engagement (Warren & Tynan, 2022, p. 26). While service provision—a core element of the community school model—is foundational to meeting the needs of poor families, service provision alone, is not a substitute for meaningfully engaging families, or fostering deeper forms of parent leadership in school governance. In fact, some community schools may fall into a “service-provider paradigm,” treating parents as clients to receive services, rather than as active participants with agency to shape the school’s agenda. While the community school model serves as a holistic foundation creating the atmosphere for stronger bonds with parents outside the school, this does not preclude the need for staff to employ evidence-based programmatic outreach efforts to engage hard-to-reach parents, ensure that they have knowledge and awareness about how to take advantage of new services and opportunities, and ultimately provide them with leadership opportunities.
The research and frameworks presented above suggest that full-service community school models which provide services to meet the needs of students’ families, emphasize relationship building between families, and offer meaningful opportunities for parent participation, provide the foundational elements for stronger forms of family involvement. However, they may still be limited by a “service-provider paradigm” (Stefanski et al., 2016; Warren, 2005) which does not treat parents as active leaders or address power gaps.

**Community Organizing for School Reform and Education Justice**

It should be noted that the more equitable parent engagement programs and the implementation of many full-service community schools have been the result of grassroots pressure from community organizing efforts. Community organizers often take a different approach to engaging parents in education issues, one that centers questions of power and racial equity. Indeed, a growing body of research has examined the role of community organizing groups in school reform processes. Over the last two decades, there has been a proliferation of community organizing groups in low-income communities of color across the country—often led by a combination of parents, youth, educators and neighborhood activists—which operate outside the school system, protest inequities in that system, mobilize communities around educational disparities, advocate for more resources, and win equitable school policies. This may include both local school improvements and broader policy changes at the district, state and federal levels (Warren, 2022; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Unlike education reform programs driven by school administrators, these community organizations are independent, mostly funded by private foundations, and often work from the “outside” to protest educational injustices and make demands on school systems to hold them accountable to historically marginalized students and families. At the same time, many combine these “outside” strategies with “inside” strategies designed to find ways to partner with educators and school leaders. Most of these groups seek to build strong and sustaining relationships among parents, educators and communities to build a base that has the capacity to exercise collective action around school reform. Many campaigns focused on building stronger family and community engagement programs in schools, and many fought for and won the establishment of community schools described above.
Organizers, however, often pursue multi-issue social justice agendas that connect educational change to a broader racial equity agenda that encompasses other issues that shape the lives of marginalized families of color such as affordable housing and gentrification, police reform, and immigration rights (Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren & Tynan, 2022). In their book *A Match on Dry Grass Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform (2011)*, activist scholars Mark Warren and Karen Mapp suggest a central role for community organizing for educational reform as part of a broader movement for social and racial justice. The authors document how organizing groups across the country ‘connect school reform to social justice’ (Warren & Mapp, 2011, p. 250) through a process-oriented approach that emphasizes long-term building of relationships, community capacity, and power. This process, in turn, empowers low-income parents and communities to shape their own vision of quality, culturally relevant school systems, rather than relying on professional educators working within the system.

Indeed, while education organizing campaigns are context-specific, pursuing different goals and agendas to meet local needs and interests, research suggests they often share and emphasize core processes and strategies. These include: a) a focus on *one-on-one relationship building* both among parents with shared experiences and identities (Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren et al., 2015), and between parents and educators in order to strengthen connections and relational trust (Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren et al., 2015). This generates *social capital* for marginalized communities (Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011), that is, “the set of resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between people” (Warren, Thompson, and Saegert, 2001, p.1), an undergirding theory informing all these literatures that I will elaborate on below. b) *political education* to help ordinary people situate their personal challenges within a historical understanding of structural inequality and to generate collective consciousness C) *leadership training and development* for participants to acquire the skills, confidence, and sense of self-efficacy to become active participants and equal partners in school decision-making, and to ultimately (Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren et al., 2015) D) *take collective, public action* to effect change and advance social justice in their broader communities (Ishimaru, 2014; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren, 2022).
Many of these efforts first began at the local level with activists fighting for specific concrete improvements in their neighborhood schools, such as stronger forms of parent engagement in school activities and decision-making. For example, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) in Chicago pioneered several effective school-parent partnership initiatives, subsequently adopted in other localities, such as a Parent Mentor program, Teacher-Parent home visits, and a Grow Your Own Teacher program (Warren et al., 2009; Warren & Mapp 2011). In response to the local schools’ lack of engagement with the surrounding Latino community, LSNA launched a Parent Mentorship program, through which it hired Latina mothers to work 2 hours a day in several neighborhood elementary and middle schools as teacher assistants. Parents participated in weekly workshops led by LSNA trainers and other parent leaders in order to develop leadership skills which they were able to utilize in classrooms to support children’s learning as well as in the community as civic leaders (Warren et al., 2009). The initiative forged powerful parent-to-parent relationships and mentorships, developing the collective capacity of the community’s families to mobilize around school reform. Through their Literacy Ambassadors program, LSNA went a step further by bringing teachers—along with parent mentors—into the homes of children to become familiarized with their cultural environments and support students’ literacy development in their home setting in collaboration with their families. This practice helped break down cultural barriers and feelings of intimidation between the teaching professionals and low-income families (Warren & Mapp, 2011, p. 180).

Organizing on a broader scale, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) has spent decades organizing families and school communities, connecting schools to other neighborhood institutions of civic life, especially church congregations and other faith-based institutions (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Through their “Alliance Schools,” IAF organizers facilitated deep and trusting relationships among all school stakeholders, what they called building “relational cultures,” to build a constituency base that had the capacity to both change school policy and build broader political power in low-income communities surrounding schools (Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren & Tynan, 2022). As a result, there was a drastic increase in parent participation in schools and student achievement improved as well (Warren & Mapp, 2011, p. 70). Through this process, schools are transformed into “institutional sites for social capital-building” and civic engagement. The IAF replicated this strategy in their One LA initiative in
Los Angeles, a coalition of over 100 organizations that included schools, unions, and faith institutions. At Fernangeles Elementary School, organizers conducted one-on-one conversations with parents to listen attentively to their needs and interests (“intentional listening”) and share stories to develop mutual connections, identify shared concerns, and build common ground. This strategy along with “house meetings” helped them identify key issues outside the school in the community to develop campaigns around (Warren & Mapp, pp. 75-76). Through Achievement Academy workshops and Parent Leadership Academies organizers educated Latino immigrant parents about the education system, school budgets, and how to be effective advocates for their children, by building up their knowledge, leadership skills and sense of efficacy (Warren & Mapp, pp. 82-83). Organizers also led trainings where school staff and parents participated and learned together. These sessions created a welcoming and empowering space for parents and educators to form trusting relationships with one another, generating social capital (discussed below) and creating the conditions for school and student success. School leaders like Robert Cordova who were trained by One LA, emphasized strong parent-teacher relationships at their schools by training educators in organizing techniques such as relational one-on-one’s and teacher home visits during after-school hours, to ensure “authentic dialogue” between the two parties, “which disrupts the unequally distributed power relationship between parents and teachers” (Warren & Mapp, p. 90). These relational strategies were reflected in how educators then conducted their parent-teacher conferences, as the practices became infused as part of the school culture.

One of the underlying theoretical perspectives that informs all three of these bodies of literature is that of social capital, that is, “the set of resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between people” (Warren, Thompson, and Saegert, 2001, p.1), a theory that Dr. Mark Warren has built upon in his research. Social capital theory suggests that strong relationships among parents “creates the basis for active participation in community and school life” (Warren et al, 2009, p. 221). These relational bonds provide an opportunity for parents to build trust among one another, share their stories, their concerns and common goals, and allow them to realize that many of their problems are “caused not by individual failures but rather the systemic inequities of public institutions” (Warren et al., 2015, p. 10).
Combining Approaches

The research and frameworks presented above suggest that full-service community school models which provide services to meet the needs of students’ families, emphasize relationship building between families, and offer meaningful opportunities for parent participation, provide the foundational elements for stronger forms of family involvement. However, they may still be limited by a “service-provider paradigm” (Stefanski et al. 2016; Warren, 2005) which does not treat parents as active leaders or address power gaps. Indeed, Warren (2005) compares what he categorizes as the community school “service model” to the “school-community organizing” approach. He notes that “before we can focus on strong forms of parent leadership and broader community power, we may first have to meet the basic needs of children and their families (p. 28).” Through their strong partnerships with community agencies – that have deep roots in neighborhoods and bring social assets into schools—community schools foster strong forms of social capital as educators, parents and CBO staff form relational trust and bonds among one another. Organizing approaches can build on this foundation, but are a more “explicitly political” approach to school-community collaboration (p. 24), in which organizations use schools as sites to organize and train parents as public leaders, and to take action directed at changing school- or district-level policy. Warren and Mapp suggest that these efforts are only ‘transformational’ when “they address education reform as part of a broader strategy to build the power necessary to address structural inequality in American society” (p. 250). It is through this transformational process of ‘democratic learning’ and the creation of ‘empowered communities’ that organizing groups can fight for an equitable and democratic education system.

Both of these theoretical perspectives—which postulate how the community schools model and community organizing approaches (which can benefit any type of school)—can effectively engage parents and increase their participation and leadership in schools. The NYC-CS initiative tries to combine both models and use the best practices of each: the community schools strategy as well as FACE’s Ladders of Engagement program which uses community organizing practices. Thus, the NYC case provides a unique opportunity to examine how see how these strategies can best be carried out and can enhance each other. Drawing from the theoretical perspectives outlined in this chapter, I set out to answer the following research questions:
1. Through what processes and to what extent has the NYC Community Schools Initiative and its Family and Community Outreach Team engaged parents and developed their leadership?

   a. How did NYC come to adopt a large-scale and ambitious community schools initiative, one which placed a strong emphasis on family engagement?
   b. Were there unique features of the family engagement effort that made it particularly effective?
   c. What successes has the initiative experienced engaging families?
   d. What challenges, obstacles or limitations has it faced in engaging families and how are they being addressed?

2. Are NYC community schools associated with higher levels of family involvement compared to traditional NYC schools?

   Since the Covid-19 pandemic struck right before I began this research, I also sought to explore, as an addendum, how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the initiative’s family engagement work.

This study adds to the growing body of research on how schools (in general), and community schools in particular, can strengthen family engagement efforts, increase active parent participation in schools, develop meaningful and equal partnerships with families, and ultimately develop their leadership. While much of the literature has focused on the impacts of individual community schools on student outcomes, there is a or smaller body of research – which includes Warren’s (2005) study on the Quitman community school – which explores the processes through which community schools leverage their core elements and services to engage parents, and illuminates how they might go beyond service provision to can build deeper forms of parent participation and leadership than traditional schools. This study contributes to prior research on the processes through which community schools are able to develop powerful forms of family engagement. Thirdly, this study highlights the powerful role of community organizing strategies in strengthening parent voice and empowerment in schools. While much of the literature on community organizing for school reform focuses on the activities of small, community based nonprofit organizations, many of which are restricted in terms of the scope of their work by limited funding sources coming from foundations, no research has documented through what processes a large urban school district adopts a community organizing model for parent engagement and how such a model is enacted. There
is also little research on the role of school districts supporting community school family engagement efforts (Maier et al. 2017). By studying how the NYC-CS family engagement model (community schools supported by a citywide family outreach team) happens in practice, I will be contributing to this emerging literature.

This study contributes to the emerging literature on the processes through which community schools are able to develop powerful forms of family engagement. My hope is that by studying how the NYC-CS initiative—coupled with its organizing approach to family engagement—is impacting and empowering families, that this will contribute to theory, and serve as a model that other community schools and urban school systems could emulate across the country. It will contribute to our understanding of how to create strong forms of family engagement and help to identify best practices and barriers to inform ongoing implementation. It may uncover ways in which outreach strategies can be more targeted and tailored to reach marginalized parents and families in low-income communities.

**Conceptual Framework**

I used the conceptual framework below (figure 1) as a lens through which to examine the process of family engagement and empowerment in the NYC-CS. I explored the ways in which the FACE team’s *Family Outreach Specialists* engaged parents in community schools and at the district level and the extent to which family participation is happening in the community schools. Based on the research described above, I began with the proposition that community schools are especially designed to encourage strong family engagement. I postulated that if the FACE team is indeed using an authentic “community organizing approach,” that this initiative is even better positioned to bring about authentic and transformative forms of parent engagement, collaborative schools decision-making, and create more of a balance of power between schools and parents of color. Both of those propositions will be examined by my research. While this framework draws on the processes and factors identified in the literature, this study will also be inductive and may lead to the discovery of new processes and factors associated with authentic family engagement.

My conceptual framework outlines the following theoretical process shown in Figure 1 below. First community organizers and parent leaders working on the “outside” pressure city government for more equitable and responsive public schools. Through a grassroots process to
elicit meaningful input from impacted communities, they shape the vision and design of community schools that will center the needs of marginalized families. Schools draw in these families by offering an array of social and educational services and events in order to serve as a “hub” of the community. Family outreach staff then adopt a “community organizing approach” to parent engagement. They conduct outreach to marginalized parents in neighborhoods surrounding schools. They draw parents into the school which becomes a site for peer-to-peer relationship-building among parents, a process which cultivates their social capital. Leadership development trainings and opportunities are offered to parents which give them new skills, agency and confidence to become leaders in school decision-making. In addition, this process works to build power among low-income families as parents take collective action and some take on public leadership roles school and district wide educational bodies and in their wider communities. Together these elements should lead to empowered families, stronger schools that are more accountable to communities, and improved student outcomes (although I will not measure this last impact directly in this study). In the long run, community organizing groups work to hold political leadership accountable to sustain funding and resources for schools and to ensure authentic implementation.
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for NYC-CS Family Engagement
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY:
MIXED-METHODS RESEARCH DESIGN

For this study I utilized a mixed-methods research design collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive picture and complete understanding of the FACE team’s parent engagement activities, and NYC-CS’s impacts on families and participants (Creswell, 2014). For the qualitative part of the study, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured virtual interviews via Zoom with members of the DOE Family and Community Outreach (FACE) team, along with other administrators involved in family engagement in community schools, in order to identify and understand the processes through which they engaged parents, the strategies that led to stronger family engagement, the challenges and limitations of this engagement, and the understandings and experiences that Family Outreach Specialists had of their own participation. For the quantitative part of my study, I employed a Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM) procedure along with multilinear regression analysis, drawing on secondary school-level data from the NYC DOE, to determine whether community schools were associated with greater improvements in family engagement levels over time compared to traditional schools. By combining both forms of data I was able to draw from the strengths of each method while minimizing the limitations of relying solely on one type of data to answer my research questions (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, this was a practical approach considering the researcher has access to both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). This two-pronged investigation is advantageous because policymakers and stakeholders in the field of education often want to know not only how programs are being implemented and experienced by participants, but also whether they are associated with measurable outcomes.

The following subsections provide detailed information on my quantitative and qualitative methodological components including data sources, data collection and analysis, as well as issues of validity and reliability.
Qualitative Methodology

In order to explore the ways in which the Family and Community Empowerment (FACE) Team—in collaboration with NYC Community Schools—is engaging families and supported parent leadership, I conducted formal, in-depth, semi-structured, virtual interviews via Zoom with a pool of 23 purposefully selected participants, each lasted approximately 1-2 hours. I conducted a second interview with some participants. Most of these interviews were conducted with members of the FACE Team—the Family Outreach Specialists, who supported community school family engagement in different boroughs and districts and who represented a variety of different racial and gender identities. Participants also included: a lead staff person from the Office of Community Schools who coordinated with the FACE office around parent engagement work, along with several community organizers / parent leaders, who work in organizations outside the DOE, and who were leaders of the grassroots campaign to win community schools, to help me understand the origins of the initiative and to seek perspectives from outside the institution. All participants signed adult consent forms, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. In addition, observational notes were taken during interviews. Data collection took place over the course of about 7 months. Data analysis and write up took an additional 6-8 months.

Interview Participant Selection

I focused primarily on interviewing members of the citywide FACE team, which drove and oversaw the community schools’ family engagement program, conducted grassroots outreach to parents, and recruited and developed parent leaders. Thus, these individuals had the unique knowledge and expertise to help me understand how this model worked at the school and citywide level, and were therefore most well-positioned to help me answer my research questions. I interviewed four director/ senior-level FACE staff and about 10 Family Outreach Specialists, each of which supported a cluster of community schools covering different boroughs and school districts across the city. Outreach Specialists represented a diverse variety of different racial and gender identities. I interviewed director-level FACE staff in order to understand and explore the development of the program’s approach and philosophy; the overall structure, goals and nature of the team’s work; how it aligned with the Office of
Community Schools; as well as to get their reflections on the perceived successes and challenges of the parent organizing initiative in community schools.

I interviewed Family Outreach Specialists because they are the staff who provided the on-the-ground family engagement support at community schools, and they were the ones using community organizing strategies and practices to engage parents. They therefore had unique understandings of, and direct experience with implementing the Ladders of Engagement program (See Appendix A for sample interview questions). By interviewing them I was able to understand to what extent each specialist had personal experience with grassroots organizing before working for the DOE; their outreach strategies; the ways in which they engaged parents in community schools; the processes through which they developed and supported parent leadership; and how they supported community school staff to strengthen schools’ family engagement capacity. Including a range of Outreach Specialists who liaised with community schools in different neighborhoods and boroughs allowed me to gather a range of perspectives on how the work is going; the common and/or differing perceptions of overall successes, challenges and limitations of the work, as well as the perceived impacts and benefits for parents and families involved with the initiative.

I also interviewed several education justice organizers-parent leaders from groups such as the Coalition for Educational Justice and the Alliance for Quality Education, to further understand the origins and development of the NYC Community Schools initiative – and how the City came to adopt this ambitious and holistic school reform strategy that centered the needs of black and brown parents. I aimed to understand the role they played in shaping the 2013 Mayoral education debate, and subsequently, de Blasio’s progressive education agenda, as well as how they developed their “people-powered vision” of community schools (See Appendix B for sample interview questions). Unlike some members of the FACE team – who came out of these community organizations “on the outside” and went to work “on the inside” – these organizers remained working on the outside of the institution to hold the initiative accountable. (Hence, I presumed they might present a more critical perspective of the work than those who had been hired to implement it, thus providing more balance to the study.) They were part of the Coalition for Community School Excellence a grassroots coalition of stakeholders formed to provide community input to the DOE to guide the implementation of community schools.
Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic struck just as I was beginning this study in 2020, leading to school closures in New York City and across the country. In light of the Covid-19 school closures, I had to make significant revisions to, and reduce the scope of, the proposed qualitative component of my research in order to comply with the IRB’s virtual data collection guidance and ensure the personal safety for my subjects and myself. While I had originally planned to conduct all my interviews in person, as well as conduct direct observations in schools, these options were no longer viable. Perhaps most unfortunately, I had originally aimed to recruit parent participants at several community schools and interview them about their experiences with and perceptions of the program. Due to school closures, new health guidelines and IRB rules restricting access to school staff and families, I determined these to be unsafe and nearly impossible to schedule.

Furthermore, even before the pandemic shuttered schools, the NYCDOE IRB had put up substantial hurdles to identifying and reaching participants at the school-level. Specifically, the IRB does not allow “purposeful sampling,” nor do they allow DOE staff to refer researchers to other potential study participants. Qualitative researchers like myself often rely on ‘purposeful sampling’ as a way to identify knowledgeable informants who can best answer our research questions. NYC Public Schools is the largest school district in the country; in order for me to identify / select several specific community schools among hundreds –and subsequently parents and staff from those school to interview— I would first have to consult with (or would require referrals from) agency-level staff who could guide me towards schools where the Ladders of Engagement model is actually happening, schools which they perceive as having made meaningful progress on family engagement and participation as a result of the initiative, and / or schools that had unique challenges, all of which would allow me to study and illuminate the processes and events associated with family engagement.

Interview protocols

I conducted in–depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with all participants. Several participants were interviewed twice. Interviews lasted approximately 45-120 minutes. All participants were provided with an informed consent form which they voluntarily signed prior to being interviewed. All interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom as per the DOE Covid-19 research guidelines, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. In
addition, observational notes were taken during interviews. Interview protocols were designed based on strategies for semi-structured interviews recommended by Seidman (2013). As per NYCDOE IRB guidelines, I assured the privacy and anonymity of participants by assigning pseudonyms. This helped to protect against any risk for DOE personnel who may have been concerned about potential reprisal if they were to speak critically about the program. I honored any requests from participants who wanted to share certain answers on a confidential basis (Fowler, 1998).

**Administrative Document Review**

I selected and reviewed key agency documents from the New York City Department of Education, the Office of Community Schools, and the Division of Family & Community Engagement, in order to give me a descriptive understanding of the nature of the initiative and its different program components, the types of services, and its family outreach and engagement activities. Most of these documents were publicly available on the NYC Department of Education website. The documents included but were not limited to: the NYC Community Schools Initiative Strategic Plan (2015), FACE’s Family and Community Engagement Plan (2015-16), and Community Schools: A Guide for Getting Started (2019). The full list of documents can be found in Appendix C.

**Data Analysis**

I wrote analytic memos during data collection as a first phase of analysis in order to capture insights and questions, identify emerging themes, reflect on new insights, and develop potential coding categories for the analysis phase. After interviews were transcribed, I read the interview transcripts, observational notes and agency documents that were to be analyzed (Maxwell, 2005). Data from participant interview transcripts was coded and analyzed using the Max QDA qualitative analysis software. An initial list of deductive codes – derived from a combination of extant literature on community schools and family engagement, review of agency documents, and interview questions— and inductive codes that emerged later, from the interview data. These codes contained a mix of concepts, themes, events and topical markers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p.207). Examples of deductive codes were “relationship-building” and “deficit-based perceptions of families,” and examples of inductive codes were “inside/outside
model” and “moving parents up the Ladder.” Using a “hierarchical coding scheme” (Saldana, 2016, p. 10), I employed first-cycle coding to “sort” the data into broad topical categories (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 207). Second-cycle coding allowed me to refine, synthesize, and integrate key concepts and themes with “consolidated meaning” (Saldana, 2016, p. 10) that emerged across interviews. Ultimately, this produced an overarching analytical narrative. I analyzed themes to uncover the meaning that participants assigned to participation in the initiative. Qualitative methods are particularly well suited for process-tracing (Maxwell, 2005, p. 23) and thus allowed me to identify the processes through which the initiative under study was effectively engaging parents and cultivating parent leadership and family empowerment. Data analysis involved an iterative process of constantly comparing qualitative data findings back to the study’s research questions, the literature review and my conceptual framework. I consulted additional literature that illuminated new themes as they arose.

**Limitations to Qualitative Methods: Validity Threats**

Growing up in a diverse, urban community, and coming from a progressive youth development background, I start off with an inherent bias in favor of community schools and a desire to see the New York City program succeed. To counter that bias, I reviewed a wide range of literature, including studies that differ in their findings about the most effective approaches to school reform, and I asked interview questions that probed possible weaknesses, challenges, and limitations of the community schools initiative as well as its strengths and successes.

I conducted several validity tests (described below) to test for validity threats, that is, “ways that my interpretations or explanations might be wrong” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 20). This increased the credibility of my findings and conclusions. I made efforts to “monitor my subjectivity” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 20) by not letting my preconceived notions and opinions about what is going on bias my research. I paid special attention to my positionality as a white male studying an initiative taking place in low-income communities of color. I have extensive experience doing work in New York City’s black and Latino neighborhoods, which has enabled me to develop a certain level of familiarity and cultural sensitivity and responsiveness.
to community residents in these neighborhoods. However, as part of this project I constantly reflected on my identity through memo-ing about how research participants are receiving me.

Furthermore, to reduce researcher bias I sought to monitor my subjectivity and my potential bias that could influence my study and conclusions by systematically searching for “discrepant evidence” (Maxwell, P. 112) (i.e. interviewing critics of the initiative), as well as soliciting constant feedback on my data and findings from participants themselves. I intentionally asked participants about programmatic shortcomings, challenges and limitations. By triangulating my data collection methods, I will reduce the risk of introducing systemic biases of any one method. I will use triangulation by collecting data using multiple methods including qualitative interviews, agency document review, and the statistical analysis of secondary data on school-outcomes.

**Quantitative Methodology**

For my quantitative analysis I estimated the association between community school status and family engagement outcomes, as measured by parent survey response data aggregated at the school-level and made available by the NYCDOE. Specifically, the research questions I sought to answer were: *Are NYC community schools associated with higher levels of family involvement compared to traditional NYC schools? Does the program effect vary by the number of years of implementation?* In order to answer these questions, I employed a quasi-experimental design that compared school-level aggregate family engagement outcomes for community schools with outcomes of a matched group of demographically similar comparison schools that were not part of the community school program.

**Data Sources**

This study combined several publicly available data sets from the NYC Department of Education on school demographics and other characteristic, with parents’ family engagement ratings on the NYC School Survey for both community schools and non-community schools. My unit of analysis is the school-level. I examined school-level data for all NYC public schools (approximately 1,866) over five years (SY2014-15 to SY 2018-19) that correspond with the first five years of the NYC Community Schools Initiative. This population included the approximately 262 community schools that were phased into the program in different cohorts.
during this time period. Data sets were available in Excel spreadsheets and were imported into Stata 14 for statistical analysis.

New York City School Survey (NYCSS)
To measure family engagement levels I draw on parent responses from the NYC School Survey. Every year, the NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE) administers the NYC School Survey (NYCSS) to all parents, teachers, and students in grades 6-12 to understand how school stakeholders perceive the learning environment in each school and to assess how schools can be improved. The survey is aligned with the DOE’s ‘Framework for Great Schools,’ which measures “six key elements of school success” for each school: Rigorous Instruction, Collaborative Teachers, Supportive Environment, Effective School Leadership, Strong Family-Community Ties, and Trust. According to the NYCDOE, “the survey ranks around the among the largest of any kind conducted nationally… in 2016, 1,002,196 surveys out of a possible 1,591,382 were submitted, representing 63 percent of the NYC public school community.”¹

Strong Family-Community Ties Element
In this analysis I focus on the Strong Family-Community Ties category, a scale which includes approximately 16 parent survey items to measure parent perceptions of the level and quality of school-family-community ties at their child’s school. I focused on the SFCT category because it most directly encompassed family engagement measures, and these measures were, naturally, the most centered around parent survey responses, as opposed to survey questions within other categories that were more directed at teachers or students. The SFCT element includes two measures within it: 1) an outreach to parents measure which is based on 11 survey items to assess parents’ perceptions of the school’s outreach and communication efforts (four of the items are based on teacher responses). One example item is: “school staff regularly communicate with me about how I can help my child learn.” Parents respond the extent to which they agree or disagree on a Likert scale. 2) A parent involvement in schools measure is based on 5 items to assess parents’ perceptions of their involvement in

¹ 2016 NYC School Survey Report Guide
their child’s school. An example item is: “Since the beginning of the school year how often have you communicated with your child’s teacher about your child’s performance?”

**Key Predictor Variable**

*Community school status.* Indicators capturing whether or not a school is designated as a community school (i.e. participation in the program) are the key predictor variables of interest in this study. However because community schools were not all implemented during the same year— but were phased in in annual cohorts throughout the study period— it made this variable somewhat complex to operationalize. For instance, many schools in the study were not community schools for the first two or three years of the study period and then became community schools halfway through the study period. In order to account for these issues, several different indicators of community school status were created. Firstly, I created an indicator for whether a school would ever become a community school (1) or not (0) throughout the study period. In other words, this measured if the school was a part of any of the CS cohorts. Secondly I created an indicator for whether a school was a community school in the given observation year (1) or not (0). Thus, a school that is part of the 2016-17 CS cohort would be coded as a “0” in years 2013-14 to 2015-16, but would subsequently be coded as “1” in years 2016-17 to 2018-19.

The question remains for how we estimate the overall program or “treatment” effect if schools started receiving “treatment” (i.e., became community schools) in different years? If I were only to examine outcomes for one cohort of community schools at a time—that is, examining outcomes for schools that had become community schools in one given year, the sample would be quite small. However, if we find a way to examine outcomes from all the community school cohorts at once, then the sample size will be substantially larger. In order to do this – to put the all the community schools on the “same timeline”— I created a *years of implementation* variable for each community school observation which indicates how many years the school had been in the program. So if a community school was implemented in 2015-16, and the observation year is 2016-17, then that school-year observation row was coded as “2” for *two years of implementation*. This allows me to then combine all the 1*st* year community school observations, all the 2*nd* year community school observations, and so on,
without having to restrict my observations to any given year. In other words, I can combine observations of community schools implemented in 2014-15 with observations of community schools implemented in 2017-18 and treat them all as 1st year community schools.

**Dependent Variables**

*Change in parent survey response rates (PSRR):* The annual NYC School Survey Report provides the total parent survey response rate for the NYC School Survey for each school, which I obtained for the years 2015-2019. Thus, as a preliminary measure of parent involvement, I examined whether response rates among community school parents increased relative to parent response rates in comparison schools. Since I examined this outcome over several years of program implementation, for my regression analysis, I operationalized this variable by calculating the change in parent survey response rates from year to year. To calculate the change score for any given year, I subtracted the parent survey response rate value from the previous year from that year’s value. I examine the 1-year change in PSRR, 2-year change, and 3-year change respectively, for community schools that have been implemented for 1 year, 2 years, and 3 years. I then compare these change scores to the average 1-, 2-, and 3-year change scores for non-community schools.

*Change in Strong Family-Community Ties (SFCT) Percent Positive:* The percentage of positive responses for this category is the average of the percentage of positive responses for both measures within this category (‘outreach to parents’ measure and the ‘parent involvement in schools measure’), which, when combined, capture 15 parent and teacher survey items (see Appendix D). Furthermore, in order to measure the effect of community schools on change in the average percentage of parents responding positively to the SFCT category questions over time, I created SFCT percent positive change scores for each school: a 1-year change in SFCT percent positive variable to assess the impact of first-year community schools; a 2-year change in SFCT percent positive variable to assess the impact of second-year community schools, as well as a 3-year change in SFCT percent positive variable for community schools with three years of implementation. To calculate the 1-year change variable, for any given year, I subtracted the SFCT percent positive value from the previous year from that year’s value. For the 2-year change, I subtracted the value from two years prior, and so on.
Likelihood of receiving a Strong Family-Community Ties Rating of “Exceeding Target.” The NYCDOE also reports an overall element rating for each of the six framework elements. The Framework element rating for each school is presented on a four-level scale in the School Quality Guide: “Not Meeting Target,” “Approaching Target,” “Meeting Target,” and “Exceeding Target.” This rating indicates where the school’s element score falls in relation to the city average for the same type of school (e.g. elementary or high school). While a school’s Strong Family-Community Ties rating is calculated using the survey measures included in the category, it also incorporates results from the school’s most recent Quality Review, specifically the School Quality Review Indicators 3.4, which pertain to “a culture of learning that communicates and supports high expectations.”

Because I wanted to measure whether program participation would increase the number of community schools that were performing above average on cultivating family-community ties, I created a dummy indicator to denote which schools were “Exceeding Target” on this rating. I also examined whether the proportion of community schools receiving this rating improved over time relative to comparison schools. Because this is not a continuous variable, I created a dummy indicator signifying whether a school received an ‘Exceeding Target’ rating (coded as a 1) or not (coded as a 0).

Because the SFCT category includes a broad range of questions, many of which focus on parents general perceptions of their interactions with teachers and some of which rely on teacher responses directly, I examined the percentage of positive responses to a few specific survey items that may serve as a more tangible measure of parent participation in schools as well as correspond with goals of the Ladders of Engagement program (ex: “since the beginning of the school year, how often have you been asked or had the opportunity to volunteer time to support this school?”).

Parent volunteer rates. This variable was operationalized as the percentage of parents at the school-level who report that they were asked to- or had- volunteered "sometimes" or "often" in the past year to support their school. This item was included on the survey for four years within the five-year study period (2014-15 to 2017-18.)

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2 Framework & School Survey Scoring Technical Guide 2016-17
Likelihood of attending school meetings and events. This variable was operationalized as the percentage of parents who responded positively (“somewhat likely” or “very likely”) to the question: During the school year, how likely are you to attend a general school meeting or school event (open house, back to school night, play, dance, sports event, or science fair)? This item was included on the survey for only three years within the five-year study period (2016-17 to 2018-19). It was obtained from the NYC school survey results publicly available online.

Perceived frequency of staff communication with parents/guardians around supporting student learning. This variable was operationalized as the school-level percentage of parent respondents at a school who responded positively to the survey item: 'school staff regularly communicate with parents/guardians about how parents can help students learn'. This item was included on all annual surveys during the study period (2014-15 to 2018-19).

Covariates

In Table 3.1 I summarize the covariates that were included in my matching procedure and regression analysis (described below) to control for potential confounding influences on family engagement, in order to determine the isolated effect of NYC community school status on family engagement outcomes. I used baseline 2014 data on key school characteristics to match a group of community schools (a “treatment group”) with a comparison group of similar non-community schools. Covariates included: school poverty level (measured by percentage of students in poverty), percentage of students that are black, percentage of students that are Hispanic, and language composition (measured by percentage of English Language Learners). Controlling for these factors helps ensure that I am not comparing disadvantaged schools that serve largely disadvantaged populations to schools that serve more affluent and whiter families. Studies show that these school characteristics can influence parent involvement levels in schools (Goldkind & Farmer, 2013; Walsh 2010), and thus including these covariates in my analysis allowed me to control for their potential effect on family engagement outcomes.

I matched on school covariate data from the 2013-14 school year (the year preceding the implementation of the first cohort of community schools), to serve as a pretreatment baseline. This helped to ensure that the community schools and comparison schools were similar at the time of the intervention. Including pre-treatment covariates data is required for
the matching method I used (described below). These covariates along with my predictor and
dependent variables are summarized in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1

Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reporting Unit</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community School designation</td>
<td>community school status by year, and number of years of implementation</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>NYC DOE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Type</td>
<td>Elementary, Middle, K-8, High School, High School Transfer, or D75</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>2014-19 School Demographic Snapshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School size</td>
<td>Number of students enrolled</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>2014-19 School Demographic Snapshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic disadvantage</td>
<td>Percentage of students in poverty</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>2014-19 School Demographic Snapshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial composition</td>
<td>Percentage black students enrolled, percentage Hispanic students enrolled</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>2014-19 School Demographic Snapshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language composition</td>
<td>Percentage of English Language Learners</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>2014-19 School Demographic Snapshot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent survey response rate</td>
<td>Percentage of parents who responded to the NYC School Survey</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Parent Survey Responses 2015-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Family-Community Ties Percent Positive</td>
<td>Percentage of parents who responded positively to a range of survey questions within the strong family-community ties category</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>School Quality Reports 2015-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Family-Community Ties Rating</td>
<td>A Dummy variable created to indicate whether or not the school received a rating of 'Exceeding Target' on the strong family-community ties category</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>School Quality Reports 2015-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff communication with parents</td>
<td>Percentage of parents who responded positively to the survey item: 'school staff regularly communicate with parents/ guardians about how parents can help students learn'.</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Parent Survey Responses 2015-19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parent volunteer opportunities

Percentage of parents who responded positively to the survey item: Since the beginning of the school year, how often have you been asked or had the opportunity to volunteer time to support this school (for example, spent time helping in classrooms, helped with school-wide events, etc.)?

School Parent Survey Responses 2015-19

Parent attendance at school meetings & events

Percentage of parents who responded positively to the survey item: During the school year, how likely are you to attend a general school meeting or school event (open house, back to school night, play, dance, sports event, or science fair)?

School Parent Survey Responses 2015-19

**Analytical Approach**

*Coarsened Exact Matching*

I used Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM), a method to match community schools with a comparison group of “similar” non-community schools. Matching methods are used to control for the confounding influences of pretreatment covariates in observational data which may be associated with the dependent variables under examination (Blackwell, Iacus, King, & Porro, 2009). The main goal of CEM matching was to prune observations from the data so that the remaining data had better balance between the treated and comparison groups (Blackwell et al., 2009, p. 526). Exact matching methods match treated units to control units with the exact same variable values, however because of the “richness” in covariates in most data sets, this often produces very few identical matches. Other matching methods generally involve identifying control units that are “similar” on the covariates to treatment units. Thus, I used CEM to temporarily coarsen each variable into meaningful groups, match on these coarsened data, but then retain only the original (uncoarsened) values of the matched data (Blackwell et al., 2009, p. 527).

An important feature of CEM is that the "bounds of imbalance on matching variables are determined a priori, thus ensuring greater post-matching balance on all covariates (Johnston, 2017). Therefore, I generated several bins (or strata) for each covariate in my data, using “user-defined cut points” (Blackwell et al., p. 527). CEM was then used to match community schools (treatment units) with non-community schools (control units) that fell
within the same covariate bins, “thus constricting the amount of possible imbalance that is allowed to exist post-matching” (Johnston, 2017, p. 340). Schools that do not fall within strata that contain both treatment and control schools were dropped from the dataset, pruning the data of schools with less comparable characteristics that do not have a balanced match.

**Linear Regression Analysis**

After using CEM to match community schools with similar non-community schools, thereby reducing potential differences between treatment and comparison schools, I first conducted a descriptive analysis, graphing the trajectory of mean outcomes for treatment schools and comparing them to the trajectory of mean outcomes for comparison schools for each outcome variable during the study period. I then conducted a correlational analysis by estimating linear regression models to assess whether community schools were positively associated with changes in family engagement outcome variables, from SY 2014-15 to SY 2018-19. For the regression analysis, because community school cohorts were implemented in different years, as described above I defined treatment in different ways: I grouped all the 1-year-community school observations together, all the 2-year-community school observations together, and all the 3-year-community school observations together to estimate the overall treatment effect of each in different models. I examined the effects of these three definitions of treatment (1 year-, 2 year-, and 3 year- implemented community schools) on 6 outcomes for a total of 18 estimates. My estimates of the impact of the NYC-CS initiative are captured by the following regression equation (Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1 Regression Equation**

\[ Y_s = \beta_0 + \beta_{1k}T_{sk} + \varepsilon \]

\( Y \) represents the value for any of the outcome measures I examined for school \( s \). \( \beta_0 \) is the \( Y \) intercept. \( T_k \) is the treatment variable, where \( k \) is the year of implementation. \( T=1 \) if the school is a community school and 0 if it is a comparison school. \( \beta_{1k} \) is the estimated effect of Treatment. Thus, when \( k=1 \), \( \beta \) is the effect of 1-year community schools, when \( k=2 \), \( \beta_1 \) is the estimated effect for 2-year community schools, and so on. Since community school dummy variables are all dichotomous —meaning they can only vary between 0 and 1— the slope
coefficient for community school status captures the difference between the mean change in family engagement level for community schools and non-community schools. I tested my hypothesis that community schools are, on average, associated with higher family engagement outcomes, and/or greater improvements in family engagement outcomes over time, compared to similar non-community schools, controlling for relevant factors.

**Limitations to Quantitative Methods**

Firstly, this research is limited because schools were not randomly assigned to the program and to a control group; schools selected for the program were chosen based on the criteria that they were low-performing on key indicators and systematically more disadvantaged than other schools. Therefore, although I was able to eliminate key observable differences by constructing a similar comparison group of schools, I could not account for unobservable differences between treatment and comparison schools. For instance, it may be that new cohorts of schools joining the initiative in later years were systematically more motivated than other comparison schools that did not join the initiative, and that this factor is what actually explained the improving outcomes of community schools during the study period.

Secondly, there are the limitations inherent in self-reported survey data which include nonresponse bias (Adler & Clark, 2003), social desirability bias (Krosnick, 1999), and “satisficing” (Vriesema & Gehlbach, 2021), where respondents lack motivation to provide thoughtful responses on all questions. My analysis is also limited by the nature of the parent survey data available. The parent surveys do not include questions about participation in or satisfaction with community school-specific activities and events such as Community School Teams, Community School Forums, and Core Leadership Trainings. Nor does the survey include specific questions about FACE’s Ladders of Engagement outreach work and parent core leader program (e.g. participation in phone banking or trainings), nor questions about whether parents feel as though they’re developing new leadership skills. Because community schools were accompanied by these unique family empowerment activities and the FACE team focused on such leadership development outcomes, ones which were not measured by the survey, it is reasonable to assume that this analysis may underestimate the quantitative impacts of the initiative. Unfortunately, I do not have quantitative data on participation in those unique
activities and events. Even if I did, I would not be able to compare parent participation in those community school-specific programs to participation in non-community schools which didn’t have such programs. However, I still wanted to see if the program—with its unique parent empowerment opportunities—had an effect on the ‘general’ standardized measures of family engagement that are captured in the parent survey which is administered to all schools (allowing for easy comparison across school types).

Lastly, while I analyzed program effects over several years, research suggests that community schools may take upwards of five years before seeing a “whole school transformation” (Daniel, Welner, & Valladares, 2016, p.2). While this study analyzed multiple years of program effects for early cohorts, I only had 1-2 years of data observations for later cohorts. It is possible that impacts may have increased with more time.
CHAPTER 4

“OPENING THE HALLS OF POWER”
ORGANIZERS SHAPE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS VISION
AND ARE HIRED TO IMPLEMENT IT

In this chapter, I describe the origins of the NYC Community Schools Initiative, the largest of its kind in the country. I analyze the factors that led to the program’s unique focus on parent engagement, voice, and leadership. In 2013, after years of neoliberal reforms and school closures in New York City during the tenure of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a coalition of community organizing groups played an essential role in shaping the education equity agenda for mayoral candidate Bill De Blasio. They visited neighborhoods throughout the city, engaging thousands of families of color and collecting their ideas for the public education they envisioned for their children. What emerged was a blueprint for holistic, full-service community schools to meet the needs of the whole child and family, leading the newly elected Mayor de Blasio to launch the largest community schools initiative in the country. The program was achieved by a major initial investment of $773 million in the City’s most under-resourced public schools. This approach represented a radical philosophical shift from the previous administration’s education policy, which was known as a nationwide trend setter for neoliberal school privatization: the closing of schools in low-income communities of color and the proliferation of charter schools that are publicly funded but privately run. After the initiative was launched and the first cohorts of struggling schools were selected to become community schools, a unique development emerged: activists who had previously worked outside the Department of Education, and often had a combative relationship with it, were hired to work inside the institution. They were sent into low-income neighborhoods surrounding the community schools to knock on tens of thousands of doors and speak to parents face-to-face, raise awareness of the new community schools, and respectfully listen to parents’ feedback and concerns. What emerged was a Family and Community Outreach team (FACE) that operated at the citywide level within the DOE to develop and support the family engagement capacity for all community schools going forward. To set the tone for the community schools transformation process, the FACE team proceeded to “open the halls of power” for hundreds of parents of color by inviting them to come to Tweed (DOE headquarters) – an institution that
had historically excluded them – to participate in core leadership trainings. These trainings provided a space for both families and school staff to reimagine parents’ role in the public-school system; challenge professionals’ deficit-based views of black and brown families; cultivate a new mindset that valued the wisdom and expertise of families in school decision-making; and develop key leadership skills for parents. Ultimately the trainings laid the groundwork for community schools to implement transformative family engagement.

**Community Organizers Shape de Blasio’s Education Agenda**

Unlike most school turnaround plans, which are commonly designed by policy experts and administrators removed from schools, NYC Community Schools were won through a grassroots community organizing campaign. Education organizers in the *Coalition for Educational Justice* and *Alliance for Quality Education* formed two citywide coalitions with other advocacy groups, *A+ NYC* and *New Yorkers for Great Public Schools*. They launched a campaign that shaped Mayor de Blasio’s education equity agenda and put forth a vision and demand for community schools to address the needs of the “whole child”, a vision which the new DOE would ultimately adopt. Education activists developed a two-pronged approach to influence the 2013 mayoral election and turn the mayoral candidate debates into a public referendum on Bloomberg’s education policies: a comprehensive electoral strategy coupled with a community-based, participatory visioning process for schools (Easton, 2014).

For decades, the New York City public school system had been plagued with stark racial and economic inequities. For the previous twelve years the Bloomberg administration had tried to reform the schools by implementing an aggressive market-reform agenda marked by punitive school closings in poor black and brown communities, and a broad expansion of charter schools, many of which either replaced or were co-located in existing public-school buildings. As a result, the Department of Education under Chancellor Klein had developed a contentious relationship with marginalized families and communities. As Catherine Miller, a FACE team leader reflects: “Bloomberg was literally selling the schools off and handing over school buildings and was instrumental in the movement to privatize schools and to bring in charters.” Walter Reynolds, a FACE family outreach specialist, reflects on the business model of education that was perpetuated under the old administration:
The model seemed to me applying private sector, competition-based models to what I view as an essentially public sector endeavor; … [E]ducation is a public good. Applying market ideologies and models to it is the wrong way to go.

Jennifer Quindel, Coordinator of the National Coalition for Community Schools and early member of the NYC-CS Advisory Board, elaborates on education policy during Bloomberg’s tenure:

I thought Klein was out to lunch in a lot of ways on what he did. He had a view about parents that I think was, “parents are a problem that need to be managed.” It’s all about the privatization, it’s about the market. It’s about the elites taking charge of the public sector and privatizing it. And I think he brought a business discipline, which Bloomberg had brought also to the administration, but he didn’t know squat about education.

Education advocacy groups formed two citywide coalitions, A+ NYC, and New Yorkers for Great Public Schools (GPS). While working in tandem, each took a different approach, using what some participants referred to as an “inside-outside” strategy. The goal was to push an equity-driven agenda for public education, one that focused on supporting struggling schools rather than closing them. Nina Carson, a lead organizer with CEJ, describes the distinctive roles of the two coalitions in shaping the mayoral race. She called the GPS outsider approach the “Rottweiler” in contrast to the gentler “Labrador” insider approach of the A+ coalition. The A+ coalition developed policy briefs on pressing educational justice issues that the city’s school system was facing, while NYGPS took a more confrontational path by holding press conferences and rallies to demonstrate the failures of Bloomberg’s school policies, highlight wedge issues, and shape the election as a referendum on the business-model for education that the Mayor had championed. Capers describes the two approaches:

[The A+ coalition] was a policy hub that listed out, in short briefs…subjects such as: What was the best way to educate black boys? What was community schools’ [approach to] parent engagement? Why is art really important in school? So, anyone could kind of go to that place and look up any of those issues and then really quickly be able to have some good thought pieces research on them…Meanwhile, NYGPS, which was the Rottweiler, were holding sometimes weekly, multiple times a week, press conferences…to create wedge issues. So really pushing the democratic candidates further and further away from
Bloomberg, really making [clear] Bloomberg's policies of school closing, his policies, the things he said around parents and parent engagement. I remember one of his quotes was ‘These parents don't know what good education looks like cause they never got one.’ I was like, ‘Well, fu** you.’

**Grassroots Community-Visioning Process**

In addition to their electoral strategy, the education activists convened a citywide participatory planning process, in which they organized more than 75 neighborhood assemblies to collect ideas from thousands of parents, families, students and educators on what they envision for their public schools under the next administration. Carson describes how families were asked these fundamental questions about their desires and dreams for their children’s schools, questions which most parents are never asked:

[They spoke]…with parents, with students, community members, educators, superintendents…principals from schools. It had the real cross-section, asking things like what does every child need to know when they leave high school? What is your vision for school? And what is your vision for your child and their education?...Those sound like really basic and easy questions, but they're questions that no one asks anyone ever. No one's asking most [inaudible] parents, what's your vision for your child's school or for your child's education? No one…is asking that. And so those are the questions we were asking. And then people said things like, we want them to have better lunch and more art and less policing…

Subsequently, as part of this process of re-imagining education, organizers drove a bus around to marginalized communities across the city, in order to showcase the community-generated ideas and policy recommendations that were collected to improve the school system. At each stop, families were welcomed onto the bus where they had the opportunity to view the various policy proposals and place tokens (votes) in different buckets that most resonated with them. As Carson explains:

Then we took all of those policy recommendations that people did and put them in buckets and put them on a bus. So that's where the ideas that are on the bus came from, it came from folks in those 75 meetings. We drove the bus around the city for five days. When we went back to the places that we had those original meetings and we went to some other places, and sometimes we just parked it on the street and we would, people got to come on. People that would come on, they
got tokens, and they got to vote for what was the thing that they felt was most important. Some of those buckets were overflowing by the end. We had to take some out and put them in bags because they were all over the floor. So it was incredible. Then we took the things that folks voted the top and put them into our roadmap for the Mayor and released it into the public.

Camille Andersen, an elected parent leader who later joined the FACE team, discussed the importance of the bus as an organizing tool to solicit meaningful input and participation from families to capture their vision of what community schools would look like:

Yeah, there was a real intentionality about taking it around to all communities to get feedback…Bringing in [families] from all of our communities to have this conversation about community schools…and have parents there envisioning what that would look like.

Thus, organizers developed a community-driven vision that represented broad constituent participation, one which they were then able to present to the new administration as a blueprint for equitable education reform in New York City. This campaign served to set the narrative around education policy: it was a referendum on the previous administration’s detrimental policies, and it provided an alternative progressive plan for the City’s public schools.

**Blueprint for Community Schools Emerges**

Given that the City’s public schools had been chronically underfunded for decades, organizers were not surprised to hear parents asking for more services for their children’s schools at the neighborhood forums. In repeated requests for more robust services, families began to put forward different “components” of what activists saw as a blueprint for “community schools,” an evidence-based model of education equity which already existed in certain schools in New York City and other districts across the country. Carson recalls requests she would hear from parents that reflected different elements of the community school model, without calling it that:

…I want more counselors in my school and we want…wraparound services, no one calls them that, but that's what they are. Right? Like actually, no one ever says, I want a community school. They just describe all the components. And then you'd be like, “that has a name.”
Jorge Mendez, a member of the FACE team, speaks to the holistic nature of the CS approach that appealed to families:

I know that the Community School model was one that was well received because it really kind of was a holistic approach to all of the issues within the school. I don't want to speak for all of the councils, but the feedback that I heard from many parents throughout is that that should be our approach, like our approach shouldn't be singular. It shouldn't be like we're just...focused on the educational outcomes – we need to be focused on all outcomes with respect to students, because the more that we help support students, both emotionally, both health-wise, and both academically, and both supporting their parents, the greater the success of these children. So I think that that was a concept and a movement that everyone was very positive on and that did achieve very good result.

Participants noted that community schools have a rich history in NYC. Neighborhood-based organizations such as the Children’s Aid Society had first pioneered this school-neighborhood partnership model in the 1990s to provide wraparound supports for students and their families struggling with poverty inside and outside the classroom. Quindel credits the important history of community schools in New York that the new initiative was able to build upon:

…there were pieces of the foundation already existing in New York, because Children’s Aid had been doing this work since 1992 and the Beacons had been doing it since ’91 and there were little pockets of innovation in other parts. The Center for Family Life had been doing this kind of work in Sunset Park for probably the same amount of time. So there was stuff to build on but there was no public support for it. Children’s Aid was doing this largely with philanthropic dollars and also figuring out how to tap into Medicaid and some other public funding streams.

The model placed a substantial emphasis on out-of-school-time programs and youth development as part of its aim to address the needs of the whole child, as Quindel explains:

[T]he original funding for the Beacons came out of…[a] commission that was looking at youth violence. They recommended divesting in corrections and investing in prevention and youth development. So these are some good ideas that keep popping up because they are good ideas…we’re now in the fourth generation of community schools…they keep coming back because it’s a right-
headed idea that keeps going out of fashion... because in the earlier generations...the work was not linked enough to the core mission of schools and... secondly the proponents didn’t have an adequate political strategy.

Zaya Ahmed, the director of Alliance for Quality Education, discusses how the neighborhood visioning process generated a “community school policy” that, regardless of which candidate became mayor, would serve as a foundation to organize around:

What made it work was the community-based organizations that have been doing the work and have been doing the work. So... what CEJ did too, was create a community school policy that we had to get passed to the kind of educational policy which in probably other cities would be their local department of education .... it was collaborative work, but we knew we needed something in place so that no matter who became mayor next, we would have this foundation, something we could organize around. Right? Was it etched in stone, absolutely not. But it was something we could say, "Hey, this policy exists. What are you doing about it?" Right? And so we could organize around that...

In order to develop and solidify their grassroots “community school policy,” activists traveled with candidate de Blasio to Cincinnati, Ohio, a pioneer city in the community schools movement, which, having first implemented the model at a citywide level, had achieved outstanding results. Lisa Santiago, a FACE organizer, remembers having the opportunity to be part of this trip,

[We] had the opportunity to go to Cincinnati with de Blasio to visit Cincinnati community schools ... I was blown away just seeing their structures and who they serve, and what their community looks like. Just hearing of the history before and after community schools. And then eventually, of course, we gained the support of de Blasio, where he said in his first 100 days, he was going to convert schools into community schools...

As part of their electoral strategy, the coalitions organized an education-themed Mayoral Debate forum, enabling them to frame the educational narrative on their terrain and their terms, and provided a platform for de Blasio to make his first pledge towards an equity-centered education policy. As Carson describes,
…We had this education debate with the top candidates, all these staff… that's when all of a sudden, de Blasio, he started saying all the right things. He started like he, his campaign had a lot of folks that we were associated with and he was really at the time committed to community or at least seemingly so. His star started to rise I think after that debate, and he pledged to open 100 community schools in his first term. After he got elected, he actually opened over 100 in his first year.

It was at this pivotal moment in the mayoral race that candidate de Blasio’s broader equity agenda was taking shape. He ran on a “tale of two cities” platform, vowing to tackle the City’s alarming wealth inequality, its racial disparities, and its discriminatory policing regime; he promised to fight for working families. A cornerstone of this platform was a radically progressive shift in education policy, one that was aligned with and informed by the robust education justice movement described above. Moreover, at the core of this community-driven vision for education was a deep commitment to support struggling schools rather than close them. Community schools – which activists had called for – would be its central strategy to achieve this aim. As Miller explains, “Getting de Blasio elected was part of the strategy. De Blasio was a community organizing candidate and so when he came in, there was this opportunity to make so many changes and the stakeholders and the community leaders who have been active in education said, ‘We're going to bring in community schools’.” It was the organizers who laid the groundwork for community schools, promoting them as a widely popular solution and holistic policy alternative which de Blasio could use to “replace the market reform agenda with a student-centered opportunity agenda” (Easton, 2014). According to Quindel,

De Blasio blew everybody away with this platform that he had for community schools. And it was because of [the grassroots organizing work], that he understood what it was and that in his larger campaign which was about the tale of two cities, he understood that community schools were an equity strategy. So the story, it is known by some people but I think in a lot of the telling of the tale about how the narratives develop, often this gets left out and it’s all put on Mayor de Blasio as if he thought it up.

Susan Jacobs, Deputy Director of the Office for Community Schools, expounds upon this theme:
Really this groundswell of coming together and coalescing and saying, "This is the model that we want to see for schooling in New York City." And again, previously it was in pockets here, pockets there. My understanding is that folks really came together and said, "Now is the time for a city-funded, city-led commitment to community schools in New York City." And so that groundswell was really a key part of it.

Quindel notes the essential role of the organizers in winning this groundbreaking initiative:

… Sometimes they were playing the role of nudge, advocate, broker and sometimes at that earlier stage they were playing the role of organizer. You know, really building community support for these community schools. That was a wonderful role, an important role for them to play. I’m grateful for them because that was not something we could do. I mean, we could do it in a limited way at Children’s Aid. It’s not something I could do at the National Center. So, they were definitely providing input all along the way.

**DOE Launches NYC-CS, Restructures Around Equity**

As a result of this impactful community organizing campaign, once elected Mayor de Blasio delivered on his commitment and launched the New York City Community Schools initiative, restructuring the Department of Education around this equity-based vision of public education. The NYC Community Schools Strategic Plan encapsulated “the new educational philosophy” of the de Blasio administration “to re-imagine the City’s school system” by meeting the needs of the “whole child” and their family, inside and outside the classroom. According to the Strategic Plan:

Community Schools are neighborhood hubs where students receive high-quality academic instruction, families can access social services, and communities congregate to share resources and address their common challenges. With the Mayor’s bold pledge to create more than 100 new fully-developed Community Schools over the next several years, NYC is now at the forefront of a national movement focused on a holistic and comprehensive approach to education in urban centers. This approach prioritizes student wellness, readiness to learn, personalized instruction, community partnerships and family engagement as key strategies to leverage better academic outcomes among high-need students.
While urban school reform initiatives commonly rely on the creation of new schools (Ravitch, 2010; Ravitch, 2013)—whether it’s the construction of privately managed charter schools or the replacement of a large portion of an existing school’s staff—the community school model is distinct because it provides additional resources and supports for existing high-needs schools. In 2014-15, after administering a comprehensive application process to schools which fit the eligibility criteria, the DOE selected and supported its first cohort of 45 community schools, drawing largely upon the Attendance Improvement and Dropout Prevention (AIDP) program grant funding from New York State (NYC Community Schools Strategic Plan, p. 18). These schools had some of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism in the city, and the lowest rates of attendance, lead indicators for student drop out. A number of these schools were also part of the DOE’s pre-existing Renewal Schools program. Renewal Schools had struggled for at least three years with low academic achievement, test scores, and, if a high school, were in the bottom 25 percent in four-year graduation rates. All 94 Renewal Schools would become Community Schools in the first two years of NYC-CS.

As Rose Rivera, a FACE family outreach specialist, says, “These schools were selected… not just because they were low performing academically, but because of all the social strife and all the issues that were surrounding the school community.” Many schools with similar characteristics had been closed under the previous administration (Easton, 2014). However, the Community Schools initiative represented a radically new approach, which—by providing additional resources, working collaboratively with the school staff and families, and leveraging the assets of their surrounding neighborhoods—sought to turn the schools around, while respecting and empowering the school community rather than disrupting it.

Through the NYC Community Schools Initiative (NYC-CS), the DOE aimed to implement an array of school-based services and programs that “support the social, emotional, physical and academic needs of students…in high need communities that face a myriad of challenges inside and outside of the classroom” (NYC-CS Strategic Plan). The administration created the Office of Community Schools (OCS), a centralized division that, by hiring staff with the unique expertise, would be able to oversee the complex, inter-agency coordination and service provision that was required to implement a citywide community schools program in the largest district in the country. OCS developed a common framework for community schools across the city, consisting of evidence-based strategies and programs to ensure
consistency and quality across community schools while also providing flexibility to encourage innovation (NYC-CS Strategic Plan). The Office of Community Schools provided resources and technical assistance for each community school to implement the following core structures and services: 1) partnership with a lead community-based organization (CBO) in order to provide wraparound social services coordinated by a Community School Director (employed by the CBO), 2) robust family engagement, 3) extended learning time 4) attendance improvement strategies 5) health and wellness services, and 6) the use of real-time data to plan, evaluate, and adjust the program. These structures and services were designed to develop capacities in schools that would lead to positive student outcomes such as improved attendance, academic performance, and social-emotional well-being.

The new administration embraced the underlying logic of the community school model which addresses the fact that educators cannot isolate students’ challenges in the classroom from the burdens of poverty that students bring with them from outside the classroom. As Rivera explains: “Since the students were coming to school with issues that were bogging them down from their home, from their building, from their block, from their community, into school. And that's why they're not performing academically. And I say it like this because there's more to a student than the academic performance that is measured by tests.” By taking these various non-academic needs of children into account, community schools operate with a broader understanding of youth development, promote mental and physical health and wellness, social-emotional learning, and provide services for students’ parents and families who are struggling with poverty and lack of opportunities. As Jorge Mendez, a FACE team leader notes,

[T]he Community School model really approached school in a very holistic way, …and we needed to think that way, because if a child is hungry, if a child is suffering various emotional trauma and we’re not addressing that, then the wellness of that child is being affected. So, it can’t just merely be…a strictly educational outcome. It has to encompass the wellness of the child, the complete wellness of the child, and that’s what the Community School model was, and working with community partners, etc.
As Aaron Taylor, a FACE outreach specialist in the Bronx, describes how the provision of very tangible social services can make a substantial impact on low-income students’ learning experiences:

You're talking about having dental and vision services for kids and free glasses. You know what I'm saying? We were in a time in our history, which you can't believe, that even when I was at school, I had kids that squint and you're teasing them like, "Where's your glasses?" They were like, "Well, I don't need glasses." Now you're talking about everybody getting their screenings so they can learn…Community schools really impact a lot of those root causes of any barrier to learning, and any barrier to having families feel like they're a partner in [their child’s education].

Each school was paired with a “lead CBO partner”—a community-based organization that often had deep roots in the surrounding area, marked by strong relationships with local youth and families. The lead CBO’s role was to provide social and educational services for students as well as their families, ones that schools cannot provide on their own. This positive enrichment serves to address young people’s non-academic barriers to achievement, and to foster a holistic support system outside the classroom that ultimately helps young people to thrive academically inside the classroom. As mentioned above, some CBOs such as Children’s Aid Society had first pioneered this unique partnership model in low-income and working-class communities decades earlier. Quindel explains the important process involved with assessing the needs of an East Harlem school that struggled with an environment of air pollution, rather than simply “throwing services at kids”:

That’s a Children’s Aid Community School. And the needs assessment we did at that school showed that 40% of the children had chronic asthma. They live on a highway. A lot of the kids live in the Metro North Housing Complex that overlooks the FDR. When you know that, you have to do something about it. You’re like we need a health partner in here, fast. It turned out that Children’s Aid has health services. So the first thing we did in that school was we set up a school-based health center that ran an asthma management project. But if you don’t do a needs assessment, you’re throwing services at kids. We say in community schools, we’re trying to get the right services to the right kids at the right time. You can’t do that unless you do a needs assessment.
In order to scale the program up to a citywide level, the DOE issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to recruit CBOs throughout the city to serve as partner agencies in the initiative. As Quindel describes,

… they ran a parallel competition among CBOs. That was important too because there were a lot of CBOs out there that had never done community schools but that were willing to give it a try because there was funding attached to it and because they had the skills that the DOE was looking for. They knew how to run afterschool programs. They knew how to run summer camps. They had social workers who knew how to work with families.

Susan Jacobs, a senior-level staff person in the Office of Community Schools, describes the central role that OCS plays in coordinating these vital partnerships between schools and neighborhood organizations across the five boroughs:

… [T]he number one responsibility of my team and of our program managers is to nurture and support strong and effective partnerships between the school and their community-based partner. So sometimes we joke it can be marriage counseling, right? Sometimes the relationships are harmonious and strong and other times those relationships can become fraught, sometimes there's a leadership change or a new community school director, things can change. And so, my team is there to stay close to those partnerships and make sure that they are strong and effective. So, they provide coaching, training, capacity building to principals, school teams and the CBO partners. My team also has an operational function, they approve the budgets for the community-based organizations and support the collaborative planning and budgeting process at the schools.

The initiative required the Department of Education to cultivate a new culture of inter-agency coordination and collaborative leadership based in strong partnerships that was essential to implement the CS model effectively. As Robinson explains:

What we were asking those schools to do was like, you have a principal, who's the instructional leader of that school. You have a community school leader who is meant to be your connector of the community school model, like the school and community stakeholders and you had a parent coordinator. It was great to have that team. Sometimes all three of them understood the model and how they could work together. Sometimes they did not…for a variety of reasons.
According to Miller, this is a comprehensive and ambitious initiative, the goal of which, ultimately, is to create neighborhood hubs which serve as vibrant centers of family life:

…the goals of community schools are to create neighborhood hubs for all the stakeholders that are engaged. They have extended learning days; the unions are involved because you're changing the expectations of teachers. It brings in a community-based organization as a partner, it brings in parents as co-decision makers. There's mental health services, there's adult education, there's just a whole wrap-around, not just set of services, but shifting in the way that we view a public school as part of our community.

**Centering Parents from the Beginning**

In addition to the focus on collaboration among school leaders and community organizations, another key tenet of the community schools strategy is to form meaningful partnerships with students’ families by providing social and educational services for the whole family, not just the students. This, in turn, improves parents’ capacity to support their children’s learning at home, and ultimately draw parents further into the life of the school and their child’s education. In other words, community schools especially – because they provide wraparound services that benefit the whole family, not just the students – have the potential to foster a broader and deeper level of family engagement than traditional schools. Community-based organizations such as Children’s Aid Society had cultivated years of expertise in parent engagement work. Consequently, the newly formed school-CBO partnerships constituted an important new structure to facilitate increased family involvement in schools which had often been disconnected from parents and the community. As Quindel explains,

…I would say in the Children’s Aid model, [family engagement] was always integral to what Children’s Aid was trying to do. So, the Children’s Aid model, which is the model that the New York City Public Schools ultimately adopted – and I’ll get into the tentacles there – is called a lead agency model. The lead agency is there during the school day as well as during the non-school hours and the lead agency model makes family engagement an integral part of what it’s doing. And often in the Children’s Aid model, the Children’s Aid Society is running like a parent room that is open all day during the school day as well as during the non-school hours. So, there’s a place that parents can go. There is a parent coordinator. So, Children’s Aid had parent coordinators in its community schools before the Department of Education ever did it.
Jacobs emphasizes that because the community organizations such as El Puente and MS 50, have “long standing, deep roots in the communities they’re working with,” coupled with the fact that “community organizing, family empowerment, and community engagement is a core to what they do and it preceded them being a community school partner,” this has led to meaningful family empowerment and engagement work “in the schools themselves.”

Thus far, I have described a model that Warren (2005) refers to as “full-service community schools.” However the NYC-CS initiative surpassed the traditional full-service model because the community organizers, who had shaped the program from its inception and remained involved to hold the district accountable, demanded that the process of deep parent engagement and family organizing that had generated the grassroots vision for community schools, would be embedded in the design of the initiative going forward. Reflecting on her visit, Carson believes that the Cincinnati community schools lacked the deep focus on family empowerment which she envisioned as a vital element for community schools in her city:

I remember going to Cincinnati to see a community school there. So, I was asking questions about, so parents can they give input? Actually having parents understand all their power and how to push the system for things that they want. Even just having like that shared decision making. ‘What is my kid learning? Why is my kid learning this? How can I be involved in it?’ Why can I not come into my kid's school again? They're like, "Well, we don't do a lot of parent engagement." So, it was really clear and I was like, Oh, that is a missing link.

Not only were grassroots advocates pushing from outside the institution, but the DOE hired several administrators who came from a community organizing background who were instrumental in shifting the internal culture within the agency required to implement the new equity strategies such as community schools. These individuals played an instrumental role in shifting the practices and the philosophy of the Department of Education during the transition to the new administration. As Quindel reflects,

So, I think there was a lot of lip service. But it changed a lot when Mike writes the strategic plan. The DOE sets up the Office of Community Schools. They hire Chris. He’s working in tandem with Mike over at City Hall and Chris Marinoni. Those are all key players in the early stages. Christine Marinoni as a community organizer, she always said that was her background and she was very proud of it. So once the community schools got started, even at the design stage, the family
engagement work took a big shift and became much more what Karen Mapp and others thought about when they talked about family engagement. It was about helping families…

The Office of Community Schools also benefitted from bringing on staff who came out of the community organizing world. According to Jacobs,

And I'll also say that when we hired for the Office of Community Schools, I'm just thinking about a colleague, one of our program managers Jose Dobles, who was one of the first of the seven program managers that I hired to be part of my team within the office, Jose came out of a community organizing background and had done a lot of that work. So, we also brought staff on that had that vision and that training and that also informed the work that we did within the office and the training of our own team members, so that was really valuable to have.

However, it wasn’t until that summer of 2015, that a new vision for family engagement began to take shape within the Department of Education.

**Door-knocking to Reach Marginalized Families**

With a goal to raise awareness among families about the 83 new community schools which were being rapidly implemented across the city, the DOE launched *Renewal Summer* in 2015, a massive citywide door-knocking campaign, or a “community canvass” in organizers’ parlance, through which hired canvassers knocked on over 45,000 doors in low-income neighborhoods of color in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Manhattan. In what resembled a political campaign to Get Out the Vote, the goal was to meet marginalized families “where they’re at,” in communities “where white folks don’t go,” as one FACE member put it, and to raise knowledge and awareness among parents and caregivers about what a community school is and how it can benefit their child. Catherine Miller, former Director of the FACE team, provides an overview of this ambitious operation:

…we called it Renewal Summer …we made a plan to do a massive door-knocking outreach plan... So, we hired canvassers and we engaged in what's now called a deep canvass where we went door-to-door and engaged in one-on-one conversations with people to say, "Hey, do you know that your school is going to be converting to a community school? Do you know what that means?" Then
to ask them for their input on what kinds of things they would like to see in their community school.

In what was a completely novel approach for the agency, the DOE hired approximately 30 canvassers—many of whom were black and brown parent leaders who had participated in the organizing effort to win the community schools, and who had often protested the DOE in the past—to now represent the agency, conduct face-to-face outreach with families, and mobilize parents around a district initiative. The canvassers were paid more than the typical rate, according to the lead organizer who oversaw this effort. As Santiago says, “We knew what the schools were that were going to be community schools, then we looked at where, because we went into the system and found out where the families lived, where they were located. And then that's how we targeted them.” Capers posits that the idea for door-knocking first came from the organizing groups who understood the need for more parent awareness around what a community school was, and how their communities could benefit from this model:

So that campaign, the door-knocking was one of our ideas. I feel like it was one of the things that we may have brought up, either us or one of the community partners. Because what was happening is over the summer, they were [like], ‘Yay community schools.’ I was like, ‘But nobody knows what a community school is. None of you all have told anybody what a community school is. Half your staff doesn't know what a community school is. Let alone schools that are being converted into community schools. Parents don't know what they are. You may want to spend some time telling people what a community school is.’

She goes on to describe pushing the district staff along with community school staff to go into the community and knock on doors of the families they are supposed to serve, and engage in a common and effective organizing practice of conducting “one-on-ones” to promote awareness of the initiative:

So I said, ‘Schools should door-knock.’ They should take organizing one-on-one type thing and go door-knock. Door-knock, if they're not there, they [leave] these things that go around your door knob. They...had folks from the FACE office go, a lot of times they went with the community school directors. They may have gone with other teachers or other staff, maybe a parent coordinator and they would door-knock to the families and talk about community schools and why their child’s school was a community school and how they can be involved in it.
It was great. They door-knocked 1000s of [doors], over a couple of weeks in the summer so that families will come back to school and know, "Oh, my kid's school is a community school."

Canvassers were given a script and a survey with questions to ask parents about their priorities around such issues as mental healthcare and after-school programming. One lead canvasser recalls the types of questions they would ask caregivers:

It was a campaign ...to give folks the community school 101 breakdown...to get folks thinking about what a community school was....Questions, like have you heard the term community school before? how important to you are mental health services in a school setting??How important do you think it is for parents and teachers to partner?!It was...to initiate a conversation and engage folks, get them thinking about what a community school in New York city was supposed to look like.

Lisa Santiago, one of the canvassers who went on to join the FACE team, reflects on her one-on-one conversations with families:

Here's this group of folks that are going to go out into your communities, knock on your door and say, "Hey, my name is... You have a child at PS one, two, three. And now it's a community school. You guys know? Oh, okay. This is why I'm here. It's a community school, it provides these resources. It's going to have this, it's going to have this. The school is going to do its form of orientation to catch up families. We also want to, if something comes up, we want to be able to invite you, is that possible?"

Walter Reynolds, another family outreach specialist, discussed the memorable experience of traveling into communities he had never been to, to meet families in the city’s most marginalized neighborhoods:

It was just an incredible experience... Places I would never go otherwise, seeing it all on foot and just meeting the residents of our city... who I would never have an opportunity to talk to otherwise...Some people told me their life stories... I just sat on her couch and drank a glass of water and listened. I think most of what we did was listen to people's stories and take back what we could. Just the realities of the families these schools would be set up to be serving outside of traditional education model.
According to Tasha Newman, “A lot of people didn’t know what a community school was. They were like, ‘Who are these people knocking on my door?’…I think when parents learned about it, they were aware but they didn’t know the full potential of what a community school can look like or should look like.” In order to increase the attractiveness and visibility of the campaign, canvassers distributed paraphernalia: “We had to also brand it. So, we had swag. When we went door knocking we gave everybody branded pencils and we had backpacks and we had water jugs and every school now had a banner. We had cards to pass out. We had buttons,” Miller says. In addition to educating families about the initiative, the community canvass provided an opportunity to (at least opened doors for) developing new relationships between the Department of Education and families of color, many of whom were distrustful of the institution due to decades of systemic neglect. Reynolds recalls listening to some parents and grandparents “vent about how terrible their own experience and their child's experience in schools had been.” He saw the real value of the door-knocking campaign, as a civic engagement process that helped residents re-imagine their relationship with the city government:

I view it as more of a pretext just to help build relationship between the DOE and families, and overall, the city government and families. I view this as kind of a gesture of goodwill and a process to begin some healing of lost trust after a lot of betrayal of communities on behalf of the city government over many decades.

Santiago describes how some families were surprised by this new approach of face-to-face outreach at their doors, that came with a level of care and accessibility that included translation services:

…[E]ven when we were door knocking, interpretation or translation was offered. And that's one thing that caught my attention that people were like, “Oh, schools don't do this, or, schools don't come to your building, to your door and share this information with you. We don't get this from schools.” But now you're getting it… parents …picked up there's this shift that's occurring under this new administration that we've never seen before.

In what is consistent with many organizing models, the door-knockers had a follow-up process to “on-ramp” parents after the first contact. Canvassers invited parents to what they called
“borough meetings,” to “get people into their universe,” as Santiago says. She recalls phone banking to follow up with parents and ensure they attend the borough event:

It's like, "Hey, I'm calling you. This is what we got. Confirm? Yes. I'm going to remind you." Okay, and then we will remind them, and then they will go to the location, and they were there. And it's like, "Hey, you knocked on my door, I remember you." You connect with people. There's a level of connectivity there. And the thing is that people will remember you. Even afterwards they'll remember you.

Miller expressed an explicit vision to organize and build power in low-income communities, one which extended beyond engaging families in schools: “We were really trying to do something that was also building people power. We always had this dual mindset of what we were doing.”

We were organizing parents and families and students but we also needed to organize the schools because to engage families as co-decision makers in a school requires a complete shift of mindset and of the way that you're doing business inside the school, right? We needed to do training also with the administrators and with the teachers and with all of the support staff. They needed to learn the tools of real engagement.

**From the Outside In: Assembling the Outreach Team**

The Renewal Summer campaign laid the groundwork for the organizing model that the DOE would subsequently adopt as its family engagement policy for all community schools. Here the Department of Education went a step beyond the standard full-service community school model, by creating a *Family & Community Outreach Team* (FACE) consisting of parent leaders and community organizers, who, according to participants, employed a community organizing approach to support community schools in recruiting and developing as many parents as possible as leaders in their schools. The team consists of approximately 20-25 “Family Outreach Specialists” who were housed in the central DOE headquarters (Tweed) in order to provide centralized support for all community schools to increase their capacity for transformative family engagement. This was significant, according to Max Bachman, a Family Outreach Specialist, because “it speaks to the focus and literal commitment on multiple levels,
including financial, to family empowerment …in community schools.” Notably, the agency hired many of the parent organizers who had been part of the canvass to lead this work. While it has become common for schools to hire family engagement liaisons of some sort, in this case the institution was hiring grassroots organizers who were well respected in their communities, many who had been known to have adversarial relationships with the institution in the past, who had not infrequently traveled to DOE headquarters to protest. Some of these same activists were now being hired as central staff, a key measure embodying the Department’s new commitment to partnering with families, and a break with the past. As Andersen recalls,

…I think it's the door knocking that laid the foundation. And then there was this team that was going to be put together. And that team then became...the composition of that team was some of those same folks that were involved in that creation. And then it was also folks that were organizers, came had organizing background. And now they were put together and then we embarked on knocking on 45,000 doors.

Vivian Robinson, who became the Director of the FACE team, discusses the strategic importance of these early hires:

….Absolutely we had outreach specialists who came from that world of parent organizing...Some of them had been parent association members or leaders, some came from associations with CEJ or AQE. I know we had one outreach specialist who had been really active in the Bronx with new settlement and other organizations. So, a good portion of them were parents or had been involved, and were really focused on the kind of equity and inclusion pieces that they wanted to bring inside more to the DOE.

According to Tasha Newman, a Family Outreach Specialist and previous organizer with CEJ, “when they had the opportunity of getting people that had organizing skills and that were organizers, parents who had skills in supporting families and their schools, the opportunity opened up for me at a position as a Community School Outreach Specialist and then I applied.” Reynolds, another member of the FACE team, recalls first joining the DOE: “…we came in as outsiders, people with the organizing, the activism experience, that mindset. How do we change the DOE from within and help set up families to advocate for themselves and their
children?” Aaron Taylor was surprised when he found out the agency was looking to hire grassroots organizers like him.

When the job opportunity came up, a friend was like, “Look, here's a job opportunity. They want folks that organize. They want folks that can base build and build relationships with communities. That can train on these kinds of things.” I was like, ”Wait, where? The Department of Education?” …I knew what [Tweed] was from being on the steps of Tweed for protests for education reform …Then ended up years later as an adult working in the building. Was always an interesting thing.

Education organizers maintained that they had been advocating for the creation of those outreach positions and for the DOE to hire their members:

...About that piece of the work. So that…piece of the work, like hiring [people] to do specific community outreach to parents and community for community schools, came directly from CEJ. It came directly from us and so much so that when they posted the job, several of our CEJ leaders applied and actually got those positions.

A number of participants spoke about the key role that Claire Maggio played, an organizer whom de Blasio hired to shape the Mayor’s new equity agenda. Miller describes the strategic role she played in transforming the DOE’s approach towards education issues:

She was instrumental in getting de Blasio elected and then was hired on as an advisor and had this vision of organizing parents to be co-decision makers in their schools using the community schools model as sort of our tool to achieve a bigger vision of building people power and particularly changing the New York City school system and the funding of schools and the sort of deep segregation and educational disparities in the New York City schools by using this community school model and parent engagement as a tool to build power.

The FACE Outreach Team used what they called the Ladders of Engagement strategy (described at length in Chapter 5) to provide opportunities for parents to engage at different levels. Family Outreach Specialists (soon to be called Parent Empowerment Liaisons) hired by the DOE adhered to the philosophy that parents should be valued as experts in their own communities. In the first years of the initiative, they worked on building face-to-face
relationships with families through community-canvass door-knocking in low-income neighborhoods around the community schools. The idea is that, by meeting people “where they’re at,” organizers are able to get parents on the ramp (step 1) by having them commit to attend a school event. From there, families are given many opportunities to participate and, based on their time availability and capacity, to move up the Ladders of Engagement. They can attend a family engagement orientation (step 2), a community school team meeting or emerging leader training (step 3), volunteer to recruit other parents through activities such as phone-banking (step 4), and ultimately, for those able to commit, become an active parent leader who facilitates meetings and events or serves as a member on a school governing body. Throughout this process, organizers have multiple contacts with families and closely track responses in a database to determine movement from rung to rung.

**Opening the Halls of Power for Historically Excluded Families**

The cornerstone of the DOE’s new family organizing initiative was its core leadership trainings which were offered for both parents and school staff. They brought hundreds of parents of color from across the City to the central DOE headquarters for the first time—inviting them “into the halls of power” – as Miller called it, spaces where they previously were not typically welcome. These trainings “set the tone,” as Max Bachman, a Family Outreach Specialist said, for the systemic culture change that was required to implement “transformative family engagement.” In order to recruit parents for the trainings, FACE team members conducted phone-banking outreach to the universe of families they had first contacted, whether through door-knocking, one-on-one meetings at community schools, or through their relationships with PTA leaders. It was an eye-opening experience for many parents to see the agency’s headquarters, where the Chancellor works, and where policy decisions were made for their children’s schools. The fact that the trainings were held at this centralized location, and that they received genuine support and recognition from the Mayor and the Chancellor, both of whom would sometimes drop in on the workshops, gave a strong sense of legitimacy to the program, and to the DOE’s pledge to developing deeper partnerships with families. Following standard community organizing practices, the events were designed to be as accessible as possible by the provision of childcare, meals, and metro cards for parents traveling from the outer boroughs. The FACE team often empowered parent leaders, along
with CEJ advocates, to co-facilitate these trainings modeling what parent leadership looks like for other caregivers. While many of those in attendance were PTA presidents, SLT members, or members of formal parent governance structures, large numbers of new parents attended the trainings who had not previously been involved in any parent leadership bodies. Thus, these trainings drew hundreds of new parents into a citywide school improvement process where they had an opportunity to develop new relationships with both other parents and with their city government. The workshops covered a variety of content, from hard skills such as how to facilitate a meeting and speak publicly to developing knowledge about how DOE governance and parent leadership structures function. Ultimately, however, the underlying goal was to “shift mindsets” among parents and administrators from a deficit-based narrative that did not value families’ contributions to education to a strength- or asset-based approach that viewed parents as experts in their child’s education, and valued and empowered them as collaborative partners in school decision-making.

In order to recruit parents for core leader trainings, FACE team members conducted phone-banking outreach to the universe of families they had first contacted, whether through door-knocking, one-on-one meetings at community schools, or at PTA meetings. Malik Madani, a Family Outreach Specialist, describes this process:

We would reach out to schools and tell them about these trainings. We would have our own parent leadership, parent list, we will get lists of the PA/PTA members from FACE, who hosted it, and we would cold call people and introduce ourselves. We're working with the school, this is a school that I work with, and invite them to these trainings. Sometimes we would attend their PA/PTA meeting and advertise it, and sometimes they would even give us a part of the meeting to introduce the ladder or talk about, a small segment, maybe 10 minutes or 15 minutes, and we would plug in that training at the very end. We would get them excited about it.

Participants emphasized that the location of the core leader trainings (Tweed), was an essential feature of this experience. Tweed – the headquarters of a massive institution, the DOE—had developed a reputation among education activists as an impenetrable bureaucracy where data-driven technocrats made school governance decisions without community input, decisions which often harmed low-income communities of color. Now, under the new progressive City leadership, a radical shift occurred: DOE staff not only welcomed, but actively reached out to
and invited hundreds of marginalized black and brown families inside the agency’s central headquarters / or “halls of power.” This served to “demystify” the functions of the massive government institution for ordinary parents who had never seen where the Chancellor works. Rivera explains the rationale behind the decision to host the trainings at Tweed,

…the idea of hosting them at Tweed was to demystify the process…one, getting in person instruction so that it feels like I'm learning something and I'm in this space connecting with other people and networking, but also seeing the institution, seeing it with their own eyes, seeing the actual building where people are making decisions for them and their child and their community, and knowing that this is the place that that happens, and that you too also have access to it.

Robinson describes what it was like for families to be inside this historic government building:

If you've been in the building, it's a really beautiful municipal building…it has this feel about it and it's like this big soaring atrium and these big, tiled conference rooms. I think there was something for families where they felt like, wow, look at this place, look at where I can be and be a part of this. So, I think just demystifying that, or putting a personal connection on it, where they then they would have their organizer who had called them and who they would see at each training. I think it also gave folks a sense of then they knew where the chancellor worked and where some of those offices were.

The centralized location and heightened attention from city leadership gave increased legitimacy to the initiative. According to Miller, “it gave us a level of validity that otherwise wouldn’t have been there.” Andersen recalls the reaction of families who saw, for the first time, where the Chancellor and the Mayor work:

It's almost like we were doing tours in Tweed when they came in. They were like, "Oh, this is great." And we would be showing them around because they'd never been in the building. And even the kids that came, because we did childcare and they were just fascinated to know this is where the Chancellor is, and wait, across right there, look out the window, that's City Hall. That's where the mayor is.

In order to create a welcoming environment for families, and to ensure that the trainings were well attended, the Family Outreach Specialists placed a heavy emphasis on accessibility by “removing barriers to participation.” The FACE team partnered with CEJ to design and
facilitate a number of the core trainings, partly due to its close relationship with the organization and the fact that many of team’s staff had been members of the group. Carson discusses how the organizers’ modeled for the DOE what accessibility looks like in practice:

For us, it was, "We're going to model for you." Because everyone always is like, "How do y'all get parents to come out to stuff? And how do you get parents to go to your leadership training, to your monthly meetings?" And I was like, "We eliminated barriers." One of the things that you have to do is you have to eliminate barriers. So we always have childcare, we always have interpretation…. We were like, "Y'all have to have breakfast and lunch."…we give Metro cards, and if we can't get Metro cards, we figure it out. We make sure, we help families get there. We eliminate barriers. So that way it's as easy as possible for folks to participate. And so, I think they saw that in real time, in real life and also realized like, "Yeah, it's messy and it's hard, but look at the end result."

Rivera describes the thoughtful preparation work the FACE outreach team undertook to form a conducive and welcoming space for families, many of whom often had to bring their children to events:

… the outreach team… it was just co-facilitating that, planning that, setting up the rooms, breaking down the rooms, connecting with parents, making sure that we had child care and that we had metro cards ready for them, and that we were setting up breakfast or dinner or whatever it was to make sure that parents felt fed and that their kids were being fed as well, that we had child care where there'd be somebody there to help their child do their homework if they were doing it on a weeknight or whatever. Making sure that we are trying to remove as many barriers to connecting to the work as we could, as we could provide.

Robinson elaborates on the need to eliminate hurdles in order to bring in new parents:

We really wanted to broaden who could be involved. So it's why we thought about the translation and interpretation that some schools were doing fine or well at on their own, but not always. That's why we always had childcare as well. We knew that we needed to make it possible for anybody who wanted to, to come and we still had some hurdles there. Like it was always in the evenings, we were largely holding them downtown and we knew those were barriers for some folks.
Core leader trainings empowered community school parents and staff with a new collective narrative that would guide the initiative going forward — one that would reject the systemic, deficit-based narrative about families of color that had been prevalent within the City bureaucracy for decades, and instead uplift families as not only central agents in their own child’s education, but important leaders of a system-wide educational change process. The goal was to develop a team of parent core leaders at each community school who would become collaborative decision-makers in school governance. These leaders would in turn, organize, recruit and activate other parent leaders. Ultimately the hope was that this new process would transform how family engagement was practiced by the institution, as well as change the relationship between the institution and the marginalized families it serves. Workshops were grounded in confidence-building activities such as “the story of self,” that helped parents to think about, recognize, and understand their own power and motivation to be change agents in their children’s education. As Tasha Newman, a Family Outreach Specialist, explains,

The Story of Self is more on the lines of you doing an introduction, talking about your story, why you got started being a parent leader, what motivated you to take on this role, and why is it important for parents to be engaged in their schools, right? … like your own experience from where it could have been the experience of something happened to your child, you were able to speak up. You initiated some ideas to the principal, and changes started to be made. So Story of Self just tells like how you got motivated, how you got started, and why is it important to be engaged in your school community.

Through these activities, Newman says, participants uncovered a multitude of unique stories and experiences that families bring to the table, which often go unheard:

From that ice breaker that I did, we found out so much about the parents in the school. Like we had parents that were swim coaches, one was a DJ, another one was a principal. We found out parents that were professors in college. We found out about parents that were publishers, so we wound up honing in on all those skills and those assets.

Sharing their stories, according to Andersen, allowed parents to tap into the knowledge and strengths that they possessed, but may not have leveraged before in relation to their child’s schooling.
…that they come with some knowledge and fund of knowledge, and that their
voice and so that's when we got into telling your story. Everybody has a story.
Seeing the strengths, harnessing the strengths. That was the next phase of having
parents come in, and feel empowered with their voice.

According to FACE team members – who often facilitated the trainings – parent
participants developed an extensive set of new leadership skills as well as organizing skills.
Participants learned how to: facilitate meetings effectively; phonebank and conduct outreach
to other parents; understand the DOE and parent governance structures; as well as develop in-
depth knowledge of how the community school model works. According to Miller, it was a
method that “was both transformational and also skill-driven:”

…there's a whole range of sort of ways you can apply that philosophy but at its
heart it's saying that we've reset the table and that people really are participating
and that we're respecting everyone's unique gifts and skills and experience as
valid and it's not just people who went outside and learned something at school.
That also it's based in sort of experiential. I say a lot those closest to the pain are
closest to the solution and so that's really, that's what we're talking about.

In addition to hard skill-building, core leader trainings served as a valuable civic
engagement opportunity for participants, who developed extensive knowledge around 1) how
the DOE functions overall, 2) how the parent governance structures operate at the school-level
and district-level including the role of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), School Leadership
Teams (SLTs), and Community Education Councils (CECs), and 3) their important role in the
larger community school strategy to meet the needs of the whole child and draw families into
the life of the school. Newman describes the complex array of school decision-making bodies
that parents learned about:

We also did trainings with the core leaders on parent leadership structures…
learning more about the school level, district level, and citywide… From PA,
PTA, SLT, Title One, to district, which is like the CEC, the DLT, the DEPAC,
and then we did it on citywide like a high school, CCH, CCHE, I think. CCHS,
all those different leadership structures that parents sit on, right, and how it
impacts each other and how you move from school level to district level to
citywide level.
Through this experience, Newman, who, before working for the DOE, was previously a parent organizer who would protest the DOE’s harmful school policies, learned how to navigate the agency’s complex decision-making processes:

When I used to be in the front of the steps in Tweed, protesting, "Down with the DOE, ah, ah," screaming and yelling, I didn't know that it took... it wasn't like I made this request and this decision and it can happen with a day or two. Like that was the response I was expecting, but being in the space, it was like, "Wait a minute. Oh, it is this. It has to go to this person, to go back, and then this person receives it and then it has to go back and then it goes to legal. And then legal and then legal brings it back and then it goes back to legal and it..." It's like a process and I think if parents understand the process, they would know how to move within the system, right?

This new approach to family engagement has to be two directional, or what Dr. Karen Mapp calls “dual capacity.” That is, not only should parents be given the tools and supports to participate in their child’s education, but the district must develop the capacity of school staff and administrators to engage with families in meaningful ways that go beyond sending a flyer home in a child’s backpack. In order to do this, FACE staff described the imperative to “shift mindsets” of DOE staff – from a deficit-based perception of families of color to an asset-based lens. Robinson, a FACE team leader, discusses the deficit-based perspective that many educators have towards families of color, a set of biases that, according to numerous studies, are common among administrators and school staff in many urban school districts serving low-income students of color.

What I always found interesting is that even for educators and folks who work in education, who can espouse that idea as it relates to children, that we should have an assets-based approach. It's another step for them to apply that to families and particularly to families of color. So, if you have a school where you have women of color coming in and asking questions and being upset, because there's been a history of mistrust and mistreatment not just from schools in that neighborhood, but from a variety of institutions, often, it would be like, they're distractions...

I think from a lot of the bureaucracy of the DOE that like, there's this way to do things and a parent doesn't just get to walk into that building and go talk to someone, there's even expectations that they would have of CEC members and how they conducted themselves.
Miller describes this ambitious goal to organize schools around a new mindset in a way that surpassed traditional professional development workshops for staff:

…We were organizing parents and families and students… but we also needed to organize the schools because to engage families as co-decision makers in a school requires a complete shift of mindset and of the way that you're doing business inside the school, right? We needed to do training also with the administrators and with the teachers and with all of the support staff. They needed to learn the tools of real engagement… we were resetting the table. So that meant that administrators and teachers needed to also change the way that they functioned inside the school. I can't stress enough how important that part is and that parents, rather than being seen as a problem, are seen as the linchpins of success, actually.

Carson, one of the CEJ leaders who participated in the trainings, notes that educators are generally not provided with parent engagement training as part of their certification process: "'I'm going to become a teacher, I'm going to teach a school.’ There's no, ‘Ooh, okay. Here's, parent engagement one-on-one,’ there's none of that. Go to school, you're a teacher go be in a school.” Robinson elaborates on the process that FACE facilitators undertook during trainings to push educators and administrators to rethink their assumptions about parents coming into the school building; to not dismiss them as problems or “distractions,” but to acknowledge their strengths, and take advantage of interactions with parents as an opportunity to build bridges and advance a shared vision: “We were trying to get folks to think about like, what is driving that person to walk into your office and ask those questions. There's a commitment there, and there's a vision and a desire that they have. So how can we build some bridges?” Some participants openly acknowledged the systemic racism that is at play when professional educators view black and brown families as problems rather than part of the solution:

…for them to confront how they view families of color, to them meant that, "I have to confront the fact that I'm being actively racist." And that wasn't necessarily our argument. …You may be... because you are working in a system that is actively racist, and is built to be so, right? And that every step of the way you have to be countering that narrative, and that becomes really hard.
The core leader trainings were not simply trying to change this narrative of a few select schools but at a system-wide level which was especially challenging. According to Robinson:

… we did our best to work both sides of that dual capacity framework. Sometimes it's difficult when you're in a large system that historically and traditionally that has not been a part of the way they think about the work. So I was really happy with the progress we made and the feedback we were seeing, acknowledging that there were some schools that we were still like, "Yeah, they say they're doing it, but they're doing the bare minimum, or they're still using some old deficits-based approaches." …it's a slug because you're changing minds and you're building new skills and muscles. That takes a little time.

One of the most beneficial impacts of these trainings was that they allowed parents from community schools in neighborhoods across the city, from all different walks of life, to connect with each other, learn and participate in interactive activities together, recognize their common struggles and goals, and form deep, long-lasting relationships that would strengthen the initiative at a citywide level. As Madani reflects:

… just the experience of seeing parents from all over the city who had the same exact interest and challenges that you're going through, and just providing a space and platform for them to share with each other was the most powerful learning experience I've ever seen. Our material, our strategies, our tools, were helpful. But then when you create the space for them to just talk with each other, break them into groups, was one of the most powerful experiences I've seen.

Conclusion

This chapter has documented the story of how, after years of neoliberal school reform policies that failed communities of color, community organizers and parent leaders shaped Mayor de Blasio’s education equity agenda from the bottom-up. They put forth the vision and blueprint for NYC Community Schools that would address the needs of the whole child and family. Family engagement is a central pillar of the community school strategy: it provides wraparound social and educational services for students and their families. However, as we saw, something unique happened in the NYC community schools initiative: the grassroots organizing practices that had helped win the initiative then went on to shape its character as it became institutionalized as a government program. The DOE hired many of the black and
brown parent organizers—who were formerly seen as adversaries of the establishment—into the institution, creating a centralized *Family and Community Outreach* (FACE) Team. The team took a community organizing approach to parent engagement. To raise awareness of the community schools, FACE sent these organizers into the low-income neighborhoods surrounding community schools to knock on doors and meet marginalized families “where they’re at.” To “set the tone” for the community school transformation process, the FACE team “opened the halls of power” for thousands of parents of color, by inviting and recruiting them to come to Tweed (DOE headquarters), an institution that had often alienated or excluded them, for core leadership trainings. These trainings provided a space for families and school staff to re-imagine parents’ role in the public-school system, challenge the deficit-based narratives about families of color, cultivate a new mindset that recognizes the wisdom, expertise and agency of families in school decision-making, and develop key leadership skills for parents. Hundreds of parents from all across the city formed new relationships with each other, increasing their social capital, and they learned about school governance and how the DOE operates. Ultimately the trainings facilitated a systemic culture change that was required for community schools to implement “transformative family engagement.” How did the NYC DOE’s FACE team, operating in the largest school district in the country, carry out this “transformative family engagement” and develop parent leaders in over 100 community schools across the city during the first three years of the program? This is the subject of my next chapter.
CHAPTER 5
THE LADDERS OF ENGAGEMENT:
A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING APPROACH TO PARENT EMPOWERMENT

In this chapter, I delineate the organizing philosophy and practices which Family Outreach Specialists employed to develop parent leadership in community schools across the city and the resulting impacts of this approach. In order to build off of and sustain the momentum of the initial door-knocking campaign and core leader trainings, the FACE outreach team developed and institutionalized a community organizing approach—the Ladders of Engagement program—to increase parent participation and leadership in the new community schools. The ultimate goal was to “develop a cadre of trained parent leaders at every community school…trained to actively participate in school governance and represent the parent voice – helping drive the community school vision and plan” (FACE’S 2015-16 Family and Community Engagement Plan). In this structure, the DOE assigns a trained family organizer (Family Outreach Specialist) as an external support to each community school to help build its capacity for parent leadership. This structure stands in contrast to the more traditional arrangement of school-based parent coordinators, who often lack the time, resources, and training to engage a broader range of families in meaningful ways.

I found that the Family Outreach Specialists (FOSs) employed explicit strategies and tactics usually found in community and political organizing campaigns: building one-on-one relationships with people “where they’re at” (meeting parents in their homes or local venues, respectfully soliciting their ideas and concerns); using pledge cards for recruitment; organizing phone banks for large-scale outreach; mobilizing a constituent base to participate in large democratic decision-making events (Community School Forums); facilitating leadership skills trainings; and drawing people into formal leadership roles and bodies (for example, PTAs or School Leadership Teams). The ultimate goal was to draw family members into a larger civic engagement process that would increase their power and build the constituency for public education in low-income communities.

I found that the FACE staff perceived the family organizing methods described above to be largely successful in increasing parent participation in schools, developing their
leadership, and forging meaningful relationships both with staff and other parents. In some cases, these processes led to employment for parents at the school or district level, and/or to broader civic involvement and collective action to defend and enhance their children’s education.

**Organizing Strategies to Engage Parents**

Below I delineate the major community organizing techniques that Family Outreach Specialists used to reach and engage parents and develop their leadership skills.

**Establishing a Base**

To lay the foundation for the Ladder at each community school, FACE’s Family Outreach Specialists go into their respective schools at the beginning of the year, to meet and develop a relationship with the school leaders: namely the principal, the Community School Director, the Parent Coordinator, and whoever else was on the “Principal’s squad” as Bachman calls it. Together they would assess the “state of family engagement” at their school: What are their goals for family engagement in the coming year? Bachman discusses some of the key factors he would consider as a FOS when assessing a school’s state of family engagement:

Just how often parents are in the building and do schools view parents as potential leaders, or is that just not on their radar at all? Are they really genuinely trying to engage them in academic partnership to support children learning? Or are some of them just really not interested in working with parents at all and just basically want to keep them out and then just do the work with students? Just getting a sense of where things are at. But then I just look for like ... As an organizer, I just wanted to hear, "Oh, you do want more parent engagement? Okay. Cool." As long as I could hear that, then to me, that was a green light to move forward.

Supporting Parent Teacher Association (PTA) engagement was a natural place for Outreach Specialists to start. Bachman explains that, regardless of principals’ underlying views of parents, it was hard for them to turn down this offered assistance from central staff:

And then [I would ask], ‘How's PTA engagement? How's that going? Do you want more people at the PTA?’ Yes. Okay. Cool. ‘What would you think of me working with PTA leadership to recruit parents to come out.’ And of course,
that's going to sound good to 99% of principals, even if they are suspicious of you or have negative feelings and ideas about parents, family engagement numbers, and family and parents in the door numbers looks good for them. So I was just generally looking for that go ahead, that green light, and then I would be able to begin my work. But hearing from them, ideally honest reflection on the state of partnership with parents, is definitely valuable.

FOSs then present the Ladders of Engagement (LOE) model to the school as a strategy for deepening the school’s ties with families and the community in hopes of getting buy-in around this new approach to family outreach. Through teaching school leaders about the Ladder, FOSs provide knowledge and tools for schools to increase their capacity for family engagement. They then work with community school leaders to tailor the Ladder to meet the needs of the individual school. As Robinson explains,

…the outreach specialists would generally try and have a couple of meetings with the school principal and the community school coordinator to talk about their vision, brief them on the ladder and get their sense of like, what's your vision for the Ladder at your school? What are going to be some of your entry level events? What volunteer roles do you have that you want to plug people into? Because we didn't want to just say, "You should have school parents volunteer as X, Y, and Z." It was like, no, what do you need, and what do folks want?

Using the LOE model, FACE organizers then help community schools develop outreach plans to increase their levels of parent participation. According to Taylor:

Somebody says, ‘We need to get more of our families in.’ If a principal says, ‘I need to get more families,’ I can dictate on the ladder, how you do that, and support them in creating an outreach plan on how you do that. Then it's like, How do we build the team to do that? How do we continue to add to that team so that we have everything that we need to be able to move the process forward?'

Rivera emphasizes the essential role that the principal plays in establishing the foundation for this work:

…I'm being very clear that the linchpin for a lot of this work on a school-based level is the school administrator. So if a principal is bought into this work, it doesn't mean that the work is going to come easy and that there's going to be a thousand parents at every meeting all year round. But I think that the school
administrator sets a lot of the tone for this level of engagement and for the level of commitment to this role.

According to Taylor, who is the Outreach Specialist for different Bronx community schools, while he was “supporting schools with building outreach strategies,” he was also educating them on the broader community school model, “this real grassroots approach where you essentially become this hub of the community to really do holistic services for folks.”

One-on-one’s: Stepping into the Community

As an initial first step of “direct and personalized outreach,” the FACE team sends a Family Outreach Specialist into each community school to carry out one-on-one conversations with parents and family members in the school and the surrounding neighborhood, in order to build face-to-face relationships with parents. This “proactive parent outreach,” as the FACE team refers to it, is the heart and soul of the Ladders of Engagement model. According to FACE’s 2015-16 Family and Community Engagement Plan:

Community Schools will be trained in a proactive approach to drawing parents into the school using direct, personalized and comprehensive outreach methods that will ensure robust parent participation in school events and of families in the education of their children, and that will help surface parents who can be trained over time to take leadership roles in the school.

Outreach Specialists attend school-based events such as PTA meetings, school workshops, presentations and trainings, but they also go outside the schools into the community in order to meet parents “where they’re at” and establish a personal connection: “It was in the community. It was going and talking to families and meeting them wherever they were. If it was at Dunkin Donuts, Starbucks, …in the park, we met them wherever they were comfortable having the conversation,” Andersen says. Newman elaborates on the deep relational work that is possible when schools have dedicated family outreach staff who are not only in the schools, but who also go into the surrounding neighborhood to build face-to-face relationships with parents:

[We would ask] "What's your vision for the school community? What do you think the school might need or support? I just want to have an opportunity to talk
to you." And we used to go to a café, sit down and talk, eat a little breakfast and then just first getting to know the parent, right? And see where they are and what their thoughts were around their school and what they feel as though could be improved. And from there, that's when we started pulling the parents in from the one-on-one's and getting them to come to trainings.

Bachman describes the impact of putting a “face to a face” as he calls it: “It made a huge difference because I'm also seeing the families in the streets, I'm seeing parents in the streets, I'm seeing teachers walk to school. I'm starting to build those levels of relationships so folks are starting to see my face as familiar.” Newman explains how she builds rapport with parents by sharing her personal experiences as a parent:

Because we couldn't be like, "Hey, Joe, come out to this training." I first had to build a relationship with him, right? And like I always tell people, everything starts with building a relationship, getting to know that person and that person getting to know you. So it was more of, I'm learning about that person, how many kids they have, what do they do in their pastime. I talk a little about me being a parent leader, having children with disability, and how impactful it was for me to participate and be a part of my school community, right, either as a parent leader or a parent volunteer.

Outreach Specialists modeled this relational, one-on-one approach to family engagement for school staff, encouraging them to conduct the same type of regular conversations with parents themselves. They emphasize the importance of establishing a personal connection with parents that is essential to creating stronger relationships. As Bachman explains:

…[W]e would try and support school staff as much as possible, teachers and parent coordinators primarily, to do direct outreach to parents… to speak with them in person whenever possible… especially elementary schools or also middle schools to some extent, at drop-off and pickup, that's a great opportunity if they could get out there to just put a face to a face. Again, even just a quick moment with someone can pay big dividends, if just they know who you are now. So even just that, the teacher says hi for 10 seconds to a parent outside at pickup, then if something goes on later in the school year, they have a better shot of being able to actually have a conversation with that person, because there's some personal connection there.
Malik Madani, a Bronx Outreach Specialist, describes his role instructing community schools on how to do “grassroots outreach” to families in a way that better accommodates their varying needs and capacities:

So I would tell them, ‘Look, your PA/PTA,’ for example, ‘has these many participants. What we can do is some grassroots outreach. Make phone calls. Still send flyers and text messages, but start building relationships with parents that are potentially going to come. Take all of your sign-in sheets from the past, and start calling people. Maybe they're not coming because of the time. Maybe they're not coming because of the meeting are too long. There are different reasons, so you adjust based on those responses.

Conducting effective, face-to-face outreach was labor-intensive according to Rivera:

It's hard. It is difficult. A lot of what we were teaching when we were outreach specialists was about building those personal connections, but doing that face to face. Asking people for their contact information, having a clipboard ready with a sign in sheet, and then using that sign in sheet to do one-on-one calls with people and following up with them after a meeting and so on, to give them your elevator pitch about who you are and why you come to this work.

**Count-on-Me’s**

The critical first step of the ladder is making contacts with new parents at a school meeting or event and asking them to sign a *Count-on-Me* card: a commitment in writing that they will attend a school event, or return for a follow-up event, and ultimately pledge to participate in some way in the new family engagement initiative happening at their child’s community school. Signing a count-on-me card was, according Miller, “the way we developed our cadre of people that we first started to talk to.” One ideal place to collect pledge cards from parents is at large school events. Typically, schools have a limited number of events that parents and family members are able to attend. Community schools however, host several “large crowd-building” and “on-ramp” events designed to “build excitement and community support for the school and provide a venue for regularly engaging families and communities in the Community School visioning process” (Family & Community Engagement Plan FY2016). These include “Welcome Nights” and Community School Forums (I will discuss the forums in a later section). According to Miller, Welcome Nights, which take place in the first week of school,
were a “way to get the universe started and set the tone for the school.” Parent volunteers are trained to engage other parents in one-on-ones and collect the count-on-me’s (a process elaborated on further down). As Miller describes,

We created these ‘welcome nights’ and we had a goal of every school, we would have two parents be collecting count-on-me's, who we trained to greet parents and have one-on-ones with them and collect the count-on-me. Then that was the on-ramp for those parents. That was a whole massive turnout program to get people to find out about and attend these. It's sort of like the open house at the beginning of the year... That's how we identified the universe. Then the next step, everybody who comes to an event and signs the card, then they got invited to an orientation… The count-on-me's became sort of the linchpin to move someone up the Ladder of Engagement.

This method of one-on-one outreach and recruitment through pledge cards is not part of the “conventional script” (Ishimaru 2014) for parent engagement, and, as Miller notes, many school staff were not trained to have these types of conversations:

But the people in the schools didn't know how to have a conversation with them to get them to sign the card. The first year was very challenging and kind of hit or miss. The way people were invited to school events [previously] was by putting a flyer in their kid's backpack. So that's also sort of not transformational and most parents don't see those things and then the flyer gets covered in milk or whatever.

FACE institutionalized the relational one-on-one technique. Not only did FACE organizers engage in one-on-one recruitment conversations with parents, but they trained parent core leaders themselves in these organizing skills – e.g. one-on-one conversations and the collection of pledge cards – to recruit other parents onto the ladder. Having parents drive this outreach was and is a central tenet of the core leader program. According to Newman:

We used to train them to do these one-on-ones with other parents, so it was kind of like a commitment card where we told the parents, "Between this week, like maybe week one and week two, you should be able to have maybe five." So we wasn't putting too much pressure on parents, but at least try five one-on-ones, and then what we used to do is by the end of the week we'd touched base with that parent to see how many one-on- ones they had in recruiting other parents to participate in the core leader program.
Parent leaders learned to take advantage of any occasion during which other parents or family members come to the school building, in order to “canvass” them and recruit them onto the Ladder. As Miller says,

If someone would come to the parent teacher conference or they would come to an event at the school…we also trained parents to canvass at drop off in the elementary schools…always collecting the Count-on-Me…whenever we would collect the Count on Me, that became the universe that we would then…call parents back within 48 hours so we had a very structured, regimented system of following up with people. They would get a call from a member of the outreach team within 48 hours and they would do a one-on-one with them…And there were all these…events that took place throughout the year. So, family night, conferences, adult education, literacy parties, workshops, et cetera, et cetera.

In step 2 on the Ladder, after a parent signs a pledge card at a school-based event, they then receive a phone call inviting them to a Family Engagement Orientation. Here they learn more about the crucial role of strong parent participation and leadership as part of the broader community school strategy, and they are actively encouraged to sign up for next steps. After the orientation, the community school’s Family Outreach Specialist—or a parent who was part of the Core Leader Team—would conduct a one-on-one with the parent to gauge their interest level and capacity for continuing up the Ladder of Engagement. As Miller says,

We trained parents to run the orientation and this is what a community school is and this is how you can get involved and then sign a Count on Me form. Then after the orientation there was always a one-on-one conducted. Ideally they would get a phone call within 48 hours. Then step three, and again it really isn't as black and white as this. There's a lot of heart to organizing, right? I always say it's jazz not classical, but you have to have scaffolding that you apply your work to. Now everybody whose attended the orientation, at the orientation they get invited to a meeting because then there's also a monthly school meeting.

For the step 3 on the ladder, the parent is encouraged to attend a meeting of a formal school decision-making body which could include the Parent Association, the Community School Team, or the School Leadership Team. Here they will connect and begin to form new relationships with other school parents and leaders who are active in the school decision-
making process. After attending a meeting, participants are asked to attend an Emerging Leader Training.

At this point, according to Outreach Specialists, the parent is beginning to “take action and get involved” by actively volunteering with the community school improvement process. Traditional school volunteerism is often directed inward (and upward) to fill school staffing gaps. While parents on the Ladder do take on traditional volunteer tasks such as setting up for or cleaning up after school events and staffing the registration tables, parent volunteers on the Ladder go beyond these conventional roles; they become organizers themselves and conduct intensive outreach activities directed outward into the community to engage other hard-to-reach parents. These parent volunteers-turned-organizers use phone banking, tabling, and clip boarding, in order to contact, engage and recruit other families who may be disconnected from the school, and whose voices should be heard. In other words, volunteers take on leadership responsibility to recruit new parents onto the ladder, mobilize them to take action, and participate in the community school initiative. But how did the FACE team go from forming one-on-one relationships at individual schools to managing and following up with thousands of these parent contacts across over one hundred community schools?

**Phone-banking: Dialing Up Parent Engagement**

Phone banking is a common practice used by political campaigns to reach out to large numbers of voters via telephone to get out the vote for a particular candidate or campaign, an effort often carried out using a call center software such as VAN (Voter Activation Network). Perhaps unexpectedly, community schools also host phone banks and use a VAN database. Yet they have a different aim: to mobilize large numbers of parents and caregivers to get involved in their child’s education, and ultimately in their school’s turnaround process. Notably, this is not part of the traditional “institutional script” for family engagement (Ishimaru, 2014, p.4); schools typically do not have the capacity nor staff to coordinate collective and sustained phone outreach to their families, and often must settle with sending flyers home in students’ backpacks. Whereas, in NYC community schools, the FACE team sets up phonebanks (at the school- and district-level) as an instrumental support structure to increase family outreach capacity for community schools. Family Outreach Specialists assist each community school to: assess its outreach needs and set outreach goals, recruit phone
bankers, coordinate and plan phone banks to reach the targeted number of parents directly, and monitor their progress. Once a pledge card is collected, an FOS or a parent volunteer enters the parent’s contact information into the FACE team’s VAN database, which in turn generates call lists for phone bankers. Volunteers cold call some parents for the first time and others they call to follow up with parents who already signed pledge cards to then invite them to a school-based event (e.g. a PTA meeting, an orientation, a Family Night or a Community School Forum) as their second step on the ladder. Ultimately the goal is to get parents and caregivers to participate more in school activities, and to take on increasingly large leadership roles in the school’s transformation process.

Thus, the Ladders of Engagement promotes a style of phone banking outreach that is both deep and broad. While it is relational, with a personal touch, it also incorporates ambitious goals to reach, recruit, and activate the maximum number of parents possible, an aspect of the program which resembles the character of a political campaign (e.g. GOTV). Miller explains that, after collecting the count-on-me, “We would call parents back within 48 hours so we had a very structured, regimented system of following up with people. They would get a call from a member of the FACE Team within 48 hours and they would do a one-on-one with them.” Miller notes that through the VAN database, Family Outreach Specialists help community schools process and consolidate all the existing family contact information that schools maintain: “We had the school list so that was a really big deal,” Miller said. “We took all the school lists and loaded them into the VAN. We knew everybody who was in every school. That was key to the success.” VAN would automatically group siblings from the same family together so callers weren’t making three different phone calls to the same parent. Robinson explains the advantages of using this voter outreach software for their team’s family engagement work:

[VAN] comes out of voter work, voter outreach. The nice thing is that you can load lists into it and it has a really easy interface for you to phone bank from. You can load a script and all of your details, and it will track that. So you don't have to do any of the paper work. Also, it's really tailored to the ladder of engagement structure that we want to use….So lots of advocacy and electoral organizations use it because it is really built for those purposes…
Outreach Specialists did not simply set volunteers up with call lists and leave them to it. They provided comprehensive training and guidance for phone bankers on how to have direct, personalized, and thus effective, conversations with parents, in order to educate them about upcoming leadership opportunities and maximize turnout for school events and forums. At the central level, the FACE team hosted regular VAN webinar trainings for community school staff and parent leaders. As Robinson describes,

We were regularly running trainings to get parent coordinators and community school coordinators trained on VAN so they could use it and just so they didn't have to use either a Google spreadsheet or some out-of-date system for tracking attendance at events. Then you'd always have a list where you're like, ‘Okay, I need people, I want to move people up into the next ladder.’ Wrong. VAN will give you that list and a way to phone bank.

FACE also developed a *Phone Bank Planning Guide* for community school staff, educators and parent core leaders with templates that help each community school team to: set aspirational yet tangible outreach goals; assess capacity and calculate the number of volunteers needed and the number of calls to be made; and monitor progress. The Guide includes a sample phone bank script as well as a tip sheet on “making an effective ask,” one that is personalized, relational, and is aimed at “removing potential barriers” to participation. That is, phone bankers communicate that the given community school event is accessible to all families by sharing information about accommodations that will be provided at the event such as translation services and food. Bachman discusses the process of training staff (such as the Parent Coordinator, a position that the previous administration mandated for every NYC public school) and parents on how to conduct a high-quality phone bank:

If teachers were willing, if Parent Coordinators were willing, I would sit down with them and we would do a phone bank training. We'd practice with them how to have a conversation with a parent, how to introduce yourself, how to ask just a question of a genuine relationship [such as] how they're doing? how their child's doing? how was your weekend? Just anything to try and build that personal connection. And then whatever the point is, if the point is to invite them into a parent-teacher conference, great. We work with them through how to work that script with them, how to have that conversation. If it is about an academic workshop coming up, great…
Madani elaborates on this process:

So what happens is that I would give the PC, Parent Coordinator, maybe the community school Director, and one or two parents, and sit with them. Each one of us has a list, and we just go through phone number after phone number. We have a script. Even before the meeting, before the session, we write a script, and literally what we are doing is making phone calls, asking if the person is the person we are trying to call, and read off that script. And after two or three phone calls, you don't even need that script. You just build on the momentum.

Rivera emphasizes that the phone script that FACE prepared was a key tool for parent phone bankers:

[T]hey would read from the phone script, and then they would be able to take down what that person's response. They said yes, they said maybe, they say they didn't know, they said they wouldn't be able to come, whatever that was, and we'd be able to process reports from that.

Santiago notes that, when given the opportunity, parents were very receptive and open to learning how to phone bank in order to engage their fellow parents:

We even did conference calls to train them on how to phone bank. We were able to get parents on calls like a group of folks together on a conference call just explain to them what we were going to do, how we were going to do it…and it was an easy sell. Folks wanted to be a part of this work. It was super easy to get them to pull other parents to phone bank with them in their schools.

Cultivating this new culture of direct outreach and phone banking among school staff and parent volunteers contrasted sharply with the “indirect outreach that folks relied on for years,” according to Taylor. “We were trying to get folks real comfortable with that person-to-person conversation over the phone. That for a lot of folks can be uncomfortable, specifically, depending on their role,” he explains. He describes the difficulties that accompany phone banking which new parent leaders had to learn through practice in order to develop this new skill set:

It's hard to get people to do it, because it's hard. If you think about making a phone call, it's easy. But then when you sit and you have ten people to try to
convince to come to this event and the first six say no, you get depleted. So if you're not used to that...you get discouraged, and after six, seven times, you kind of drop the ball. But then, once it becomes part of the process, and you get used to that rejection...And we also help them understand the math, that maybe three out of seven people, I think the math was...four out of ten will answer, and two out of those four will say yes...[I]t was some math that we developed over time with calculations.

Madani notes the complex “outreach math” that the phone banking entails if parent leaders want to recruit a “critical mass of folks” to an event:

We help them with outreach math. How many people they want, or parents they want coming to the event, which will translate to the amount of phone calls they have to do. So if you want, for example, 50 people to come to your event, to the Forum, then you will probably need to make 150 phone calls, or 200 phone calls.

Santiago elaborates on the importance of setting regular concrete targets for phone outreach:

[F]or me personally, what was instrumental, what was successful for me, was when we [would] create goals for events. The purpose and the goal...I could be a number stickler, numbers cruncher. What is our goal? And I'm going to tell you what I got. I can, if I called 100 people, I got 50 people say yes. And then I'm going to push even harder to increase that number, or at least maintain it. For me personally, when we were doing the work it was super instrumental when we were as this outreach team, when we had our weekly meetings to talk about the progress of whether it's for training or for forums. What were our progress at the time, and where were we when it came to numbers. And when it came to people? That was very instrumental for me.

Increasing “language access” is a fundamental principle of FACE’s work, and phone banking was no exception. The FACE team made sure to hire a substantial number of outreach specialists who were multi-lingual. Outreach Specialists who spoke Spanish were able to call and converse with large numbers of Spanish-speaking parents to get them involved in community schools. As Andersen recalls, “We had so much success, especially with Spanish-speaking families, because we had Spanish-speaking staff on our team. And so they came out in droves.” FACE staff, who were racially and ethnically diverse, represented other cultures and languages as well. Madani, for instance, is Yemeni-American and speaks Arabic. This expanded the outreach capacity of FACE, allowing them to reach a large constituency of
Arabic-speaking parents and families who traditionally have been underrepresented in school events and parent governance structures. As Madani explains:

When it came to phone conversations…I'll notice what dialect they're speaking, I'll try to match my dialect with them, or use the standard dialect Arabic if they're from Morocco or from a country that has a different dialect from mine. When it comes to phone conversation, it was easy. Give me all the Arabic-speaking, or the Arabic-looking names, and I'll call all of them. So that's what I used to do when it came to phone banking in schools.

According to Santiago, parents were very receptive to phone banking, and the fact that FACE would also provide parent volunteers with DOE-provided phones at call centers made a difference:

Folks wanted to be a part of this work. It was super easy to get them to pull other parents to phone bank with them in their schools. And just to know that a city agency is…giving me a phone so that I don't use my own phone or the school phone. Because those things were not done before. It's either I use my personal phone and if I had one. Because some people they're going through financial issues, they don't have one. The fact that they were giving something to us was super instrumental.

Rivera emphasizes how the “personalized” character of this phone bank outreach had an impressionable impact on parents:

It was just a very cool system that would help parents help the school and help the CBO do outreach and participate in doing a very personalized outreach, which we feel is the most effective way of doing outreach, because it is giving someone that personal touch, that phone call that lets them know, hey, somebody from the school called me. They want me to come down for an event, and it was a personal invitation. They read my name.

Parent leaders were encouraged to share their personal stories of how they become parent leaders with other parents. As Rivera explains:

When you want parents to come out to these meetings, if you want them to come out for your PTA meetings and there's only three people coming in, learning about outreach is a very key and crucial component of doing that. And how do you do outreach? You're actually going to share a personal story about why you
got involved in parent leadership yourself, and that is a catalyst to build a conversation for finding out what motivates them as individuals to be involved, so that way you can use that as an opportunity to get them more involved and into the fold.

There is one annual school event which really anchors and strengthens all steps on the Ladders of Engagement, and draws parents into collaborative decision-making in the school. This is no typical family night event.

**Community School Forums: Mobilizing Parent and Community Voices**

A “linchpin” of the community school strategy is the annual Community School Forum (CSF). A Community School Forum is a large collaborative planning session hosted by each community school every year that includes all the school’s stakeholders — families, students, teachers, administrators, staff and community partners — in order to share school data with the community and collectively review and plan the goals, priorities, and activities of the school. According to the DOE:

Participants get an update from the administration on the state of the school, review progress made over the last school year in developing and implementing the Community School vision and plan for the school, and hold interactive discussions to help determine Community School priorities and resource allocation for the coming year. Community School Forums are a key component to the Continuous Improvement approach in Community Schools.

Forums ensure a participatory planning and visioning process for community schools; they provide leadership development opportunities for parents who are part of the event planning, outreach, and facilitation process; and they give a meaningful and democratic voice to families in school decision-making. Forums are held every year; they are not just a one-time consultation, as participants will explain below. Jacobs describes how the forums undergird the family empowerment process that is central to the community school approach:

The forum is one of the core family engagement and empowerment practices in community schools. It's where the community comes together, families, students, teachers, staff, they review data from the past school year and they review the impact of programming and services through the community school. And then they create a vision for where they want their school to go in the coming school
year. And there are focus groups and conversations focused on the four core features of the community school. And they generate a summary of feedback and ideas, which then informs the creation of the Comprehensive Education Plan for that school, the CEP. So there's a through line between the collaborative leadership and practice that goes on all year to the forum in the spring to the generation of the CEP for that community school.

CSFs constitute a new type of structure which did not exist previously in traditional public schools and they require months of extensive planning and outreach efforts. Outreach Specialists play an integral role by supporting a school’s Forum Planning Committee which consists of key stakeholders, often including members of the Community School Team or School Leadership Team, the Parent Coordinator, teachers, and a team of parent and caregiver leaders. Forums are “arguably the most important responsibility every year” for Outreach Specialists according to Bachman. Outreach Specialists work with the school’s planning team months in advance of the forum to plan community outreach and phone banking, develop a forum agenda, and prepare logistics related to materials, food, and translation. Bachman describes this critical function:

[T]he forums were…. arguably our biggest… most important responsibility every year. We oversaw and co-organized the entire process in collaboration with community school directors and their team…[W]e would 100% be on the ground for forum planning meetings throughout the spring, late winter, early spring, and then through the forums happening, and then even for the forum debrief sessions…and a lot of what I did for the forum planning process…is just like event planning, event organizing in a way that is collaborative, that is relational, that is empowering for parents. And what a lot of that ends up being, is nuts and bolts. So what time is the event happening? Is that a time that most of your parents can come to? Will there be childcare? Will there be food?

A broad swath of stakeholders would often be brought into the forum planning process from across the school community. As Newman describes, “You have all the stakeholders, which would be your principal, your parents, your community partners, right? Staff, that could include the custodian, the school safety agent, students.” Outreach specialists ensure that forums are planned in a way and scheduled at a time that is “accessible for everyone.” That means paying special attention to the culture and customs of different racial and ethnic groups of families. As Rivera explains:
Where I think through practice, people were able to understand and see what were the issues coming up, like, why would you hold a community school forum in the middle of Ramadan and invite your Muslim-practicing families to this event, and then you know that it's Ramadan, you're having it at four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. It's still daylight in the middle of May, and you're offering them food, and the food isn't halal…Making sure that we are planning with those parents to make sure that we are doing it at a time that is accessible for everyone, that the food is culturally responsive to the community that it's serving, or different details that to some may seem insignificant or inconsequential, but if you're trying to build community with the community, then you need to meet them where they're at. And if you're serving them a ham sandwich, then that makes no sense. They're not going to eat it, and they're also fasting. So those are just some of those cultural pieces that in every iteration of the forum, we've tried to address.

*Parents learn through forum organizing*

Community School Forum organizing is an integral component of the parent leadership development process in each school. This collaborative planning process provides multiple leadership and organizing roles for parents; on its own, the planning operation serves as a mechanism to strengthen school-community ties. Parents on the Ladder at each school take a leadership role in forum planning, in conducting forum outreach and phone banking to other families at the school, and in planning the forum agenda, priorities and logistics. Ultimately they often take on speaking or facilitating roles at the forum itself, including leading the breakout groups. Thus, annual forum planning is a key programmatic structure that develops and solidifies each school’s cadre of core parent leaders. As Santiago explains,

> A lot of the [parent] leaders that we work with, also then supported the forums. So organizing, being a part of their community school teams and a part of those forum planning conversations. Supporting with outreach...making sure that the school is a welcoming space when parents were coming in, or/and that they were at the table during sign-in sheets, or the count-on-me’s. Parent leaders were instrumental throughout the planning for the implementation [of the forums].

Parent volunteers at each community school used the phone banking strategy described above, sometimes throwing what they called “phone bank parties,” to attract other parent volunteers to join the forum outreach process, give them their own VAN log-in information, and then call hard-to-reach families and strongly motivate them to voice their ideas at the Forum. The Core
Leader Trainings at Tweed (described in the last chapter) also include mock forum exercises to train parent leaders in the important planning, outreach and facilitation skills required to successfully carry out a Community School Forum. As Andersen recalls:

You have to imagine us in Tweed, we actually set up all the stations for the forum. We knew there were various buckets that they had to speak on, because that was part of the community school model. And so we would set it up in Tweed, where we would have the stations, and so then the principals would come with their team and with parents, and then we would sit with them, and we'd rotate around to each one to know what the conversation needed to be, what the roles were, and how to do it. And I think one of the ones that really was always impactful was the outreach, figuring out the number.

Santiago points out that a lot of the parents who participated in the core leader trainings at the district-level at Tweed, then took those skills back to their schools, and took on leadership roles in planning their Community School Forums, ensuring their success:

A lot of the leaders that we work with, also then supported the forums. So [that meant] organizing, being a part of their community school teams and being a part of those conversations that were planning their forum. Supporting with outreach…making sure that the school was a welcoming space when parents were coming in, or/and that they were at the table during assignment sheets, or the count-on-me’s. Parent leaders were instrumental throughout the planning for the implementation [of the forum.]

She elaborates:

It was like a “revolving system”…these parent leaders who I’ve cultivated a relationship with, who are going through the core leader trainings, we were preparing them for their Community School Forums. We were also training them and teaching them on how to incorporate themselves into that process. And understanding what is outreach? And how does outreach connect to the forum, or support the forum. Explaining the correlation. And then helping them…understand their value as parent leaders, and why they're important, and they should be at the table. All of that played a factor.

Rivera concurs:

[T]here would be parents that they wouldn't just be a part of the planning process, they would also help do the outreach for the day, leading up to the actual forum
day, and then they would also help facilitate or co-facilitate those conversations in those breakout rooms.

**Popular tools for collaboration**

The FACE team developed a comprehensive *Community School Forum Toolkit* that could be used by schools across districts, which included: sample planning meeting agendas, forum agenda templates, and other “popular education tools” to guide community school staff through how to design interactive, attractive, relational, and community-driven forums that would actively engage families (many of whom had never previously been asked for input into school decision-making) in thoughtfully-facilitated small-group discussions, and directly solicit their ideas around key elements of the community school transformation process. FACE encourages schools to develop forums that “incorporate transformative family engagement strategies.” They do this by encouraging the planning team to study Dr. Karen Mapp’s 5 Process Conditions in order to create activities “that are interactive, collaborative, linked to learning, developmental, and relational.” Forums are formatted to give each community school stakeholder – school staff, parents, students, community partners – “active, visible roles in the forum itself” to ensure that the event is representative of all school partners and models collaborative decision-making as part of the school improvement process. For example, the principal’s role is to give a “state of the school” presentation, and parent leaders often serve as facilitators for collaborative small-group discussions to evaluate school priorities.

**Participatory planning process**

Forums often begin with a relational ice-breaker to energize participants. Then either the principal, Community School Director, or a parent facilitates a short activity called “*What is a Community School?*” in which attendees pair up to discuss what they do and do not understand about the community school model and what they want to know about it. The facilitator then answers or clarifies any key questions that arise. The principal than gives a “State of the School” presentation that includes an overview of the school’s accomplishments, key data on school performance and attendance, as well as goals for the coming year. Taylor explains the importance of this step:
The first thing is that the principal does a state of the school address like where's the school at? What are key issues? What are the successes? You're essentially being transparent with everybody there where the school is. Because if families don't understand where the school is, then they can't help you, they can't partner with the school to correct some of those things. They would go over test scores, reading, math, all of those kinds of things, and also school environment stuff and attendance.

Next, and perhaps most importantly, attendees break out into small group discussions, each of which is facilitated by either a parent leader, a new parent, or a school staff member. In these “collaborative discussions,” each group focuses on one topic or “core evidence-based feature” of the community school which include: attendance, school culture / environment, instruction and curriculum, health and wellness, and family empowerment. Each group participates in several progressive rounds of discussion moving from topic to topic. Each small group has chart paper and assigns a note taker to collect participants’ ideas. Facilitators kick off the conversation by sharing some of the school’s performance data on the issue of focus (e.g. attendance rate) and then use discussion questions to prompt thoughtful dialogue and gather feedback on existing community school programs and services, identify priority needs going into the coming year, as well as strategies on how to best address those needs. Facilitators use a broad range of prompts to guide discussion in different topic areas. Sample questions from FACE’s collaborative discussion guide include: What are the ways you feel your child is being supported in school? What challenges do you have to overcome to get your child to school every day / on time? What could the school, and parent community, do to ease these challenges? Are there important topics that would make your child feel more connected to the curriculum? What programs and services have you and/or your child been able to take advantage of? What are the best ways to communicate and engage families to build a strong partnership? What community organizations or community leaders could we partner with to support our school in this area? As Taylor says:

You're looking back at the year and doing an evaluation, but you're also planning it. You're also asking the families …’How do we work on attendance? Our attendance rate is 80%, what should our goal be for next year and how do we achieve that goal? What are some things that prevented us from getting to that goal for this year?’
Newman describes the breadth of issues that parents discuss in forums:

Parents want to know more about the academics, how it impacts their child and if it can be changed. After-school programs, what [were] additional after-school programs that parents wanted to see, because it was Community Schools and they had the funding. Health and mental health's a conversation, that we don't really talk about in the black communities and it was a conversation, it doesn't always mean you're going to a psychologist or a psychiatrist, but more in the lines of making sure that you're mentally healthy to help support your kids at home, right?

Santiago gives an example of the types of concerns that parents have voiced:

Parents were talking about how to make their school building more welcoming, and how to make information more accessible. ‘Because I speak a different language. And when I come here, I don't understand the writing on the wall, or no one in the office can support me because [they] don't speak my language, and it's just not welcoming.’ Those were things that were changed in many schools, I think. Especially with interpretation and translation. People started understanding, ‘Oh, we have to talk to parents in their language, not in our language’ or/and ‘we have to stop abbreviating’ or/and ‘we have to stop talking in and using DOE lingo. We have to explain things and share things.’

Taylor highlights how new connections and bonds are made between parents in forum small group discussions and describes an instance of creative problem solving that arose from one discussion:

In a lot of those conversations, it's having parents identify what they believe the problems are, and work through that…One parent may say, ‘Look, I have a few kids. I take my youngest kid to school first. Then my other kid is late to school because the timing doesn't work.’ So then in that conversation, you would have parents say, ‘Well, I'm in your building. I live in your building. I can walk your kid while you walk the other kid.’ …In those different conversations, parents are working with each other to create solutions, but they are also supporting the schools to identify what those issues were. Again, using their expertise to support the schools to remedy some of those key issues.

Santiago describes the lively, interactive atmosphere of a forum:
You bring people together, and you talk about the school and the things that are happening and the things that need to occur. And you collect feedback, where does that go? What happens to that? And it's like there's so much energy and momentum built around the forum, pre and post. Let's continue to work. Let's put it to work. Parents are talking about what they need, students need, principals, school administrators need, teachers need. The idea was that they would then take all of this information whether in their community school team.

Because the community school model entails an influx of new social and educational services provided for families, forums are an opportunity for school leaders to raise awareness of these wrap-around supports, solicit feedback from parents about their impacts, while aiming to build a “partnership” that goes beyond service provision. According to Robinson:

What we wanted to make sure is that those services were informed by families and that they were aware of them. So at a community school forum, if a school had a food pantry or if they had dental screenings, those kinds of things could be topics of conversation and also areas where families could say, "Well, it would be really great if we did this or that." And we often found that families had some sense of what the community school was, but... they could certainly use more information about what services it provided and what potential it had. So that was part of that forum, thinking about how the school could be responsive and connected and not just like service provision, but a partnership.

**Collecting feedback**

Andersen emphasizes that the process of collecting parent feedback itself is instructive and an opportunity for skill development for school staff: “…it was having those conversations and helping staff to know how to have those conversations with students and with parents. And actually watching them engage in the feedback and chatting. We set it all up and show them how to do it. Taylor provides a story which illustrates the value of bringing everyday members of the surrounding community – who typically may not be viewed as having meaningful insights into school affairs – into the community school’s participatory planning process:

They had a Bodega owner at the table, so they talked about attendance. The Bodega owner’s like what time does school open? They told him what time, and he’s like, "Well, I have a lot of people at my store trying to get sandwiches at a certain time." Bacon, egg, and cheese, which you know is popular in New York. The owner said, "Look, I'm a very popular store, I can stop selling bacon, egg,
and cheese sandwiches to students at a certain time hoping that they’re not staying in my store too long, or increase the number of people making bacon, egg, and cheese so kids are getting to school on time”…Instantly, you may say, or an institution may say, "Why do I need to have the Bodega owner as part of this conversation? What is their expertise?” That person, from day one, has already brought you something that shifted an issue that you have in your school.

Towards the end of the breakout discussions each group selects their top priority or conclusion to share back with the larger group. There is then a report back for each group to share out their top priority issues, solutions, or takeaways, which they have also written on their chart paper on the wall for all to see. Attendees then engage in “dot-mocracy,” an activity in which everyone is given sticky dots and they go around the room placing their dots (voting) on what they believe are the most important priorities. As Miller explains:

Then we had these big banners that had questions on them for the categories that we were asking people to participate in designing what their community school looked like. There was school safety, mental health, adult education and each school kind of had their own design supported by the organizing staff but we would have small circle meetings that were all facilitated by parents where they would brainstorm and write on butcher paper and then we made these big banners and they would put their notes up on the banners and then we would do “dot-mocracy” where people would then put dots on the things that were their favorite. Using these popular education tools, we would then take that information and that was what turned into the community school plan for each school. How they engaged with people to make the determinations about what they wanted to do in the school and also they would measure the effectiveness of those programs.

At the end, the forum host / MC highlights which ideas were identified as the most important. Lastly, forum organizers facilitate a “community visioning exercise,” where they return to small groups and are asked “to create a collaborative drawing that symbolizes the goals and visions they have for their school.” Participants are then asked to look for themes and commonalities across the different group murals. As the forum wraps up, school leaders ask the parents to take action, sign a count-on-me card, and make a commitment to continue participating as active leaders in the school’s plan and vision. Parents are informed about how they can get involved in subsequent events and school decision-making bodies such as the next CST or PTA meeting.
"Opening the floodgates of criticism"

Forums do not proceed free of resistance however. Participants remarked that some principals and school staff are concerned about having to share school data and have transparent conversations with families about the state of their schools—many of which had been selected to be part of the program precisely because they had previously been performing poorly. As Robinson explains:

… a lot of them were very nervous about sharing that state of the school information, because they were worried they would lose students, that it might look bad for them…we had some schools that were like, "I can't tell them that. I can't give them that data." We had renewal schools in the Community Schools Initiative. They were renewal school and a community school, and they had some difficult data... They had some things to prove and I was like, "You have to inform your families of those benchmarks and the requirements and what you're working to do, and then ask them to be a part of it."

Reynolds notes that some principals were nervous about “opening the floodgates to criticism,” which they believed might jeopardize their job or cause tension in the school community:

The one thing that they were terrified of happening was a parent just criticizing safety event issues that happened in the school because they're worried about getting on the Dangerous Schools list. Persistently Dangerous Schools list is not something you want to be on from the state. So, they're worried about things getting escalated to the superintendent.

However, when Outreach Specialists encouraged principals to stick with the process and overcome their doubts and uncertainty, most of them found the forum process extremely rewarding and were grateful to have gone through with it: “I even had principals thank me for staying on them to do it, even though they didn't want to do it or they were scared to do it,” Reynolds said. He tells a story of one community school staff which had been experiencing significant turmoil:

One was actually in East Harlem, an elementary school that had just merged. They'd just absorbed another school, and the principal was just overwhelmed with an insurrection from the new staff. They did not want to be merged into working for him and working with the teachers at their new school. He said his first year was just a nightmare, but then he made all of his staff attend the forum.
Two teachers at a big table with a community partner because they had a lot of community partnerships. So, they had maybe a dozen, 15 tables, and then the rest were parents and some students too. He gave the teachers a script of what the topic was for the table, and the questions to ask, and have a conversation. I did some training for the staff in conjunction with the community school director and the parent coordinator beforehand….And then I got the principal to do a little data presentation, and I told him how to approach how he welcomed people and explained what the process was. It was just wonderful. Just seeing the staff just come alive. Even though they were dragging their feet and didn't want to participate in the prep work or the trainings, they had a blast. … But the principal heard things were getting heated at one of the tables about the safety issue. It was like an exit that shouldn't have been open was opened… this is a neighborhood that has some gang violence on the streets, and students are bullied and there have been homicides on the sidewalks not too far from the school….But the principal was able to go over there and address the anger and fear the parent had, and turn the conversation over to the whole table. People talked, "Well, how can we learn from this, and how can we change things for next year?" And then he said at the end of it, "I heard some great ideas. Next year I'm going to present to you how we took your ideas and put them into action and how they went." And he did that, and it was just a great... It's so rewarding just seeing that growth happen in the span of a couple of years.

According to Robinson, once a school actually experienced the forum process, it was a transformative moment in shifting the school’s culture: “often what I found is that once we could show some success or evidence, like once a school held a community school forum and saw families come and ask questions or give interesting feedback, or want to help, it's like a light bulb went off.”

**Evaluation: incorporating parents’ ideas into the school plan**

After the forum, the planning process is not over. At this point the Forum Planning Team then holds an evaluation meeting to discuss the ideas collected during the forum and how to integrate those recommendations into the school’s Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP), which is due at the end of the school year. Often in schools, Reynolds says,

…principals generally write the CEP single-handedly, even though it’s supposed to be a collaborative effort with the School Leadership Team… every school leadership member has to sign this Comprehensive Education Plan. But I've just
found through my experience that most parents just didn't even know what they were signing. They were just like, ‘Here sign this.’ ‘Okay.’

In the debrief meetings the forum planning team goes through and reviews all ideas that were generated at the forum, written on butcher paper, identifying the top priorities and needs that had the most votes and uses that information to identify the key areas which the school needed to work on for the following year. As Santiago explains:

And then they would embed this information that came out...pulled out ideas and the things that came from the forums and the conversations, build them out, and then implement them in their CEP plan so that next school year, this is something that we're working on. And we're hearing you. The point is that you're hearing them, but then you're also putting things into practice.

Bachman emphasizes that it’s important for Outreach Specialists to ensure that parents are part of the debrief meeting:

I really tried my best to make sure parents were part of the debrief as well, because that's kind of where the power, that's where the decisions start to get made, it’s about programming priorities. You can hear from parents in the forum, but it's what happens with that feedback and the ideas and parent opinions that get expressed, it's what happens with them, is what actually matters.

**Embedding a new structure for collaborative decision-making**

Robinson emphasizes that the forum was to be “embedded into the collaborative planning process that a school goes through.” Since schools are already required to have other structures and decision-making bodies, “we were trying to tie them together. It was a capacity-builder and a way to build buy-in for the school’s vision and goals.” Bachman explains that it is not of minor significance that the DOE mandates these annual spaces for structured dialogue between school staff and families, a structure which, by nature of its existence, increases both transparency and parent voice in school governance:

… the fact that there was the forum built and baked into the community school initiative in New York, is huge. Because even if you have terrible relations…even if you have school staff and principals that dislike parents, that think poorly of them, they don't want them in the building, maybe are afraid of them… the
forums were tremendously valuable because no matter if they wanted to or not, they had to do them. The DOE was watching to make sure they were happening. And it was a real opportunity for parents to speak truth to power and to have their voices heard and to hopefully actually get some shit done, to get some shit that they thought they needed....And again, just by nature of the forums existing and us going real hard with parents and Community School Directors to get people out to them, that's a thing. So that is no doubt a victory of community schools and a systemic change that's taking place, and that continues to happen.

Participants recall that community school staff really appreciated the on-the-ground support from central staff (Family Outreach Specialists) during the forum process, support which in the past they did not receive from the central administration. As Andersen says,

...I think that that this level of support, and one-on-one was what really... was very impactful for schools. Because they're so used to Central saying things and then that's it. While here we were showing up. We got you. Okay, let's set up, what do we need to do?

Santiago elaborates on this point,

...And they actually appreciated that from us. They appreciated that it wasn't someone just coming into their building just to observe. That it was there are folks that are coming. And folks that are calling other folks that belong to our building, belong to our community that are going to support us on this day. So they, principals and their teams and teachers who participated, the SLT teams, the community school team as well, they appreciated those things. Because I remember being told, "You guys, don't just come see and observe and then leave. You guys come set up, participate, breakdown." The schools appreciated us for that.

**Impacts of the Ladder on Parent Participation and Leadership**

I found that the FACE staff perceived the family organizing methods described above to be largely successful in helping parents develop meaningful new relationships (both with staff and other parents) and increased their active participation in schools and on school decision-making bodies. This process resulted in pathways to employment for quite a few parent leaders who were hired as Parent Coordinators or Community School Directors. Others leveraged their new knowledge and skills to join elected parent leadership bodies, develop
relationships with elected officials in city government, and in some cases, run for public office themselves. Some parent leaders were propelled to take collective action – in one case, stopping school closures in their community – to protect and enhance their children’s education.

**Parents Take Leadership in Community Schools**

Participants provide evidence that substantial numbers of parents are participating in the initiative, taking on leadership roles, and joining PTAs and other school governing bodies. As Robinson posits:

> In the first year that I was there, we did really see a growth in the numbers of people involved and I think, it was somewhere between the range of like 11,000 and 14,000 parents that we had on the ladder in the VAN [Voter Activation Network] system. Which was exciting and just knowing that that was being used and we were really trying to drive schools towards that approach was exciting.

For Bachman, the main success was developing parent core leader teams at community schools, parents who would then take on leadership roles in their PTAs, and go on to train other parent leaders:

> The successes I would measure would largely be in terms of…helping to develop small groups of strong parent leaders to be parent leaders, to then work themselves as PTA leadership…to engage other parents and increase the value of their average PTA meeting, or the community school team meeting. Or neither, and a parent that just knows everybody and is so warm and open and just so connected to other parents. And usually... If there's a parent like that…That's me recognizing that in them and then just supporting them to develop that part of themselves.

He emphasized that the core groups of parent leaders and the Parent Teacher Associations were “stronger as a result of [FACE’s] work.” He recruited both new parent leaders into the PTAs and worked with “pre-existing parent leaders to recruit other parents to come in.” Through the process, parents became better facilitators, public speakers, and strengthened their outreach skills:
So it was a combination of those parents and pre-existing parent leaders. But by the time, through our work together, they were better facilitators. They facilitated at the Community School Forums. So they probably did feel a bit more comfortable speaking publicly. But they also became accustomed to doing some phone banking, to calling just for their PTA meetings, for that being at least part of their toolkit as a PTA leader, was to get on the phone and call parents to invite them to come out.

Some parents who went through the Ladders of Engagement leadership pipeline went on to join district- or citywide-level parent governance bodies, such as Community Education Councils (CECs). Taylor perceives it as parents having broadened their perspective of their own agency, what they were capable of, through the leadership training process embodied in the Ladder: “It wasn't that ‘I can't do that’ because, it was like if they wanted to do it, they could do it, and they realized that from those trainings.” He gives an example: “The first monolingual Spanish-speaking President of a Community Education Council in the Bronx…was a parent that came up through [the Ladder program]. She was an emerging leader, she was a core leader, she did phone banking, she was in other trainings, and is now a President of a CEC.”

**New Relationships & Social Capital**

Bachman believes that one of the most significant transformations that have occurred through the program are the many new, meaningful relationships that were formed *between parents* which didn’t previously exist, impacts which he notes are very difficult to measure or quantify:

What you would see and what would largely go unregistered or undocumented, would be the quality of that PTA meeting that was taking place monthly now, or would be the number of sincere bonds and relationships that exist between parents in the building that didn't exist previously. And those are relationships that can potentially have long-term effects on a community, a family, a student. But again, it's much harder to measure. And some of them I'll never know about as an organizer, or will never even know about as a team.

Bachman emphasizes that parents became more empowered as individuals through these peer relationships:
I know for a fact that our work improves the lives of a good amount of individual parents. I know that for sure, because they became more empowered human beings, because they became more involved in their school and had more power. By nature of being more active and coming to meetings, they had some more power and then they also probably were more connected to some people, other parents, or school staff. So their lives individually improved.

Taylor describes how, through the Community School Forums, parents who may have lived in the same building but never interacted with each other are now forming relationships through their children’s community school, social bonds which are mutually beneficial:

This [school] is a place I want to be. Those [forums]…start the motor on that relationship. Because, again, that brought folks into a space that allowed people to see each other in their light… in their expertise, and [allowed] that support to build. It also builds relationships with parents that lived in the same building, but didn't know each other’s circumstances. A parent that didn't know your kid was late because you took another kid to a different school. Now we're working together to make sure that both of those kids succeed…Again, that does something on a community level as well in building those relationships.

**Pathways to Employment**

One particularly tangible outcome of the Ladders of Engagement is that it served as a pathway to employment for many (often low-income or unemployed) parents who developed new skills through the core leadership opportunities, and went on to land jobs in their community school or community-based organization: “We saw a lot of parents get hired either by the CBO, one of the CBOs in the building, or into an existing community associate or community coordinator or family worker title that the school may have,” Reynolds says. “We had a large number of parent leaders that became parent coordinators,” Newman says. “And in great scenarios,” Bachman mentions, “[parents were hired] as Community School Directors. That happened and their lives were improved.” For a couple of years the Office of Community Schools worked with FACE to create an AmeriCorps program specifically for parents from the community rather than the traditional program for young college graduates. “I remember one school I went into in Flatbush, the PTA president was really active in the school and really positive, but she was looking for a job. And I told her about [AmeriCorps], and she said, yeah, I want to apply to this,” Reynolds recalls.
Part of the AmeriCorps program is [parents] could not be AmeriCorps members in their school where their children were to avoid any sort of conflict of interest or whatever. And then the principal said, "You are not going to steal away my PTA president." And I said, "Well, it's up to her." And she goes, "Well, I'm going to give her a job." We have this title that's been vacant for a family worker, which is a community associate under a DC37 title, and she gave her the job. She still works in the school to this day.

Newman recalls a parent in District 23 who “was not engaged at all” at first, but who gained confidence through Newman’s encouragement and mentorship and went on to land a position at the school.

I wound up speaking to her, talking to her one-on-one, just building off each other, my experience, her experience, and then she started coming to the trainings. And then building her skills…But as she built her skills, she was like, "You know what, I'm going to go for it," and then she went and she became a school safety agent. And some [became] parent coordinators, some are community school directors. So it was a lot of growth from that core leader program.

At one community elementary school that Newman liaised with as an FOS, she suggested the school host a job fair for parents because, “the most difficult thing [for parents at that school] was finding a job.”

I had suggested that they do a job fair…where they ask different companies to come out, they set up a table and they could do onsite interviews or take applications or those who register early can do an interview on a site…[some schools] have a space in the building where they have Workforce One come once or twice a week, [because] that's what some communities needed.

Path to Broader Civic Engagement
Participants suggest that FACE’s family empowerment program has increased civic engagement among parents and has the potential to mobilize and broaden a constituency around public schools, as Miller noted in Chapter 4. In some cases, opportunities beyond the education system were opened up for parent leaders who had obtained new leadership and civic skills through the Ladders of Engagement. For example, by teaching parent volunteers to use
the Voter Activation Network, FACE helped them develop valuable and marketable political skills: “the use of VAN helped land those parents a job with the constituent office of some elected [official] because they knew how to use VAN,” Rivera points out. Furthermore, Newman says that “some went and ran for City Council, and before they didn’t have the [confidence]…I think it was within them.” Reynolds says that parent leaders built new relationships with public officials and leveraged these relationships to bring more resources to their community schools: “They were just so eager to develop their own capacity as leaders. They built connections with the City Council and other elected leaders in the area and just tried to bring in as many resources into the school for the students as they could.” Bachman believes that the family empowerment work in community schools has increased “parent engagement and school staff engagement with local government, or with their elected officials, lobbying their council member to get funding for the school or doing that through the participatory budgeting process. So I tangentially supported some of that work…” He draws parallels between the parent leadership development process and the City’s Participatory Budgeting (PB) initiative, in which community members develop their own project proposals and then vote on how public money will be spent in their communities.

When I think about PB in comparison to community schools, there are absolutely parallels. And I think that we’re talking about the same communities. We’re talking about low-income communities of color in New York City and they’re under-resourced. So even if it's the $1- to $2-million in PB or a $60,000 project in a playground, that’s really significant for that community. And the same goes for community schools. I mean, sure, the initiative overall was pretty well resourced by the DOE, which is good. But in these communities, they’re historically oppressed on multiple levels. Of course they need a lot of resources.

*Empowered Parents Fight School Closures*

Robinson tells a story that illustrates both parent growth as civic leaders but also the FACE team’s authentic commitment to empowering marginalized families of color and showing solidarity with these communities, even if it puts them at odds with the larger Administration. Although school closures were uncommon under the De Blasio administration, in 2018, there was a list of schools slated for closure, including several community schools in Far Rockaway, a working-class community of color on the outskirts of Queens. So the FACE team utilized its organizing skills and phone bank infrastructure, mobilizing a “huge phone bank of 80 DOE
staff...to call the families of all those schools slated for those proposals to inform them about it, to inform them about the community, meaning their school. So we either left messages or we spoke to people. That was great because... otherwise, this goes out in a backpack letter or impersonal outreach.” FACE had parent core leaders with whom they had worked closely in those community schools slated for closure. The FACE team worked with parent leaders to educate families about the DOE’s public process for school closure so that families could participate, challenge, and speak out against the decision:

The DOE was going to close the school. There's an entire process for this. The proposal is posted. There is a review and a period for public comment, and then there's a vote at the PEP [Panel for Education Policy]. First, we did the phone banking and we wanted to make sure that folks were aware and could go to the local community meeting to hear about it and express their two cents...Some of these schools were community schools and particularly the ones in the Rockaways, the community really responded to because of the history of the storm and the nature of the Rockaways. People were just like, "You cannot close these schools on us. We need this, we actually need the support." We had some core leaders in those schools. So what we did is we held a little mini meeting of those folks and briefed them on the process. Like from proposal to PEP vote, what is that process? What's the timeline? Where are the moments that the community can be engaged? And literally answered their questions, walked them through it, gave them here's the email address, if you want to send in public comment.

Here, the FACE team appears to serve as an internal, built-in accountability force within the DOE, one that can hold the agency accountable to the marginalized communities it claims to serve, a role that is usually played by advocacy groups outside of the administration. Indeed, in this case, FACE acted as a counterweight to those agency voices advocating for school closures, voices that are more removed from and often at odds with communities of color. As Robinson says,

These were folks who, in the community, were really angry at the DOE, but we could sit in a room with them. [We were part of ] the same agency that was proposing these closures [but we could] say, "Here's the process. Here's how you can be involved." I couldn't, as a staff person, tell them the proposal will be changed or your school won't close, but I can tell you how you can be involved in the process...They were thankful for that and it was a lesson for us and the
outreach team on how we can provide this information without us worrying about stepping into something that's really murky. Ultimately, those schools did not get closed. I can't claim any credit for that, but I think it's just an example of the ways in which you can communicate and share the information and be a partner with communities, even when your roles are a little different.

Unlike typical city bureaucrats, as a FACE leader, Robinson saw herself as an “advocate,” who was part of a team that had the know-how to organize parents against this injustice and “move the needle” within the agency:

It's not something...that an office on a large scale was going [to do], to hold a meeting on like here's the A190 process and how school proposals get built. All that stuff on the website. It's there. I was an advocate and so was the team in meetings of saying like, "We need to share the information. So how are we doing that?" So we were working with, and it's why we were able to do the phone bank. The deal was, we knew that we had the technology and the know-how to actually do that phone bank. So they asked us to do it and we organized it. That wouldn't have happened without us being there. So those were the kinds of ways that we were moving the needle even if the agency wasn't ready to do a training for the general public about some of those inner workings of the DOE.

Ahmed believes that in the beginning, before the community schools and family empowerment initiative, many of the CBO staff were “afraid to engage. They weren’t used to advocacy. They thought it was too political. They wouldn’t want to rock the boat.” However she notes that through the initiative, “we’ve been able to push some of them to engage their parents in schools more effectively in the push for what they want to see.” Now in the Coalition for Community School Excellence—an alliance of partner organizations and neighborhood leaders formed to ensure the success of the community schools—Ahmed says, “there’s a really beautiful space...a strong base of probably 30 or so folks who are all in on advocacy, who have been doing a lot to try to save the community schools [that are impacted by proposed budget cuts].” Newman notes:

Because a lot of times, Community Schools have money that's funded to them, but sometimes principals, the school staff can't write grants or ask their councilman for funding, so by building those parents up in those schools and providing them with trainings on grant writing and stuff like that, they can do the work. The same as a Community School [does], by providing certain
resources to their community, by doing a lot of grant writing and outreach to their community councilman or their community partners to help in their schools. So the model was, it's kind of like a break-off of Community Schools, without the resources really.

The effort to successfully fight the school closures lends some modest evidence that the Ladder of Engagement initiative may indeed contribute toward building organizing capacity and power in low-income communities of color, a stated goal of FACE leaders. As noted in Chapter 4, Miller had expressed an explicit vision to organize and build power in low-income communities, one which extended beyond engaging families in schools: “… we were really trying to do something that was also building people power. We always had this dual mindset of what we were doing.” She envisioned the FACE team’s Ladder of Engagement initiative as a vehicle to build a broader movement in support of public education as “a counter to the privatization movement and the charter school movement,” which had dominated the city’s education policy for the previous decade. This new movement would include not just educators but families and communities, one that could transform the broader school system. As she elaborates:

Our goal was also to be a counter to the privatization movement and the charter school movement. But we knew that we had to really invest in the whole community. It was really sort of turning public education and the way that it had been run on its head and it turned into we were trying to build a grassroots movement from administrators and teachers, people inside the building, but also that included the communities surrounding those, each school, and then the parents and the families that were participating in each school. So that there were sort of those three prongs of supporting building in a movement around public education and engaging all of those various stakeholders. Not just inside the building… to build power to support public schools in general and public school funding and public education. That was sort of the vision. Then I imagined that we could, you’ll see here, we would have 20,000 new parents regularly engaged and we would be able to turn out tens of thousands of people to events.

Conclusion

In this chapter we examined how the FACE team's Family Outreach Specialists implemented community and political organizing strategies to increase active parent participation and leadership in community schools across the city. Through their Ladders of
Engagement program, Outreach Specialists—many of whom came out of the community organizing world—went into community schools and collaborated with school leaders to support them in developing new, robust family engagement plans to build out parent leadership pipelines at each school. They engaged in one-on-one conversations in order to build face-to-face relationships with parents in schools and surrounding neighborhoods. They recruited parents onto the Ladders of Engagement-by having them sign count-on-me cards pledging to attend a school-based event or leadership training. As is commonly practiced in political campaigns, the FACE team organized phone banks to call and have personal conversations with thousands of hard-to-reach families across the city, and encouraged them to attend community school events, forums and trainings. Phone bank outreach was tracked in a Voter Activation Network (VAN) computer system. Outreach Specialists helped organize a new collaborative planning process at each school through annual Community School Forums. Forums brought together entire school communities in a way that had not been done before: school-neighborhood assemblies of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other community members assembled in community school gymnasias and cafeterias—reinforcing these spaces as neighborhood hubs—to collectively discuss key issues, priorities and challenges for the school community. These forums fostered a new collaborative culture and participatory atmosphere at the community school as a place that welcomed families and actively sought out and valued their ideas and input into the community school vision. These methods were largely successful in promoting parent participation and leadership in the schools, according to the FACE organizers I interviewed. The Ladders grassroots outreach methods built the social capital of parents, who developed deep relationships with one another and school staff. In some cases, this process led to employment in the school system; in others, parents ran for elected school governance positions; and in yet others, it led to broader civic engagement and collective action to advocate for schools.
This chapter examines the dynamics and challenges of implementing the NYC community school model, with its embedded Ladders of Engagement program. First, I describe the pre-existing school governance and parent engagement structures that Family Outreach Specialists encountered in NYC schools, including the Parent Coordinators, Parent Teacher Associations, and School Leadership Teams. Then I describe four new family engagement structures of the Community Schools, including: establishing a formal partnership with a Community-Based Organization, hiring a Community School Director, creating a Community School Team, and organizing an annual Community School Forum. My study found that by implementing the four new structures, the community school strategy augmented and enhanced the family engagement capacity of schools in concrete ways. At the same time, the implementation presented some very real challenges.

I describe and analyze the range of buy-in from school staff to the new model and its approach to family empowerment. Family Outreach Specialists faced the situation that they had to contend with the extant parent structures and sets of power relations at each school. In some schools, these new structures and staff roles complemented the existing ones. In other schools, Outreach Specialists met significant resistance from pre-existing staff or PTA members—whether due to their other competing priorities, perceptions of a turf war, or outright refusal to share leadership roles with parents—dynamics which Community School Teams and FOS’s had to navigate. I found that, unsurprisingly, conditions were best when the local community school staff had an open mindset and desire to take advantage of the extra support provided by FACE – that is, when school staff and PTAs want to work with FACE on the Ladders of Engagement to strengthen their existing PTA, SLT and parent infrastructure, and to build out the new structures and approaches. In cases where there was resistance, Family Outreach Specialists had to be adept at assessing and navigating around barriers, sometimes even creating parallel structures. In numerous instances, the Outreach Specialists were able to overcome these obstacles by training community school staff on transformative engagement approaches in ways that led to a “paradigm shift” in how they related to parents.
Lastly, I examine some of the perceived challenges of scaling up and sustaining the community organizing approach to parent engagement. The rapid expansion of the number of community schools led to a sharply increased caseload for each member of the FACE team and some perceived that the hands-on nature of their relationship to each community school began to dissipate. Some feared that this compromised the grassroots nature of the endeavor. Furthermore, in 2018 a restructuring of the DOE resulted in the decoupling of the FACE team from a specific focus on the community schools and its absorption into a larger bureaucratic family engagement structure which served the entire school system. Again, some participants expressed concern that this reorganization compromised the integrity of the parent leadership support for the community schools.

Pre-Existing Parent Governance Structures

The NYC Community Schools initiative–along with its Ladders of Engagement program–was not implemented in a vacuum. The City’s public schools already had (and continue to have) an infrastructure of parent governance bodies in place at the school, district, borough, and citywide levels, most of the dynamics of which are outside the scope of this study. But it’s useful to consider briefly the pre-existing parent governance structures in the schools themselves. First, effective school-level parent and community engagement requires an active commitment and strong leadership from the school Principal, whether in a community school or not. In response to years of community advocacy, former Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, who served under the Bloomberg Administration, in 2003 created the Parent Coordinator (PC) position for all the City’s elementary and middle schools. The PC is a full-time, paid staff person who works for the principal, serving as the liaison between the school and its parents. The vast majority are women and they are often mothers of children in the school. PCs lead parent outreach and engagement efforts in the school, by such activities as assisting the Parent Association, convening parent involvement events (such as “back to school” nights) and serving as liaisons with outside parent support staff.

All schools are mandated by state law to have a Parent Association (PA) or Parent Teacher Association (PTA). PAs elect parent leaders to provide information to families about the school; advocate for students and parents; and coordinate activities for parents and caregivers. They are “self-governing organizations” meaning they cannot be run by the school
principal, and they create their own bylaws. Any parent or guardian who has a child in the
given school is considered a “member” of their school’s PA. Parent members support schools
by participating in PA meetings and decision-making through group votes; volunteering at
school events and fundraisers; chairing and participating on committees, and providing input
on school policies. NYC schools are also mandated to have what are called School Leadership
Teams (SLTs). SLT members include the principal, PTA president, the United Federation of
Teachers Chapter Leader, other staff members, and elected parents. They are mandated by law
to have an equal number of parents and staff, as well as two student representatives (for high
schools). SLTs develop education policies for their school, in particular the school’s
Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP), and make sure there are necessary resources to
implement them. The SLT consults with the principal on a school budget that is meant to align
with the CEP, and they give input on the selection of the school’s principal or Assistant
Principal.

Below, participants discuss the role of these new community school elements and staff
positions in the family engagement process, and how they interacted with and enhanced the
pre-existing components of family engagement. This is followed by a section that examines
the range of buy-in that FACE team members met in their work with existing school staff and
PTA leaders, ranging from enthusiasm to outright resistance, and how obstacles were
overcome.

**Building the New Community School Structures**

**Community School Teams**

In order to implement the community school model in a collaborative way that is
inclusive of all voices, community schools assemble Community School Teams (CST). While
Community Schools still have the traditional school decision-making bodies, they are also
required to assemble a Community School Team, a “cross-stakeholder team tasked with
implementing the Community School Strategy” (Community Schools: A Guide for Getting
Started). CSTs commonly include the principal, Community School Director, teachers, Parent
Coordinators, sometimes students, and other key staff — although “literally everyone is
welcome,” Bachman says. The CSTs provide a structure for collaborative work between the
school, the CBO, and the community. Family Outreach Specialists (FOSs) assist in developing and building out the CSTs as part of their work in supporting the school’s family outreach plan. According to Taylor,

Building these community school teams was like giving, outside of all of the other structures … a place for the CBO partner, the school, and not only parents, but folks within the community. The Bodega owner, the faith-based folks in the community to really come together and talk through key issues and key successes that they have…. supporting folks to own their part in that process of actualizing how powerful the community school model could be if it was up and working full steam.

According to Bachman, “part of our job was to help build those teams…we would work with CSDs to build out that team. To help them identify what staff members, and then of course parents that wanted to be on it. And so we were very hands-on, very involved in building those teams and making sure those meetings took place.” Rivera elaborates on the essential role of FOSs in undergirding Community School Team planning and ensuring that parents’ voices are included and valued:

Our job was to make sure that we were working in tandem with community school directors and their staff to make sure that they were convening these meetings. We would even be called to lead some of those meetings initially, and to make sure that in the planning process, we're choosing a date, we're choosing a time, we're choosing enrichment activities that would help entice the parents to come through on a weekday or a weekend to talk about their school, but also make them feel like we're building a community to have this conversation where your thoughts are deeply appreciated and valued.

The Outreach Specialists played a key role identifying and recruiting parent leaders to be on CSTs and to encourage other parents to take on responsibilities in their meetings, says Madani. In addition to experienced PTA leaders, Outreach Specialists ensure that ordinary parents are included and have a voice on the Community School Teams. As Santiago emphasizes,

I made sure that whenever I was sitting on school teams, that there were a couple of parents sitting there with me, part of the conversation and if not, I was making sure so, "Hey, Ms. Andersen, what do you think?" I would fold them into the discussion because we have to be mindful that there are other people in the space
and it shouldn't just be the leader and the parent coordinator, or the leader and the community director. Let's incorporate everyone. That's how we folded people in.

CSTs constitute an additional required school decision-making body on top of the traditional mandated school bodies such as the PTA and SLT. Family Outreach Specialists experienced a range of responses to the Community School Teams. According to Madani, some school leaders “were eager about building teams and creating processes and systems, and that comes sometimes just from the principal.” Family Outreach Specialists had to navigate the school decision-making bodies on a case-by-case basis to assess where they could find the most traction for their parent organizing work: “In some schools it worked. In some schools they just felt like there were already too many teams to create this team,” notes Madani. According to Reynolds,

I took different approaches in different schools where you kind of just played it by ear. What's a better fit for this community and this person? The SLT is mandated to exist by law, and they have very clear functions. And the community school team could be whatever the school wanted it to be. We tried to diagram it out, make it make sense because the SLT is basically an advisory body to the principal, and we tried to say the community school team is an advisory body to the SLT. Reaching people that it wouldn't reach otherwise.

In one case for instance, a community school’s SLT was not functional, but Reynolds observed many parents in the building and assessed this as an ideal opportunity to build a Community School Team.

[In another case, a real high-priority school, the SLT just wasn't functional at all. So, I just [said] "Well, you are mandated to have this, but you figure that out… I'm not going to try to solve that problem. But let's get a community school team going," because there were parents in the building all the time.

The Principal is the Linchpin for Success

As alluded to earlier, participants emphasized that a key player in this model of family empowerment is the school principal who, according to Rivera, “sets the tone for this level of engagement and for the level of commitment.” Outreach Specialists meet with each principal in the summer before the school year begins to build a common understanding of the community school model with him or her, and establish a foundation for the building out the
Ladder of Engagement. Principals, of course, play an integral role in the community school strategy: they work with FACE to assess the family engagement needs of the school; they help create and cohere the Community School Team; they play a lead role in the planning of the annual Community School Forum where they deliver the “state of the school” presentation; and they work closely with the new Community School Director and the pre-existing Parent Coordinator to coordinate parent outreach efforts and ultimately drive the Ladder at their school. The success of the Ladder in many ways hinges on whether or not the principal serves as a role model for the new mindset, enthusiasm, personable and relational practices that accompany transformative parent engagement. As Rivera explains,

> [P]rincipals are very much the linchpin to most of this work in a school building. If they're bought into it, if they care about it, if they actually appreciate the parents' feedback, and are willing to receive it and not take it as a personal attack on them as people, but as a tool for them to better their processes and their engagement, then events would be well attended.

Madani also notes that it makes all the difference if there is a high-level of buy-in and enthusiasm from the principal:

> … some schools were eager about building teams and creating processes and systems, and that comes sometimes just from the principal. Then those are more schools that I would engage in that conversation about picking specific people and having parents, sometimes from the PA/PTA leadership, be in those meetings and delegate responsibilities.

Unsurprisingly, if the community school principal is open and receptive to the work, it makes Outreach Specialist’s job easier and allows them to be more effective. As Santiago notes,

> When I was doing the work with [a Bronx principal] from the very, very beginning, he was open to parents, and engaging and welcoming them into the school building. So it was easy for me, one, to have that relationship with him and be able to carry those conversations, but then two, the strategy and the work was so easy to implement in his school, because he believed in it.

Madani recalls that one Bronx principal
...was very welcome to the idea. He basically gave me all the green lights. I would go into the school without even emailing anyone that I was coming in. I would go in, I know where the Community School Director's office is. I'll just go, I'll hang out with her for a little bit, and we'll do some phone banking or talk about the upcoming event and how we can increase engagement.

**Role of Community School Director**

A crucial pillar of the community school initiative is the Community School Director (CSD), a new staff position created specifically for community schools. The CSD is hired by the lead CBO partner to coordinate the wrap-around services for families and the partnership between the school and the CBO. Jacobs describes this role:

[T]he vision is that the Community School Director is like an uber resource coordinator. They are there to help the school look at the assets and needs of the school community—students, families, and community—and then help to both in some cases directly provide programming and supports, but in many cases coordinate those programs, supports, and services. Not just within the walls of the school but neighborhood, city, reaching across New York City in some cases to connect the dots. And so in that way they are also there to support and partner with the parent coordinator around any unmet needs and opportunities for family and community engagement. So the same way that they will partner with a school social worker or the guidance counselor, right? The CSD isn't there to replace those people, they are there to amplify and support their work in ways that the school may never have had the bandwidth to do before.

Compared to a traditional school model, having a CSD greatly increases the school’s capacity to engage parents, identify, understand and address their needs, and provide them with leadership opportunities. CSDs are able to create a more robust environment for parent empowerment for two key reasons. Firstly, whereas, many of these schools have historically been understaffed and under capacity when it comes to service provision—often consisting of an over-stretched nurse or social worker whose time is taken up by a small number of students—the CSD acts as a full-time service coordinator to focus on the time-consuming work of identifying and coordinating a broad array of social and educational services to meet the needs of all families. As described in previous chapters these services address non-academic barriers to learning and create the conditions for families to flourish and students to succeed.
The second reason is that the CSD is often *from* the community, anchored in a Community-Based Organization that has “deep roots” in the local neighborhood. Thus, this staff person is able to harness and leverage all the pre-existing relationships, assets, and connections of the CBO to bolster neighborhood trust and activity in the community schools.

Having an additional staff member who can “serve as the right hand of the principal,” according to Quindel, and focus on social and education service provision for students and parents, can “take things off of the principal’s plate that are not related to the instructional program.” Many of these schools have historically been understaffed and under capacity when it comes to meeting the needs of students and their families living in poverty. The CSD is able to focus on the time-consuming and sometimes challenging workload of service provision, while working in partnership with the principal and other school leaders to conduct joint-planning and needs assessment for the school’s families. Quindel emphasizes the additional capacity provided by the CSD:

So the schools may have some DOE staff that are… if they’re lucky, they’ll have a school social worker. If they’re lucky, they’ll have a school nurse. And oftentimes those people are either under-utilized or all their time is gobbled up by five kids… The DOE social workers have in the past tended to work only with kids who have IEPs. So there is plenty of work to do if the CBO is able to focus on social services. The Community School Director is both a provider and a broker of support services and the CSD works with the principal to conduct a needs assessment so that they are basing their joint planning on what are the real needs of the students and their families.

This is extremely valuable because the CBOs often have “long-standing deep roots” in the neighborhood surrounding the school. As Jacobs notes, “…this work of community organizing, family empowerment, community engagement is a core to what they do… And it preceded them being a community school partner.” The CBO anchors the community school and provides it with a foundation to form deeper relationships with families. Robinson gives an example of the pivotal role a CSD can play in increasing parent participation in the school:

Once the community school coordinator partnered with families and we had some of those families come into our training, they filled out their PTA. They started to have 70 plus attendees at those meetings and they developed a family
resource room at the school that they had volunteers at throughout the course of the day.

The CSDs, in collaboration with the Family Outreach Specialists, also play a key role in the Community School Forum planning. FACE hosted open house sessions at Tweed to prepare schools for the Forum process, and they would often interface with the CSDs as their point people in community schools. The CSDs, in turn, would bring teams of parents and school staff to the trainings. As Bachman recalls,

And we had open house sessions that we did at Tweed…which from an organizer's perspective were very valuable …It was face time with CSDs and their teams that would come in, sometimes with parents at our urging. …[and] they're coming to us instead of us coming to them. So those were really, from an organizing perspective, solid gold sessions.

In many ways, the quality of the family engagement work hinges on the CSD’s level of commitment and buy-in to the model. As Rivera explains,

I think that the clarity of intent of not just the Community School Director, but of the CBO in the building as an institution inside the school, if they're clear on what they want to do and they're also clear on what I want to do and how our work can best support each other, then it made for a much smoother relationship…

Along these lines, participants emphasize that having a CSD “from the community” is a crucial element for success when it comes to developing strong school-community ties: “…you can relate more if you know your community or have some similarity in your community, how you grew up, versus the community that you're working in,” Newman argues. Bachman reflects on one example of a CSD at an elementary school in Brooklyn’s Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood “being a fantastic, tremendous leader in the community. He already had lived in the community his whole life, a young guy about my age. And so as a Community School Director, he was a powerhouse. And I just came in and helped him, just supported his family engagement work.” Carson highlights that a community organizer from her Coalition for Educational Justice, who had originally recruited her into this work, has now “gone on to
be an amazing Community School Director,” and she posits that “it’s because she comes from organizing, she’s a former teacher, and she does this work like her orientation.”

At the same time, Newman notes that there were plenty of Community School Directors that came from outside the neighborhood who “couldn’t understand the dynamics of families in the building or outside in the community, because they didn’t live there.” At times this led to high levels of turnover for this role, as schools sought to hire new CSDs who were from the community. Newman recalls how she had to push some CSDs to focus more on parent empowerment:

I couldn't react certain way, so I used to be like, "You know what, you have to really think through about what are some of the needs and really survey what parents want to see in their schools. Not always doing it for them but with them." So that was my biggest pet peeve with [some] community school directors, but the resources, there was a lot of resources. Some of them knew what they were doing and were very successful. Some needed some support and work, right?

**Role of the CBO and Wraparound Services**

As mentioned before, the Community-Based Organization’s key role is to provide wrap-around social and educational services to meet the needs of students, their families, and the broader community. The idea is that the services are unique to the needs of each community school and that they are informed by input from families, such as that which takes place during the Community School Forums discussed above. Community schools provide physical and mental health services, English Language and GED classes, and other programs. The DOE puts out an RFP for CBOs to submit proposals to serve each community school. As Rivera explains,

…if the school is hearing a lot about, "I need a job. I need to be able to get some English classes so I can take my GED or take my citizenship test so I can be able to get a job to provide for my family," and the CBO happens to say, ‘Well, we offer this. We offer that’ and it ticks a lot of their boxes, then that's the CBO that gets selected for the school.

The services draw more parents into the school building, which in turn, allows Family Outreach Specialists to engage them, invite them to school events and trainings, and offer them
leadership and empowerment opportunities. Newman emphasizes that it’s important to engage families in the needs assessment process that identifies which services to prioritize, because otherwise it is easy for staff to make deficit-based assumptions about parents:

... Some of them needed [the GED program], but in some cases [they didn’t]. They were like, "Oh, we're going to do a GED program," and I'm like, "Who said that these parents don't have their high school diplomas"? Just because they live across the street from a housing project doesn't mean that they are uneducated or they don't got high school diplomas. And if they really looked at it...a lot of them had their degrees already.

Newman emphasized that quality outreach to parents is important in increasing the utilization of these services:

[The uptake] was dependent on how they did the outreach for those services, right? Most of the time the principal and her team or the SLT team would come up with services based on what are the needs on the data that's in their school, so then the community school director would create programs and workshops around that, right?

In sum, the quality and depth of the school-CBO partnership is essential to the foundation of the community school model, and is a key condition that shapes the quality and extent of family empowerment work at the school-level. As Jacobs describes,

… there are definitely some schools, like I mentioned MS 50 before with El Puente, where parents and students are deeply connected into the fabric of the school. The principal sees them as partners, he talks fluidly about the partnership with El Puente where it's not even like, "Oh, that's my community school partner, here's my school." It's like it's all one thing, right? And so I would say that in many cases where the partnerships are the strongest between the school and the community-based organization and where that community-based organization has deep roots in the communities that they're serving, you see that really come to fruition and really be strong and powerful. And you have families that are fully, not just welcomed into the school and supported, but as you said, actually co-leading the school in some powerful ways.
Challenges to Implementation at the School Level

Participants described various challenges they encountered in helping schools implement the Community School strategy and its new approach to parent empowerment.

Resistance from School Staff

With a citywide initiative of this size, there was inevitably a broad range of buy-in at the school level. While the Ladders of Engagement flourished in some schools, the program met plenty of resistance in others. Resistance and conflict came from different actors and went in different directions. Sometimes the principal or school leaders did not want to cooperate with FACE or buy into the Ladder. In some cases school staff did not want to collaborate or share decision-making power with the CBO partner. In other schools the CBO was not deeply committed to a vision of parent empowerment. Newman explains how the general shift in mindset that FACE was trying to institute among school staff—to treat parents as equal partners in their child’s education—did not come easily, and was a challenge for many:

… it was kind of difficult in the beginning with the Community Schools…It was very difficult just to have school staff on board with having parents really as partners in their child's education. Because …some schools were more a space of, "We'll call if we need you," or more of a fortress school where it's like you can't really get in, but only if you need something, "We'll let you know. You don't have to come into the building." So most of the schools were like that at the time, so pushing for the Community School Initiative was really difficult in the beginning, like the first two years.

Madani provides an anecdotal example of a Bronx community school principal who was completely uncooperative and unopen to partnering with FACE:

An extreme example I'll give you is...There was one school in the Bronx, I…went to the school, introduced myself, barely met with the principal…who ignored my emails and all that. Once I got a meeting, I talked for maybe 20 minutes about the work that we do, and the question was literally, "Do I have to do this? Is it mandated?" And I was like, "Not really. I don't come from a mandated office. These are strategies that seem to work that we have tested in many, many schools and have yielded successful results." And after that meeting, I never heard from them, and they never responded to any of my requests.
Rivera mentions a Bronx school in which the Community School Director was very dedicated to the Community School Forum process but “it felt like the principal would try and stymie the work at every turn.” She reiterates what a pivotal role the principal plays in creating the right conditions for the Ladder: “So if a principal isn't bought into the work, it's very difficult to get work done. And those would be the schools where the conversations and just the attendance of people coming in would be really less than, because they didn't feel bought into the process because the principal wasn't bought into the process.”

Some principals had a hard time relating to the partner CBO, even though a collaborative and trusting partnership is crucial to the success of the community school model. Quindel recalls some of these instances:

I think …[what] continues to be a challenge is that a lot of the principals don’t get it, even some of them who applied to be community schools. I always say it’s kind of like your mother-in-law moved in with you and you need to be prepared for that. If you have a lead [community] agency and a Community School Director who’s there all day during the school day and trying to partner with you, you have to kind of want that.

Madani elaborates on the need for all stakeholders to recognize the value that the community organization and its services are bringing to the school:

…the CBOs had a mental health component. They had all these other things that were really important in value. And [some] principals hadn’t bought into it all the way either…So by them not buying in, the CBOs were having trouble. So it was a lot of ironing that out too for folks about, what is the role of a CBO? And are they going to be respected in the space, what they bring, what they do?...And to this day, I think the CBOs still struggle sometimes with principals around that, even though I feel like [the CBOs] have proven themselves over and over again…

Another obstacle was that some principals and Community Schools Directors viewed the FACE Outreach Specialist as just another central-level staff person who was there to pester them with additional work responsibilities. As Rivera recalls:

And where the community school director wasn't clear, or also, like a principal, felt very standoffish, but it was a lot of interference…there's a lot of this perception that I as a central level employee am coming to provide oversight and
to sort of be big brother to a lot of these administrators and parent leaders or CBOs. Then it also depended on how much they actually told me, how much they wanted to engage with me, and how much they let me connect with the parents in the building.

Jacobs points out that there was sometimes friction between the new CSD and existing school staff, highlighting the need for relationship-building and collaboration between different members of the school team that is essential to successfully implement the holistic community school strategy:

… I think initially, and even sometimes now, there could be a perception …like who is the CSD? Are they here to replace me or take over what I'm doing? And so there's a lot of relationship building that has to be done so that folks feel that this is a benefit and a complement to their work and it's not all about replacing the work, there's enough work to go around.

**Competing Priorities – “my role is my role, this is my lane”**

Madani explains that for school staff who have been there many years, who have a multitude of tasks to do along with an entrenched way of doing things, taking the time to do more extensive outreach to parents can be seen as a competing priority:

[While] the principal may tell you, "Look, you're from Central, do as you please here," …you have to deal with the Parent Coordinator, and if they've been there for 20 years and have gotten used to a certain way of working, which is not to their own fault, the schools literally over-labor the parent coordinators. They make them do everything. So when you come and tell them, "Oh, let's do phone calls," they're like, "I have to do lunch duty’’…They make them do a lot, more than what they can bear. So they're covering classes, doing all of this crazy stuff that has nothing to do with their role. So you coming in, I think, to [add to] their plate, automatically puts walls in front of them, so you have to deal with that.

Indeed, participants acknowledge that transformative engagement requires extra work which poses a challenge for school staff who are already overworked. Carson provides a typical exchange she might have with a school staff person about what transformative family engagement entails:
People get really stuck in the, "So why do I have to..." They think it's extra work. It's the hardest piece, right? when you're talking to an educator around parent engagement, you're like, "Here's all the things that you should be doing." And you literally see the excitement go from [ten] to [zero]. Because they’re like, "Oh, this is 20 extra things for me to do a day." And I'm like, "I know."…You either want to do it or you don't…And I get it. There's no time. There's no extra money. Nobody got your back in doing it. Your administrator is just being like [inaudible ], but no one really cares. So I get it.

Robinson describes the litany of competing priorities that a community school leader has to juggle, while at the same time contending that improved family engagement will actually help schools address these other priorities:

When I think about what a principal or a community school leader has on their plate, you are leading a building and working hard to ensure that the students in your building have what they need to achieve and you might have students who are behind grade level and reading. Then throw in, if you're in a neighborhood where there are high levels of socioeconomic need, families dealing with homelessness, poverty, whatever it may be. So there's a lot to juggle. Then … they have a grant that requires that they meet particular details about enrollment in their afterschool program, or they're looking to move test scores. Those things become priority…and our argument always was family engagement helps you do those things well. Research shows it, we know it. Give families the information, partner with them. You've got more people helping you do the work. The difficult part was moving people from seeing those things as separate columns and thinking that's going to take more of my time. So I can't do it and seem like it will help me do this thing that is top priority.

Existing Parent Governance Bodies React to the New Approach

As mentioned above, FACE’s family empowerment work was implemented on top of an already existing layer of parent engagement infrastructure, most notably the school Parent Teacher Association. Some schools which joined the community school program already had functioning PTAs, while others did not. Many schools that became community schools did not meet the basic requirements of having an active PTA, nor a School Leadership Team that included the mandated proportion of parent members. As Reynolds explains:

…a lot of the work was just getting the already existing requirements fulfilled about having a functional parent association executive board. Having your school
leadership team be half parents and having them have an active role on that school leadership team and understanding what it means. Not just being rubber-stamped for the CEP at the end of the year.

Unsurprisingly, among the pre-existing PTAs that were functioning, there was a range of responses and buy-in to the Ladder of Engagement, which in many ways constituted a parallel system, a separate structure from the existing parent governance bodies. The Ladder represented a new organizing approach to parent engagement which many of the old PTA leaders were not trained in. As Miller explains,

There was tension within the schools about this sort of dual thing happening. I would say that that was a flaw in the design… each school also had a parent outreach coordinator so when we created this additional infrastructure … there was already an infrastructure that this was overlaid on top of that caused some confusion and tension…some of the usual suspects were on the PTA and they weren't trained in…engagement and outreach. People do the best that they can but it wasn't from an organizing model or methodology and so in many cases it was the same people and it was kind of entrenched.

According to Robinson, “that kind of inertia and status quo can make it really hard to see outside of what you've been used to.” This dynamic could manifest as a “turf war”:

….sometimes I think that originated out of unfortunately, a turf war with the parent coordinator where they'd be like, "Why are you calling families and training them? My job is to hold workshops." So I think for those instances, what I tried to have our staff do was … to take a step back. It's like, okay, we need to connect better with the parent coordinator because I think often there was just a miscommunication about what we were doing…

Sometimes parents might have to choose between attending meetings of their monthly PTA, School Leadership Team (SLT), or the new monthly Community School Team. Reynolds mentions that he “took different approaches in different schools” when trying to set up Community School Teams and navigate these existing dynamics:

We tried to diagram it out, make it make sense because the SLT is basically an advisory body to the principal, and we tried to say the Community School Team is an advisory body to the SLT. Reaching people that it wouldn't reach otherwise.
He points out that while SLTs are public meetings subject to open meeting law which anyone can attend, “most parents didn’t even know what they were, and cannot speak at them unless they’re recognized by the chair.” In one case, Reynolds recalls that, as an FOS, he coached the chairperson on how to more effectively facilitate the discussion to “open up the floor to more participation” from parents. In schools where they had to manage both an SLT and a CST, Reynolds would sometimes:

…recommend they just hold separate meetings. They could be back-to-back, but open up your community school meeting in a way that’s more inviting to the people that you aren’t reaching and you really want partnership with in a way that the SLT can’t really do. And that happened effectively in a few schools where we did that.

He describes a community school in Brownsville where they did this successfully, and the attendees and energy from the CST meetings would flow over into the SLT meeting after.

I'm thinking of one right now in Brownsville where they just held the meeting back-to-back, the community school team. Everybody was welcomed and really encouraged to come. We flyer-ed, phone banked, even door knocked to get it started. And the community school director I think for the very first one brought in the community liaison from the police precinct. A lot of people wanted to be there to share concerns or whatever. And then that meeting formally ended after an hour and then the SLT meeting did its business, but then most people would stay.

In another instance, in a school with a non-functional SLT, Reynolds decided just to focus on organizing the Community School Team, one which developed some creative materials:

In another case, a real high-priority school, the SLT just wasn't functional at all. So, I just started, "Well, yeah, you are mandated to have this, but you figure that out, right? I'm not going to try to solve that problem. Let's get a community school team going, because there were parents in the building all the time. Mostly because their children had behavior issues and they wanted to keep their eye on these students, make sure they aren't getting in trouble or they aren't being punished unjustly for their behavior issues…And they ended up setting up some guidelines about how parents could partner in the classroom on their concerns, and also just making the learning environment more fun. Getting parents and students to work together in the classroom on projects.
Overcoming Obstacles

Shifting Mindsets

These examples of staff resistance speak to the need and importance of the Dual Capacity Framework which the FACE team used to guide its centralized leadership trainings at Tweed described in Chapter 4. As previously discussed, in addition to parent leaders, FACE trained community school staff – CSDs, principals, and Parent Coordinators — on how to take a transformative approach to family engagement, one that viewed low-income families of color from an asset-based lens rather than deficit-based, or as Andersen put it, “changing their mindset, then their skill set, then ultimately moving them into action.” According to Robinson, after FACE provides the leadership training at Tweed for school staff, they aim to “reconnect them back to the school…we wanted them to be volunteers and leaders in their school and be part of that collaborative planning.” Then, Andersen explains, through relationship-building with school leaders, Outreach Specialists were able to help them understand the organizing mindset and skillset that the Ladder entails, dispel any false notions they may have harbored, and, in some cases, win their confidence and get buy-in for the work:

… we started showing them how to do community school forums. And so that was when we started really doing more one-on-one with principals and parent coordinators. And we had to bring them in because they felt like we were trying to take their jobs. It was a lot of stuff like that. But then they realized, "No, we're trying to help you and give you the strategies of outreach. And what is the conversation with the parents." And we shifted to now doing principal visits. … And we actually were very successful with them going in and actually talking to principals like, "This is who we are, this is what we want to do. What's your vision?" And then they actually gave their endorsement, their blessing, "Okay, yeah, do it this way. Let's do it that way."

There were instances when existing PTA leaders, after seeing the kind of training that FACE was providing to community school leaders, “came back and said, ‘well, we want training like they get it too. Because PTAs [had not been] getting that kind of training or that kind of support,” says Andersen. Often Outreach Specialists would try to connect emerging parent leaders to the existing PTA to improve the dynamics of collaboration at the school. Rivera notes that Ladder trainings and leadership opportunities provided valuable enrichment for
parents who were already involved in PTAs, SLTs, or other bodies, and that these programs are not mutually exclusive:

…oftentimes it would also be enrichment for a lot of those parent leaders, right? So if they were already serving in the PA, PTA… then we were trying to connect with those [existing] parent leaders to say, "This can be part of your skills building base, if you will.

Participants describe instances where they challenged the mindset and assumptions of school staff and impelled them to think more deeply about their parents’ agency and capacity to take on leadership roles at the school. According to Robinson,

My colleague….would always say, "Schools will tell me, 'Well, I don't have a leader like that, that can do that.' Well, how many students are enrolled in your school, and how many of those families have you actually talked to?" Because there's someone, every school has someone and it's just a matter of finding them and connecting them with the right pieces. I think those were the stories that sustained us through when we knew it. Sometimes it's a slug because you're changing minds and you're building new skills and muscles. That takes a little time.

Sometimes school staff and educators would complain that parents “don’t want to work with us,” Robinson says. These were the opportunities for Outreach Specialists to reframe the challenge to encourage a “shift in mindset:”

We were trying to get folks to think about what is driving that person to walk into your office and ask those questions. There's a commitment there, and there's a vision and a desire that they have. So how can we build some bridges? Sometimes it was more implicit than that… just trying to get people to always think from a strengths-based perspective, because I was like, "Look, I know I respond best when people make those [good] assumptions about me. I'm more willing to partner." So that's the approach you have to take as you work with your community while still acknowledging that there were structural barriers to some communities being able to engage in the ways that we would like to.

**Multi-lingual School Staff: A Factor for Success**

Participants pointed to the persistent problem of language barriers when trying to build meaningful, lasting relationships with parents. About 180 different languages are spoken in
NYC public schools. The FACE team centers *Language Accessibility* as one of its key family engagement strategies to create a welcoming environment in community schools. According to the 2015-16 Family Community and Engagement Plan:

Language Accessibility Schools will be asked to improve their language access according to protocols that will be shared, including ensuring that a Language Access Coordinator (LAC) is appointed and trained, translation is routinely made available to families who need it and at school functions using professional translation services, and that all communications are routinely translated.

In Community School Forums, parents would discuss ways to make community schools more welcoming and information more accessible to the community, according to Santiago. FACE responded to this input and improved translation and interpretation services. Santiago quotes a parent:

“Because I speak a different language… when I come here, I don’t understand the writing on the wall, or no one in the office can support me because they don’t speak my language, or it’s just not welcoming.” Those were things that were changed in many schools… especially with interpretation and translation. People started understanding, “Oh, we have to talk to parents in their language, not in our language, or and we have to stop abbreviating, or and talking in DOE lingo. We have to explain things and share things.”

According to Madani, “The most popular language was Spanish…it was so popular, we would have trainings solely in Spanish. And sometimes we would have an English interpretation for the few.” However, he has seen the need to improve language access to other immigrant communities. He describes some of the cultural trust barriers faced by another large immigrant constituency: the Arabic-speaking community.

I think the Arabic speaking community has some needed growth to happen in trusting the educational system, because most of the time, and this happens with any immigrant community, most of the time there’s a high mistrust… I had a parent, literally, who came to me and he’s telling me, "This school wants to provide my son mental health services," because he would have fights every single week with other students. Then I'm like, "All right, let him sit with his counselor and see how it goes." And he's like, "No, I don't trust them. I'm not sending my son to them. They're going to brainwash him."
Madani speaks Arabic and has been able to serve as a critical resource for and bridge connecting the Ladder of Engagement to this large community of families: “My office saw [me] as an asset to reel the Arab community in and provide them access.” In fact, the value and demand placed on Madani’s services reveals that the school system could use more multi-lingual resources: “But working out of Central, the only one that speaks Arabic in the office, it’s very hard to provide [sufficient] access at that level.” Through phone banking, Madani has been able to talk to many hard-to-reach Arabic-speaking families, break down the cultural trust barrier, and engage them in community school activities. During the Covid-19 school closures, which I will discuss in Chapter 8, Madani became a go-to resource for Arab communities across the city, who relied on him for crucial information and assistance during the pandemic. Although Madani works at the citywide level, his story is perhaps even more relevant at the school level. One of the most effective ways for a community school to truly engage and build stronger relationships with this community is to hire a multi-lingual Parent Coordinator or staff person at the school level who speaks the home language of immigrant families. Madani says,

[T]he most successful model to serve families, immigrant families specifically, is hiring people who speak the language at the school-level…You need people at the school level, so when they go into the school building, [the parents] see them, they know their name, and they know who to go to.

He gives an example from a Bronx community school:

[W]hen it comes to family engagement in general, and their relationship with the school, and parents of the Arabic speaking community, the most successful case that I've seen is that when a secretary or a parent coordinator that speaks Arabic is hired. There was a school in the Bronx, in District 11, that hired a parent that spoke Arabic, English, and Spanish. They hired her as a secretary after she was involved for a few years with the PA/PTA. And every time I would go to a school and speak to parents, all the Arabic speaking mothers especially would cluster around that secretary and ask her questions about stuff I shared, just because they trusted her. She was a woman, and obviously for Arab culture, the gender relational gap is there. They trusted asking another woman…

The importance of multilingual staff will be further discussed in Chapter 7.
A “Paradigm Shift”

Santiago reflects on the progression of a Bronx community school principal who increasingly embraced the idea of collaborating more with his parent body by building out the Ladder of Engagement at his school over several years:

By year two or year three he's like, "Okay, let's talk about the Ladder because I got to create the CEP [Comprehensive Education Plan]. And how many parents we got here? How are we moving them? Where are we moving them to? And who are these parents? We got to list them out." I guess at one point, he's the one that's telling me what's happening. He's asking me. He's acting as parent coordinator, and he's creating along with his families, the Ladder plan so that he can put it into his CEP, and then mid-year, he's following up with his own plan, with his families and his SLT… But he was a true believer in the Ladder, and he incorporated it into his CEP, he had it on his wall. He knew who his leaders [were]…He knew who his attendees were, and he set goals for himself and for his coordinators, and how they were moving folks up that ladder throughout the school year. That was very instrumental.

The principal also incorporated the Ladder into work he was doing with his teachers and created Teach Me Fridays, notes Santiago: “Every Friday, there was an engagement opportunity… teaching parents a different topic. One Friday Science, another Friday Math, another Friday English….they’re breaking up into grades. ‘This is what your children are learning, I want you to learn this so that you can support your children at home.’” Robinson explains that community school administrators and educators sometimes had to go through the process of implementing the Ladder and a community school forum before they could understand its rewarding and transformative impact:

It was like a paradigm shift, and they were like, "Oh, I get it. Now I understand why I have to do this." I distinctly remember Susan Jacobs talking to me about a school that had been really hard to work through the family engagement stuff at first, but they had the forum and then the principal was like, "I can't imagine not doing this now." So we saw some of those paradigm shifts. It took some time, honestly, and that was a drag sometimes on the staff. I had to coach them to understand that the little successes add up here and you might not get the team fully bought in right away, but over a couple of years, we would improve practices and we'd get teams bought in.
Taylor sees Community School Forums having a transformative impact through which parents began to “see themselves as active partners in the school process.” By sharing and listening to each other’s ideas, teachers, staff and parents started to view each other in a new light:

[S]chools would start to say, "Oh, parents have great ideas," and it would be a light bulb for them. That maybe if this is their first forum, they've never done it. They've never done it in this way. That would be a light bulb for them. If parents have never… participated in a process that looked like this, then for them, it turns into a light bulb and it's like, "Oh, the school really values me and values my opinion. I should be more involved."

**Challenges to Scaling Up and Sustaining the Initiative at the Citywide Level**

While the NYC-CS Initiative has taken substantial steps towards shifting institutional priorities to strengthen parent empowerment in schools, such an ambitious goal faces many challenges in order to be sustained. The fact that it is the largest initiative of its kind in the country and that the number of community schools expanded at such a rapid pace made it difficult for the FACE team’s infrastructure and capacity to keep up with the expanding support needs. In 2014, there were 45 community schools; the following year that number shot up to 130. By fall 2017, there were 227 community schools and the following fall there were about 260. While the FACE team was able to expand somewhat, participants suggest that this was not sufficient to support the influx of community schools.

While the community school structures and services remain in place with a certain level of consistency—and have expanded as new schools joined the program—participants give the impression that certain components of the Ladders of Engagement organizing program began to dissipate after the first few years, reflecting perhaps the inevitable challenges of trying to scale up and sustain a program of this size in such a large urban school district. For example, the deep canvassing / door-knocking outreach used to raise awareness among families about the new community schools coming to their neighborhood was only funded once – in the summer of 2015. Some FACE team members said they had hoped that this community canvassing would continue to happen annually. Other Outreach Specialists noted that after the first three years of the program, due to their ever-expanding caseloads, they no longer played
an on-the-ground role in supporting Community School Forums; this role had formerly constituted one of their key organizing functions. As Reynolds noted, “The community schools are still obligated to have them, but we don’t support them. I haven’t seen one. Last year I supported a couple where we were asked to come in where schools had brand new Community School Directors…” According to Bachman, “If we don't have a commitment and enough financial resources and people power, or people resources committed to making the forum a success and spreading the word, then it's not as impactful, less parents get to participate in that.”

It is also unclear the extent to which the VAN system phone-bank outreach has continued to happen systematically after the first three years. Miller argued that the DOE did not put a sufficient infrastructure in place to sustain their initial organizing approach for the long-term:

That organizing requires a really long-term commitment and an understanding about what goes into that. I think that there wasn't an infrastructure built around our team that supported that for the long term. I would say that's sort of a lesson. I don't know if the DOE would say that that was a lesson but I would say that that's a lesson. That if you really want to build out a community school program that is deeply rooted in and supporting parent engagement [and has] a long-term commitment to organizing, [that] means [an] organizing infrastructure is required.

Miller emphasized a distinction between the community school strategy – providing integrated family services which create the atmosphere and conditions for parent empowerment – versus the explicit programmatic efforts of deep outreach and training that are needed to empower parents as leaders:

They think that just because there's a community school program that there will be parent engagement as opposed to parent engagement having to be a special program within the community school program… people think the community schools engage parents [alone]. Parent engagement engages parents.

**FACE Office is Restructured, Leading to New Challenges**

Three years into the Family and Community Outreach Team’s work, in 2018, De Blasio hired a new Chancellor, Richard Carranza, a first-generation Mexican-American who was
staunchly committed to educational equity and social justice. Carranza restructured the DOE’s offices and brought on Deputy Chancellor Hydra Mendoza to oversee the restructuring of the FACE division. While previously the FACE outreach team that was outlined in the Community School Strategic Plan had been isolated from the rest of the Division of Family Engagement which included the DOE’s public communications, now the FACE team, the Office of Communications and the Office of External Affairs were all merged together in one Division of “Community Empowerment, Partnerships and Communications.” This reorganization was an attempt to streamline and simplify the central support system for schools. In the new structure, the FACE team was split up into separate Borough Empowerment Teams that were more aligned with the previously existing elected parent governance structures in each borough. In so doing, the FACE team no longer maintained its sole focus of supporting community schools and instead supported both community and traditional schools. Each liaison was now assigned a vastly expanded caseload of schools. Under the new structure, each borough has several Parent Empowerment Liaisons (similar to the Outreach Specialist position), School-Based liaisons that communicated at the school-level and coordinated with the school-based parent leadership bodies), and one district-level parent liaison who coordinated with the Community Education Councils (CECs) (district-level “education policy advisory bodies which review and evaluate their district’s educational programs, hold public hearings and approve zoning lines”). As Rivera explained,

And so with that was the creation of these borough teams, so it broke up the former outreach specialist team because now we were in different borough teams. And each borough team would have a team of empowerment liaisons, a team of school-based liaisons, and a team of district liaisons. The district liaisons worked with the parent leaders and the Community Education Councils. The school-based liaisons worked with the parent leaders on a school level that were part of their PA PTA executive boards, and also their school leadership team boards, so the parents that serve in school leadership teams.

The new borough-based model diffused and absorbed the original FACE team into a broader support structure that focused on strengthening the existing parent governance structures for all schools. As Rivera said,
Schools that are less engaged have less parent leaders, and there are more vacancies because those parents don't feel inspired, don't feel connected to the school to want to serve. And so the idea of the empowerment liaisons was to work with those up-and-coming parent leaders to make sure that there wouldn't be voids of leadership in schools as there was... that way we would create a pipeline of parents that would serve in these leadership structures, and that there would be a continuum of parent leadership, [to fill positions] where there was always voids. So that's ... and what the new structure... is trying to solve for.

**Concerns with new structure**

Some participants expressed concern with this change. As Reynolds said,

I have a lot of concerns about that because it clearly says as part of the Community Schools Initiative there will be a Family Community Outreach Team supporting the work. We're defined in that as an essential part of the initiative...The [original] Family community outreach team as outlined in the community schools plan from City Hall, no longer exists.

Rivera was concerned that, due to her expanded portfolio of schools, she was less able to have as much of a “personal touch” with each school as she had maintained with her smaller cohort of community schools:

I think some things have gotten lost. Because now I'm working with six, seven times the amount of schools I was working with before...so whereas I was working exclusively with a cohort of, or portfolio of 15 schools. Now I'm working with 150, 160 schools. And the truth is that I may not be able to have a personal touch with every single one of them all the time, because it's just not possible...So I do kind of miss that personalized model with the community schools where I worked with 15 schools and the parent coordinators and the parent leaders knew who I was, and I knew who they were, and there was a personal connection. Whereas in order to get that to scale in this institutional model, I'm losing a lot of those connections because I'm not working directly with a smaller group of schools.

Madani pointed out, “So now you have less people doing more work.” Robinson wanted to maintain the close working relationship between the FACE team and the Office of Community Schools:
Having the Office of Community Schools as part of our work did mean that it was tied to a very clear initiative and one that had support both... internally and externally...but that was going to get harder and harder in a borough-based model and while there was, I think, discussion of the value of the Ladders of Engagement, I don't know that the structure set itself up to actually be able to continue to implement it well.

Madani believed it had been challenging for FACE to scale up and scaffold their model to align with the complex levels of parent governance structures: “The challenges that we're going through right now is basically building a cohesive model that funnel into each line. Because you have empowerment, you have school-based, and you have district-based. But although they interconnect it in terms of theory, in terms of practice the office has not had enough time to develop that pipeline.” Rivera still believes their goals for supporting all schools now needs to be collectively reflected on and clarified:

I think that being very clear about what support we want to offer all schools is going to be key to us to move this work forward. So making sure that even though we're not working exclusively or rather the outreach team, because FACE always worked on a citywide level with all schools, but specifically the former outreach team worked only with community schools and now because we've been restructured and there's a new structure in place.—And now we work with all schools. I think that even if we were to hire more people, I think that making sure that we are able to engage in a process of reflection and be able to sort of establish office or divisional goals yearly, that helps orient the work of all everybody and new people included. So that way we know we're working towards this, I think would be just helpful for our work overall.

Conclusion

In this chapter we examined four new structures that accompany each community school which serve as mechanisms to strengthen family engagement: a partnership with a CBO that has roots in the local neighborhood and that provides wrap around services and programming for families; a Community School Director who coordinates the partnership and services; a Community School Team to promote collaborative leadership in implementing the community school strategy, and an annual Community School Forum, a participatory planning event that brings hundreds of families together with educators to collectively set the agenda
for the school. I discussed the range of buy-in from school staff to the new family organizing approach. At each community school, Family Outreach Specialists had to engage with pre-existing staff and parent structures (e.g. PTAs) and sets of power relations. Some schools were open and receptive to their Outreach Specialist and the Ladders of Engagement. In other schools, pre-existing staff were resistant to the new approach, were overburdened with competing priorities or were threatened by what they perceived as a “turf war” or having to share power with parents. In these instances, Outreach Specialists had to adapt and navigate around these obstacles. In some community schools, this led to the emergence of parallel structures. Where possible, the Outreach Specialists trained community school staff in grassroots organizing techniques that led to a “paradigm shift” for some in how they engaged parents.
CHAPTER 7
QUANTITATIVE RESULTS:
COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND PARENT ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES

As described in Chapter 3, for my quantitative analysis I estimated the association between community school status and family engagement outcomes, as measured by parent survey response data aggregated at the school-level. I utilized a quasi-experimental design that compared school-level aggregate family engagement outcomes for community schools with those of a matched group of demographically similar comparison schools that were not part of the community school program in order to investigate: 1) whether or not NYC community schools were associated with higher levels of family involvement compared to similar traditional NYC schools, and 2) whether the relationship between community school status and parent engagement outcomes varied by the number of years of community school implementation.

I found that community school status had a positive and statistically significant effect on several school-level parent engagement outcome variables. Community schools, when compared with matched comparison schools, were associated with: higher increases in parent survey response rates; slightly higher percentages of parents who responded positively to the “Strong Family-Community Ties” category questions; higher percentages of parents who were asked to volunteer or have volunteered in the past year to support their school; higher levels of parent satisfaction with school staff communication; and a substantially higher chance of receiving an “exceeding target” rating on the “strong family-community-ties” category of school quality. For all of these variables, the relationship was strengthened as the number of years of program implementation increased from one to three.

Study Population

My dataset included five years of outcome data for the city’s approximately 1,866 public schools (the number of schools changes slightly from year to year as some schools close and new schools are opened), spanning the period of time from the 2014-15 school year (the first year that community schools were implemented) to the 2018-19 school year. I matched schools based on the pre-intervention year (2013-2014) school characteristics. In 2014, the
NYCDOE reported data for 1,781 schools consisting of 712 elementary schools (40 percent), 351 middle schools (19.7 percent), 187 K-8 schools (10.5 percent), 415 high schools (23.3 percent), 58 “Transfer high schools” (3.3 percent) and 58 “D75” schools (3.3 percent). NYC schools serve large numbers of high-needs students. In 2014, the pre-initiative baseline year, the average public school served a student body in which 76 percent of the students enrolled qualified for free or reduced-price lunch or were eligible for Human Resources Administration benefits. However, this number ranged broadly: some schools had 100 percent student poverty levels, while some schools had poverty levels as low as 4 percent. The average school’s student body had a racial composition that was 34.3 percent black with the percentage ranging from 0 to 98.8 percent across schools, and 41.2 percent Hispanic; and 13.3 percent of students at the average school were English Language Learners.

**Assessing Baseline Equivalence**

I used 2014 data on school characteristics to establish baseline equivalency for matching between community schools and comparison schools. As can be seen in Table 7.0, school selection for NYC-CS was not random. As mentioned previously, schools that were eligible and selected for the program served high concentrations of low-income students of color, and struggled with high rates of chronic absenteeism, low-academic achievement and low graduation rates. The unweighted means indicate that community schools were different from non-community schools on virtually all observed characteristics. In sum, community schools serve student bodies that are significantly more disadvantaged than non-community schools. In the year preceding their program implementation (2014), those schools which would become community schools served, on average, a student body in which 85.9 percent of the students enrolled came from families in poverty (meaning they qualified for free or reduced-price lunch or were eligible for Human Resources Administration benefits) compared to 74.7 percent students in poverty, on average, in non-community schools. The average community school had a racial composition that was 38.9 percent black students and 50.1 percent Hispanic students compared to 33.5 percent black and 39.5 percent Hispanic for non-community schools. Community schools also had a substantially higher percentage of students who were English Language Learners (17.5 percent on average) compared to their counterparts (12.5 percent). Community schools, on average, had slightly lower enrollments than non-
community schools with an average total enrollment of 577 students compared to average enrollment of 594 students, although this difference was not statistically significant. These baseline differences in observable characteristics suggest that we might expect community schools, which face structural disadvantages, to have lower family engagement and participation levels than their more advantaged counterparts. Thus, in order to account for this selection bias, this suggests the need to compare community school outcomes with a more comparable subset of comparison schools that have similar characteristics to community schools.

**Coarsened Exact Matching Results**

I used Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM) to select and match a sample of treatment schools (schools that joined the community school program at any point during the study period) with a sample of similar comparison schools (schools that did not join the program during the study period but which had similar characteristics). I first used Scott’s rule and break method to coarsen the variables into bins in order to constrain the amount of possible imbalance that is allowed to exist post-matching. Doing so, however, resulted in a very low number of matches (~30 per group) across treatment and control groups. I instead opted to create researcher-defined bins for the three variables with the largest L1 distances revealed by the imbalance assessment: total school enrollment, percent of students living in poverty, and percent of ELL students. Through several iterations using different cut points within these three variables, the researcher was able to improve the match to 128 treatment and 234 control schools. As for the other two demographic variables—percentage of black and percentage of Hispanic students—I allowed Scott’s rule to determine cut points, as this minimized the bias across group in these variables without sacrificing sample size. I matched schools on the following variables, which were coarsened into the respective bins below:

- *School type* (six bins based on the type of school: Elementary, K-8, Middle, High School, HS Transfer, or D75)
- *Total enrollment* (five bins based on cut points at the following enrollment levels: 100, 300, 500, 1000, 2300)
- *Percentage of students in poverty* (four bins based on cut points at 2 percent, 70 percent,
80 percent, 100 percent)

- **Percentage of students who are English Language Learners (ELL)** (five bins based on cut points at 1 percent, 9 percent, 30 percent, 50 percent, 100 percent)
- **Percentage of students who are Black** (bins generated using Scott’s break method)
- **Percentage of students who are Hispanic** (bins generated using Scott’s break method)

The CEM process resulted in 1,108 possible strata and 93 matched strata which contained both treatment and control schools. Schools from non-matched strata were dropped, resulting in an analytic sample of 128 treatment schools and 234 control schools. The three columns on the right in Table 7.0 below allow us to determine the success of CEM in constructing a group of comparison schools that has more similar characteristics to the community schools. The post-CEM weighted means show that after matching, the treatment group and the comparison group were much more similar on observable characteristics, and there were no longer statistically significant differences between them. The difference in total enrollment however, was not reduced, and actually increased from an average difference of 17.2 to 19.1. Note that there was still a significant difference in school size.

**Table 7.0**

Baseline Characteristics of Community Schools Before and After Matching (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Characteristics</th>
<th>Unweighted (Pre-CEM)</th>
<th>Weighted (Post-CEM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>community schools  (n=262)</td>
<td>non-community schools (n=1,519)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>577.5</td>
<td>594.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Poverty</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>74.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Black</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Hispanic</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent ELL</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05
P-values derived from T tests indicate the level of statistical significance. The smaller the p-value, the stronger the evidence that the null hypothesis can be rejected.

Next, I estimated whether the average outcomes of the community schools improved relative to all non-community schools, and whether and to what extent the outcomes of treated community schools in my matched sample improved relative to the matched comparison group of schools.

**Community Schools and Parent Survey Response Rates**

Figure 7.1 (a) below illustrates the average parent survey response rate for all community schools relative to all non-community schools, over a five-year period from 2014-15 to 2018-19 (with more community schools joining the program each year). Figure 7.1(b) shows the trajectories of the matched community schools (treated schools) and comparison schools, over the same time period. In 2015, we see that community schools had an 8-percentage-point lower parent survey response rate (44.5 percent) compared to non-community schools (52.5), or a 16 percent lower response rate. After only one year, from 2015 to 2016, community schools had nearly cut this gap in half, as the average community school parent response rate rose 4.8 percentage points to 49.3 percent, while the response rate for non-community schools only increased by one percentage point. By 2017, the gains for community schools were 3.5 times greater (8.2 percentage points) than those of other schools (2.3 percentage points): a 75 percent reduction in the gap. By 2019 the gap in survey response rates between community schools and non-community schools had been completely closed, and community schools actually had a slightly higher average response rate (55.6 percent compared to 55.3 percent). The increase in average survey response rates from 2015-2019, was approximately four times larger for community schools (11.1 percent) than it was for other schools (2.79 percent). In other words, the average parent survey response rate for community schools increased by about 25 percent between 2015 and 2019, while the average rate for non-community schools increased by only 5 percent.

The trajectories of the matched sample shown in Figure 7.1 (b) further illustrate the positive impact of community schools on parent survey response rates. The orange line now represents the average parent survey response rates for “treated” (i.e. community) schools, while the blue line shows the average response rate for matched comparison schools over the
period from 2015 to 2019. After matching with demographically similar schools, we still see that, in 2015, comparison schools had a 5.7 percentage point higher APSRR (50.6 percent) than community schools (44.9), an 11.8 percent difference. In 2016, after one year, community schools had virtually cut that difference in half, with their average response rate increasing almost three times faster than that of comparison schools. By 2018, community schools had closed the gap and surpassed the average comparison schools response rate by 2.8 percentage points. The average response rate for community schools continued to increase relative to comparison schools between 2018 and 2019. From 2015-2019, the APSSR for treated schools increased by 14 percentage points (31.1 percent), 3.5 times larger than the increase for comparison schools –4 percentage points, or 7.9 percent.

**Figure 7.1**

**Average Parent Survey Response Rates**

![Average Parent Survey Response Rates](image)

In Table 7.1 below, I present the estimates for the relationship between duration of community school status (number of years since joining the initiative) and average parent survey response rate for both the unweighted population and for the matched sample. All of the results except for the unweighted regression on the 1-year difference are positive and statistically significant. Notably, after two years of implementation, parent survey response
rates increased by an additional 5.4 percentage points more for community schools, on average, then they did for comparison schools. After matching, the association was stronger: over two years of implementation, parent survey response rates for community schools increased at a rate that was 7.8 percentage points higher than the rate of increase for comparison schools, on average, controlling for other factors. The three-year effect was even more pronounced. After three years of implementation, community schools were associated with an 8.4 percentage point higher increase in parent survey response rates. After controlling for the covariates through CEM, over three years of implementation, community schools were associated with a 9.7 percentage point higher increase in parent survey response rates than the average change in survey response rate for comparison schools.

Table 7.1

Estimates of the Relationship between Community School Status and Change in Parent Survey Response Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community School Status (Years of implementation)</th>
<th>Unweighted Regression</th>
<th>CEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>3.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>5.44***</td>
<td>7.82***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>8.37***</td>
<td>9.47***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Community Schools and Percentages of Parents Responding Positively to “Strong Family-Community Ties” Questions

Figure 7.2 (a) below shows the average school-level percentage of parent responses that were positive across the “strong family-community ties” category of questions for all community schools and non-community schools (pre-matching) for 2014-15 through 2018-19. We can see that the community schools and non-community schools follow a very similar change trajectory during the study period, with community schools average percentages remaining a couple percentage points lower throughout. Although, by 2019, community schools had reduced the gap by two thirds, from 1.92 percentage points in 2015 to 0.63 percentage points in 2019. Figure 7.2 (b) below shows the trajectory for treated and comparison
schools (post-matching). While in 2015, treated schools had a slightly lower percent positive, by 2016 they had caught up to comparison schools, and had slightly surpassed them by 2017, maintaining a modestly higher average positive percentage (slightly over 1 percentage point) through 2019. From 2015 to 2019, treated schools saw an increase of 11.1 percentage points compared to a 9.6 percentage point increase for comparison schools during the same time period.

Figure 7.2

Average Percentage of Parents Responding Positively to “Strong Family-Community Ties” Category Questions

![Graph showing the average percentage of parents responding positively to “Strong Family-Community Ties” category questions for pre- and post-matching periods.](image)

Table 7.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community School Status (Years of Implementation)</th>
<th>Unweighted Regression</th>
<th>CEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>-1.2 **</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>1.04*</td>
<td>2.54***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>1.18*</td>
<td>2.71***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05
Table 7.2 above shows that estimates of the relationship between community schools and the percentage of parents responding positively to “strong-family-community ties” category questions, were positive and significant, albeit moderate in their effect. Notably, after two years of implementation, community schools were associated with a 2.5 percentage point higher positive response rate from parents on this comprehensive group of questions addressing the extent to which a school has “strong-family-community ties,” controlling for other factors. After three years of implementation, community schools, on average, were associated with a 2.6 percentage point higher positive response rate from parents on this group of questions than comparison schools, controlling for other factors. These estimates were both significant at the 0.001 level. The unweighted two- and three- year effects were more modest yet still significant at the 0.05 level.

Community Schools and “Strong-Family-Community-Ties” Category Ratings

Figure 7.3 (a) below illustrates the proportion of community schools and non-community schools which received an “Exceeding Target” rating (as opposed to a “not meeting target,” “approaching target,” or “meeting target” rating) for the Strong-Family-Community-Ties category of school quality, for the school years 2014-15 to 2018-19. In 2015, the percentage of community schools exceeding target (7.8 percent) is only about half that of non-community schools (14.2 percent). During the 2015-16 school year, the percentage of schools exceeding target increases significantly for both groups, although non-community schools increase at a higher rate, expanding the gap to 9.5 percentage points. However, over the following year, the percentage of community schools performing well on this element continues to increase to 15.8 percent, while the percentage of non-community schools exceeding target drops 5.6 points, reducing the gap to only 1.4 percentage points. This suggests that community schools were able to avoid what may have been an exogenous shock, or a challenging year for the larger school system. Over the next two years both groups increase at an accelerated rate although the non-community schools pull away again and widen the gap. However the matched samples show a very different story in Figure 7.3 (b) below. In the matched sample, a slightly lower proportion of treated schools were exceeding target on this category in 2015, and the rates remained about the same through 2016, with the comparison school proportion dropping slightly. However from 2016 to 2017, from 2017 to 2018, and from
2018 to 2019, the community schools pull ahead of the comparison schools with significantly higher proportions receiving an “exceeding target” rating. Specifically, from 2016 to 2017, the proportion of community schools “exceeding target” increased by 44.6 percent (14.8 percent in 2016 to 21.4 percent in 2017), while the proportion of comparison schools that were “exceeding target” fell by 24.8 percent (14.7 percent in 2016 to 11 percent in 2017). This means that in 2017, the proportion of community schools exceeding target was almost twice as high as that of comparison schools.

**Figure 7.3**

**Proportion of Schools “Exceeding Target” on the “Strong Family-Community Ties” Rating**

By 2018, the proportion of community schools “exceeding target” had jumped another 10 percentage points to 31.4 percent, a proportion more than double that of community schools in 2015. The percentage of comparison schools “exceeding target” also increased about 10 percentage points catching up to where community schools had been in 2017, but still lagged behind community schools by 10.8 percentage points. In 2019, the proportion of community schools “exceeding target” was 27.4 percent higher (40.5 percent) than the proportion of comparison schools exceeding target (31.8 percent). Overall, from 2015-19, the proportion of treated (community) schools “exceeding target” on this element increased from 15 percent to
40.5 percent, a 170 percent increase, compared to a 90 percent increase for comparison schools, which rose from 16.7 percent in 2015 to 31.8 percent in 2019.

In table 7.3 below, I display the calculated odds ratios for community school status and the likelihood of “exceeding target” on the Strong Family-Community Ties category. While after only one year of implementation, community schools were estimated to be 35 percent less likely than non-community schools to be “exceeding target” on this category, after matching they were, on average, 28 percent more likely to be “exceeding target,” although the latter estimate was not significant. Two years out, after matching, community schools were estimated to be 72 percent more likely than comparison schools to receive an “exceeding target” rating on this category. After three years of implementation, community schools were more than twice as likely to be “exceeding target” on this comprehensive measure, compared to control schools.

Table 7.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community School Status (Years of Implementation)</th>
<th>Unweighted Odds Ratio</th>
<th>CEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>0.65**</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1.72**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>2.24**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Community Schools and Parent Volunteer Rates

Figure 7.4 (a) below shows the average percentage of parents in a school who report that they were asked to, or had, volunteered "sometimes" or "often" in the past year to support their school (henceforth referred to as “parent volunteer rate”) for all community schools and non-community schools throughout the study period. In 2015, the average percentage of parents responding positively to volunteering at community schools was about 12.4 percent lower than the rate for non-community schools. Over the following year the volunteer rates for both groups increased dramatically: a 62.6 percent jump for community schools, and a 45.9
percent increase for non-community schools, reducing the gap to only a 2.3 percent different in volunteer rates. Then, for unknown reasons, the rates for both groups plateaued over the next two years. Figure 7.4 (b) illustrates the average parent volunteer rates for treated community schools and comparison schools. In 2015, comparison schools had a 10.3 percent higher average parent volunteer rate (46.7 percent) than community schools (42.4 percent). From 2015-2016, the rates jump dramatically for both groups, increasing 36.5 percent for comparison schools to a value of 63.8 percent, and an even more astonishing leap of 60 percent for community schools to a value of 67.6 percent. Therefore, in 2016, community schools now had an average parent volunteer rate that was about 6 percent higher than that of comparison schools. In terms of percentage points, between 2015 and 2016, community schools saw a 42.5 percent greater increase in their average parent volunteer rate than comparison schools did. However, between 2016 and 2018, the rates for both groups plateaued, remaining almost completely constant: community schools maintained a close to four percentage point higher average in 2017 and then dipped slightly in 2018 to 2.6 percentage points above comparison schools.

Figure 7.4
Percentage of Parents who were *Asked to, or Had, Volunteered “Sometimes” or “Often” in the Past Year to Support their School*
Table 7.4 below provides regression estimates of the relationship between community school status and the average percentage of parents who report that they were asked to- or had-volunteered "sometimes" or "often" in the past year to support their school. Before matching, first-year community schools were associated with lower percentages of parents who had been asked to or had volunteered sometimes or often within the past school year (henceforth referred to as ‘Often Asked to Volunteer.’) Specifically, community schools on average had a 3-point lower percentage of parents who were Often Asked to Volunteer over the previous year. After matching, the relationship became positive, although not statistically significant. However, after two years of implementation, community schools were associated with a 4.1 point higher percentage of parents who had been asked to or had volunteered on average, relative to non-community schools. After controlling for other factors through matching, the matched sample of community schools was associated with a 7.4 point higher percentage of parents who were Often Asked to Volunteer relative to comparison schools. The three-year community schools were associated with an 8.2-point higher percentage of parents who were Often Asked to Volunteer than their comparison schools, controlling for other factors.

Table 7.4
Estimates of the Relationship between Community School Status and Percentage of Parents who Report that they Were Asked to Volunteer or Had Volunteered "Sometimes" or "Often" in the Past Year to Support their School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community School Status (Years of Implementation)</th>
<th>Unweighted Regression</th>
<th>CEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>-2.97*</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>4.1**</td>
<td>7.37***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>4.48*</td>
<td>8.2***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Community Schools and Parents’ Likelihood of Attending School Meetings and Events

Figure 7.5 (a) below illustrates the average percentage of parent respondents who reported that they were somewhat or very likely to attend a general school meeting or event for community schools and non-community schools for the last three years of the study period.
(2016-17 to 2018-19), the only years this data was available (this item was not included on the survey in previous years). Pre-matching, we can see that in 2017, the average rate for community schools was approximately 1 percent lower for community schools, (1.07 % lower) (or 0.94 percentage points) and by 2019, community schools closed the gap to 0.41 percentage points. However in the matched sample, Figure 7.5 (b) below, treated schools are shown to be performing slightly better than comparison schools with an average positive response rate that is 1.24 percentage points higher than that of comparison schools in 2017, and then around 0.6 percentage points higher the following two years.

Figure 7.5

Average Percentage of Parent Respondents who Reported that they were Somewhat or Very Likely to Attend a General School Meeting or Event

In Table 7.5 below, I found nonsignificant, but positive associations between community school status and the percentage of parent respondents who reported that they were *somewhat* or *very* likely to attend a general school meeting or event. Although all the coefficients were nonsignificant, it should still be noted that before matching, 1-, 2-, and 3- year community schools, on average were associated with slightly lower percentages of parents who were more likely to attend school events. However, after examining the relationship on the matched sample, and thus controlling for other factors, the community schools had a positive effect on
this outcome, relative to the comparison schools. However, when we examine the change in this outcome variable over a two-year period (subtracting the percentage value from two years ago from the percentage of the current year), we find that, by the end of their second year, community schools had a 1.35 percentage point higher increase in their percentage of parents who responded positively that they were likely to attend school events. This association is quite modest, yet significant (p<0.05).

Table 7.5

Estimates of the Relationship between Community School Status and Percentage of Parents who Responded Positively that they were "Likely to Attend a General School Meeting or Event During the School Year"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community School Status (Years of Implementation)</th>
<th>Unweighted Regression</th>
<th>CEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>-0.78</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>-0.79</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Community Schools and Parent Satisfaction with Staff Communication

Figure 7.6 (a) below illustrates the average percentage of community school and non-community school parents who agreed or strongly agreed with the survey item: “School staff regularly communicate with me about how I can help my child learn.” We can see that in 2015, the average parent satisfaction rate was about 2 percentage points lower for community schools, which then saw a slightly steeper increase from 2015 to 2016 reducing the gap to 1.1 percentage points. Then, from 2016-2017, the average for non-community schools declines more sharply (down to 90.5 percent) than that of community schools virtually closing the gap. Then the averages for community schools begin to increase slightly, pulling away from the non-community schools which remain largely flat through 2019. In Figure 7.6 (b), the average parent satisfaction rate for the treated community schools gradually ascends from 2015 to 2018, while the comparison schools, which start out 2.2 percentage points above the treatment schools, fall 0.6 percent by 2017 and gradually climb back up to their 2015 level (91.6) by the
end of the study period.

In table 7.6 below, I estimate the relationships between the duration of community school status and the change in percentage of parent respondents who strongly agree or agree that 'school staff regularly communicate with parents/guardians about how parents can help students learn'. All of the results, except for the unweighted regression coefficient for the 1-year effect, are positive and statistically significant, though modest. Of note, the average change in this outcome over three years was 2.7 percentage points higher for community schools than for non-community schools (significant at the p<0.001 level). The effect was slightly reduced after matching with community schools after three years of implementation being associated with an increase in positive response rate that is 2.44 percentage points larger than the increase for comparison schools. These trends are illustrated in Figure 9.8 below.

**Figure 7.6 Average Percentage of Parents Satisfied with Staff Communication Levels**
Table 7.6

Estimates of the Relationship between Community School Status and Change in Percentage of Agreement that “School Staff Regularly Communicate with Parents about how Parents Can Help Students Learn”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community School Status (Years of Implementation)</th>
<th>Unweighted Regression</th>
<th>CEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Year</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>1.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Years</td>
<td>1.19**</td>
<td>1.74**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Years</td>
<td>2.68***</td>
<td>2.44**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Discussion

I used a quasi-experimental design to estimate the impact of NYC-CS on several school-level measures of family engagement. All in all, I found that NYC-CS had a positive impact on parent survey response rates, volunteer rates, Strong Family-Community Ties Element ratings and Strong Family-Community Ties percent positive, suggesting that community schools are a promising strategy to increase parent involvement in schools and create the conditions for stronger and more authentic partnerships with families.

In particular I found that the average school survey response rate for community school parents increased by 3.5 times the rate for comparison school parents from 2015 to 2019. Regression analysis revealed that, for community schools that had two years of implementation, their parent survey response rates increased, on average, at a rate that was 7.9 percentage points higher than the average two-year increase for comparison schools. The increase in response rates for community schools implemented three years, was 9.7 percentage points higher than the three-year change for comparison schools. The author is unaware of other studies that have examined community school impacts on parent survey response rates.

I also found that community school had a positive and statistically significant effect on the percentage of parents responding positively to “Strong-Family-Community Ties” category questions. However, this study showed that community schools had a substantially positive impact on school-level ratings for the “Strong Family-Community Ties” category of
questions, a comprehensive scale measuring family engagement. I found that, while in 2016, the proportion of community schools exceeding target on the SFCT rating was roughly the same as the proportion of comparison schools receiving this rating (14.8 and 14.7 percent), by 2017, there was a 10 percentage point difference between the two groups as the proportion of community schools “Exceeding Target” increased by 45 percent (to 21.4 percent), while the proportion of comparison schools receiving this rating decreased by 24 percent (from 14.7 to 11 percent). Therefore, in 2017, the proportion of community schools exceeding target was double that of comparison schools. In 2018 and 2019, the proportion of community schools exceeding target was 52 percent greater and 27 percent greater respectively than the relative proportions for comparison schools. Furthermore, my logit regression analysis showed that, after matching, community schools with one year of implementation were 28 percent more likely to be exceeding target than comparison schools; two-year-implemented community schools were 72 percent more likely to receive an Exceeding Target rating, and three-year community schools were more than twice as likely to be Exceeding Target on strong family-community ties than comparison schools. These findings, that the community school strategy improved ratings on a broad scale measuring strong family-community ties, corroborates prior research on the effectiveness of community schools at engaging families (Blank et al., 2003; Durham & Connolly, 2016) and they provide new evidence of how community schools can improve ratings on a scale that encompasses a broad range of family engagement indicators.

Additionally my results show that community schools have a positive effect on self-reported parent volunteer rates. From 2015 to 2016, the average percentage of community school parents who reported that they volunteered “sometimes” or “often” in the past year to support their school, increased by 60 percent from 42.4 percent to 67.6 percent, a 42 percent greater increase than that of comparison schools that year. However, the rate plateaued for the next several years remaining about the same. One plausible explanation for this is that the dramatic jump was associated with the effect of the second cohort of community schools (implemented in 2015-16), the only cohort that was preceded by a massive summer door-knocking campaign to raise awareness among families. This cohort of community schools had larger effects than other cohorts on other outcome variables as well.

Community schools were also associated with slightly larger increases in parent
respondents’ satisfaction with staff communication during the study period. This is consistent with Durham and Connolly’s (2016) evaluation of Baltimore schools that found a higher percentage of community school parents agreed that their “school regularly communicates with me about how to help my child learn” than non-community school parents (Durham & Connolly, 2016, p. 6).

For all the indicators I found that the program impact increased with the number of years of implementation. This finding is supported by prior research that shows the community schools model is more impactful after it has matured through several years of program implementation, with some researchers suggesting the strategy may take upwards of five years to realize its full potential (Daniel, Welner, & Valladares, 2016).

**Limitations**

Firstly, this research is limited because schools were not randomly assigned to the program and to a control group; schools selected for the program were chosen based on the criteria that they were low-performing on key indicators and systematically more disadvantaged than other schools. Therefore, although I was able to eliminate key observable differences by constructing a similar comparison group of schools, I could not account for unobservable differences between treatment and comparison schools. For instance, it may be that new cohorts of schools joining the initiative in later years were systematically more motivated than other comparison schools that did not join the initiative, and that this factor is what actually explained the improving outcomes of community schools during the study period.

Secondly, there are the limitations inherent in self-reported survey data which include nonresponse bias (Adler & Clark, 2003), social desirability bias (Krosnick, 1999), and “satisficing” (Vriesema & Gehlbach, 2021), where respondents lack motivation to provide thoughtful responses on all questions. My analysis is also limited by the nature of the parent survey data available. The parent survey measures which I examined do not capture the full impact of the initiative on parents and their leadership development. For example, there were no survey questions about participation in or satisfaction with community-school-specific events and activities such as Community School Teams, Community School Forums, and Core
Leadership Trainings. Neither does the survey include questions about whether parents feel as though they’re developing new leadership skills or experiences. Because community schools and FACE’s Ladders of Engagement activities focused on these outcomes, ones which were not measured by the survey, it is reasonable to assume that this analysis underestimates the quantitative impacts of the initiative.

Lastly, while I analyzed program impacts over several years, research suggests that community schools may take upwards of five years before seeing a “whole school transformation” (Daniel, Welner, & Renee, 2016, p.2). While this study analyzed multiple years of program effects for early cohorts, I only had 1-2 years of data observations for later cohorts. It is possible that impacts may have increased with more time.
CHAPTER 8
COVID-19 IMPACTS

The deadly Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent school closings served to illustrate the importance of the Community Schools strategy. The Department of Education leveraged the Community Schools’ social service infrastructure and their connections with surrounding neighborhoods to respond to the crisis in a way that was more nimble and adaptable than traditional schools’ structures were able to provide. De Blasio entrusted Community Schools with hosting over 90 Regional Enrichment Centers to care for the children of first responders and other essential workers. All the training and experience that FACE had built up over the previous years left it uniquely prepared to meet the immense challenge presented by the pandemic, by communicating regularly with over a million public school families to provide essential information; by providing extensive technological training and assistance so under-resourced families could overcome the digital divide.

Challenges for Schools and Families

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic rocked New York City, leaving hospital morgues overflowing with bodies, and killing over 18,000 city residents in its first three months, making it the national epicenter of the pandemic. On March 15th, 2020, after attendance had been plummeting and teachers were demanding action, De Blasio closed the City’s 1,800 schools to in-person learning. The school closures were the beginning of a long series of disruptions and uncertainty for the city’s 1.1 million public school students and their families. A week later, educators and students began remote learning, a model which ended up continuing in some form or another for the next year and a half up until Fall 2021. Shifting the largest school district in the country with over 1.1 million students to a remote learning system, all in a matter of days, was an enormous undertaking. Within a couple of weeks the DOE scrambled to distribute over 200,000 laptops, iPads and Chromebooks to thousands of families who lacked computers and WiFi access. Approximately 75,000 teachers with a broad range of technical skills and know-how suddenly had to set up remote learning instruction plans and learn to use online platforms to teach students in a matter of days. As in the other cities, the vital role played by public schools as a social life-line for communities quickly became apparent when tens of
thousands of students briefly lost access to the daily free school meals they had always relied on. In response, the City opened over 400 school buildings to distribute free breakfast, lunch and dinner meals on a grab-and-go basis for students and their families (199,483 meals were distributed on March 19th alone). The City opened 90 Regional Enrichment Centers (RECs) to care for children of first responders, health workers, transit employees and other essential workers.

Taylor says the DOE was examining best practices with which other cities had responded to disaster and shock: “Even when they were thinking about WiFi, I think we were looking at how other places did it. I know in Mexico City, after earthquake, folks in the city were opening their WiFi networks so their neighbors could use it and make phone calls.” Rivera describes the dramatic disruption to the social and emotional health, wellbeing, and routines of children and families who relied on schools as a place of belonging:

In the very beginning, it was very hard to get technology to a lot of these families and a lot of these students and their schoolwork suffered. And just the sense of having a place away from their home that they could socialize and connect with other people their age also impacts, not just students, but also their families, their parents as well…Connectivity issues, people not getting devices, people wanting to access food because their child's no longer in school. So they're not getting any meals. And the parents don't have enough money to provide for the meals that the school was providing when they were at school, different things like that, I think, sort of dominated our conversations with our parent leaders.

Mendez recalls the substantial trauma and loss that the FACE team witnessed among the families they serve: “The toughest part was the emotional impact, because what you saw was people and friends that you've worked with for years go through some traumatic things, like loss of life. New York City was hit very hard by COVID. You would hear stories of people that you knew that were sick, or people that you knew who had family members who'd passed and lost people.” He adds,

The mayor established these food pantries throughout the city, and our parent leaders were talking to us about that. One, just getting parents support and help, and then, also talking about where things needed to be improved, where, "Okay, this pantry, this needs to be improved or that needs to be improved." It was all of these things happening at the same time, both technically getting up to speed, both emotionally supporting our parents throughout the pandemic, and continuing to keep people together throughout some very difficult times. We weren't just talking
about council business; we were talking about food lines. We were talking about, like, there were parents who had lost their jobs; who could not afford to feed their families.

**Community Schools as Social Safety Net**

NYC community schools and their CBO partners served as a crucial institutional support, a vital social safety net, during the Covid-19 crisis. Mayor De Blasio selected the community schools—because of their social service infrastructure, medical services, and strong ties to surrounding neighborhoods—as the appropriate sites to open dozens of *Regional Enrichment Centers* (RECs) which served the children of health care workers, first responders, transit employees, and other essential workers during the school closures. Quindel explains the significance of this particular decision:

> [A]s soon as the schools closed in New York City, Mayor de Blasio asked the Office of Community Schools to be in charge of setting up these what are called enrichment centers for the children of the essential workers. That is a big deal. That is a vote of confidence. He knows that the Office of Community Schools knows how to make things happen...So I think that really is a testament to the recognition that the community schools know how to respond to a crisis and know how to mobilize the resources. It’s huge.

“Those are the schools that during Covid knew how to find families,” Carson argues. She further emphasizes the importance of the chosen REC sites, and highlights the crucial role of community school-based CBO staff at these sites:

> [M]ost of the schools that they did [the RECs] in, they were all community schools. Why? Because they had medical services on site. That’s a really smart thing to do...they couldn't make teachers work in them. So they chose community schools because they had the [CBO] partnerships. And so all those community schools were held down by those community-based organizations. It was their staff that were there. I'm sure that there were some schools where there were some DOE teachers, but they were the CBO staff that were in there with young people....if we didn't have that, what would have happened?

The Office of Community Schools was able to leverage and coordinate key institutional supports for impacted communities. Community school CBO partners provided social services to meet the needs of families. For instance, community school-based CBOs were able to distribute cash cards to families who were food insecure. As Jacobs describes,
We've done a lot of work around meeting basic needs, food insecurity being an example. So our CBOs have figured out how to get gift cards to be able to support families with food. They've driven food to families, when families haven't been able to come to the school or the food pantry to get the food...they've been incredibly innovative in their approaches and they've also leveraged community. So if a pantry is shut down in a school, we have schools that work with our office to figure out how to move that pantry to a church or to a community center.

Because community schools had developed deep connections to families and neighborhoods by creating a collaborative culture and wrap-around services, they strengthened the resiliency of these communities in the face of the pandemic and gave families a trusted place to turn to. As Robinson emphasizes,

My hope is that in the community schools, where we had built a culture of collaboration that wrap around services, that then families had a place to turn to in this moment. I hope that those schools were able to shift and say, "Well, we need a food pantry and we need some mental health supports, or maybe we need some support for families as they navigate the unemployment system," whatever it may be. Being responsive to that, and I hope there was that trust allowed families to stay connected, even if it had to be over a screen during this time.

The Digital Divide is Real

The Covid19 pandemic magnified educational disparities faced by marginalized students and their families, particularly those who were low-income, Black or Latino, English language learners or disabled. Many families lacked access to computers and internet which were required for remote learning. Six months into the pandemic, some 60,000 students had not received iPads or laptops. These are the same families who struggled disproportionately with “digital literacy,” reflecting what has become known as the “digital divide.” As Taylor says, “I work on the Bronx team and we know that...when we went remote, understanding that the majority of folks in the Bronx don’t have internet. The digital divide is real.” Rivera elaborates on how the shuttering of schools and the shift to remote learning exposes structural inequities and burdens families who face this digital divide:

[I]t's really marked a lot of the inequities that our families have been feeling already prior to COVID. It's just put them on relief even more. Because in low income communities, there's a digital divide where there may have not even been technology in the household available for children to learn...They don't even have a working
device for their child to continue instruction, so their child's education has been interrupted by no fault of their own because of this pandemic. And we're talking about lack of access to devices, lack of access to internet, lack of knowledge of using these devices, and [lack of] an opportunity to engage and connect in a virtual setting has just exposed a lot of just the structural inequities.

She emphasizes that internet access is a luxury for many poor and working-class families: “Parents may have had a hard time putting food on the table. And as we know, because of this crisis, that's been made even more difficult. So between choosing to pay for food and choosing to pay for internet, I'm going to choose to buy food, because we all need to eat.” Even if a family has access to an internet-connect device they often don’t have the skillset or training to use it:

[I]t's not just about having access to the actual laptop, tablet, smartphone it's about knowing how to use it and knowing how to use it to set up your own meetings so that you're doing things and you're learning. It's a skillset to have to surmount. Now, not only are we trying to teach you how to organize and how to connect with your families, but on top of that, we're telling you to do it digitally. And then we're also trying to teach you how to use technology just to turn on the tablet. Just to connect to a Zoom call. Just to set up a meeting online. Just to make sure that you're connecting with people so that people know that there's a meeting happening.

Rivera says,

And also, it exposes a lot of the inequities that this institution has sort of perpetuated, like the idea of there being a digital divide, the idea that we're expecting parents to host elections to elect new parent leaders that would represent them in these parent leadership structures, but they might not even have a phone.

Parents who don’t speak English faced additional barriers navigating the new virtual system. As Madani describes: “I had a parent who was struggling with her iPad. She's Arabic speaking, she texted me, and I was able to contact the school, and then the school made me make an appointment for her at the school to come in and bring it in for them to see it. If you don't speak English, then that whole process becomes hard.”

Rivera notes,

So the DOE, yes, has coordinated a pretty massive effort to ensure that public schools students have access to technology and have access to their homes to internet connectivity, but that's still an uphill battle.
FACE Shifts to a Virtual Environment

Communicating Covid-19 Information to Families

As the pandemic shut down schools and families’ lives were completely upended, there was an urgent need for the DOE to provide day-to-day informational updates and maintain constant and clear communication with the thousands of families who had an endless number of urgent questions. According to Rivera:

People want to be informed, want to know what's happening with their child's education. And what are the big decisions that are coming from central offices and from City Hall that directly impact their child's education and their family life. ‘Are you opening for in-person learning? Where does somebody register for in-person learning? What if I want to have a blended model? Meaning part of the time my child's at home and part of the time the child's in school? Or what if I just want to make sure that I retain my child at home for whatever extenuating circumstances that is? What are the different options for me? Also what about the test and trace, that was also very big, because that process is run by City Hall, but it's mandated in all schools that people will be randomly tested for COVID. And what does that process look like? If I choose to opt out, what does that look for my child's learning options?’ I think that because there's so many little technical what ifs in terms of all of us staring into the abyss and working in the unknown, because we are dealing with something that none of us have had to deal with in, I don't know how many years.

In order to address such questions throughout the pandemic the FACE office has hosted routine “large-scale information sessions” online, along with weekly bulletins where they keep the public updated on the status of remote learning, hybrid learning, and in-person learning, along with Covid-19 testing and tracing procedures. These have included joint online sessions with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. At the district and borough levels they have held forums and conversations with families. “One thing we all say in FACE is that there is no downside in overcommunicating even when you don’t know what the answer is,” Graham says. FACE set up a multi-tiered system of real-time, two-way communication and information-sharing with different levels of parent leadership. Parent Empowerment Liaisons (formerly Outreach Specialists) host weekly check-ins with school-level Parent Coordinators, while District Liaisons check in with CEC parent leaders, and the Deputy Chancellor meets with citywide leadership monthly. As Rivera describes,
I think that in the very beginning, I want to say the first two weeks or month everything was halted because we were still trying to find our footing in this new world...it was very hard for us to sort of imagine what we were going to do. How are we going to support? But then the mandate from our leadership was to make sure that we were having weekly or biweekly check-ins with these parent leaders to make sure that we were offering them information in as close to real-time as possible about different things that were happening system-wide, but also to hear feedback from those parent leaders about what's happening on the ground.

**Parent Governance Structures Go Virtual**

Members of the FACE team—now integrated into the broader FACE Office of Family and Community Empowerment, many of whom had been trained as Family Outreach Specialists in the Ladder of Engagement organizing approach to do relational, *in-person* outreach—were now suddenly tasked with facilitating family empowerment during a pandemic. They had to keep the entire system of parent governance structures – PTAs, CECs, etc. – up and running, amidst Covid-19 school closures. Thus, they had to shift the entire system onto virtual platforms over the course of a week. For instance, Mendez explains, there were immediate transitions that needed to take place in order to keep the mandated structures of school governance functioning:

[I]t was, for all of us, extremely dramatic, and stressful, and life-changing. It literally was, in a very short amount of time, how do you transition the largest school system in the country to a virtual environment?...One of the things that I was very impressed with was how all of us just came together and broke down, "Okay, what are the things that we need to do immediately? And what we need to do immediately is that councils, from a state mandate, need to meet monthly. So we need to be able to figure out a way virtually how to make that happen." And there were certain things that we needed to figure out from a process point of view. "Okay, how does that transition or translate into a virtual world?

The most urgent emerging role that FACE staff needed to fill was that of technical support provider. As alluded to above, many parent leaders at the school, district and citywide level, were not familiar with the Zoom software which the DOE, like most organizations globally, used as its primary virtual platform. “The FACE team has had to be the experts and the change agents that has taught thousands of parents how to use the virtual tools,” Alana Abrams, a senior level officer at the Division of Community Empowerment, Partnerships and
Communications, said. Furthermore, many FACE staff themselves had to learn how to operate the platform and troubleshoot. Taylor summarizes some of the immediate questions the team confronted:

  How do we make sure that folks are comfortable getting on [Zoom]? How do we train parents on how to do Zoom? How do we get other parents that know how to use Zoom to train other parents how to do Zoom? Because we can't do everything, how do we train people to facilitate a meeting digitally?

FACE coordinated trainings to teach virtual skills to a vastly diverse DOE staff and body of parent leaders, many of whom do not speak English or lack computer literacy. Trainings covered: how to download zoom on their computers; how to set up and log into meetings; the technical logistics of running meetings and keeping them secure; and muting and unmuting participants for public comment among other skills. While regulations had always stipulated that parent governance bodies are required to meet in person, FACE staff found themselves having to swiftly develop new policy guidance for parent leaders and school staff on how to conduct PTA and CEC meetings virtually. As Newman explains,

  So initially we were trying to figure out if PAs and PTAs still have to have meetings, how can they hold these meetings?...we did a lot of trainings on how to... The Guidance Home facilitated an effective meeting. We did one on PA, PTA Zoom, how to set up Zoom accounts, how to hold a Zoom election, PA, PTA election. We did one on the financials, like I think it was mainly like, "Ah, we're financials. We did one on by-laws." Virtual, but I think parents found it difficult to navigate this whole new technology that we're in with the Zoom, and I think that kind of delayed some of the work that could have been pushed forward...

Graham elaborates on the virtual guidelines and protocols that FACE created for school districts on how to elect parent leaders: “A lot of families and schools had just not quite figured out how to have a meeting online. We had to work through policy considerations about how do you hold an election when you can't do it in person, how do you verify the eligibility of people to run for office, how do you verify the eligibility of people to vote in a Zoom meeting?” At one point, the DOE had to change their zoom licenses to allow for larger attendance at PTA meetings: “It sounds ridiculous but DOE Zoom licenses only allow up to 300 people. But we have goals to have far more than 300 parents who are part of the PTA. So, we had colleagues who had to figure out with our IT department how to change the licensing to do that,” Graham says. In order to maintain the democratic integrity of the school governance process, FACE
had to make sure virtual meetings were accessible, providing online translation services, and other measures. As Mendez describes,

All our council meetings, by state law, have to be public. So in-person, they were always all open to the public. When we were talking about having meetings virtually and the councils were setting up their meetings virtually, we had to make sure that it was accessible, that it was open to the public as well… In an in-person meeting, that would mean having an interpreter and having microphones for the parents so that they can hear what's being said translated into the language that they speak. So we transitioned that virtually…[We] ensure that all of the supportive services to the public continued, meaning that, at our meetings, we would have translation and interpretation.

Rivera emphasizes the importance of scheduling trainings at the right time of day for parents so that they don’t conflict with their children’s learning.

The idea of being extra mindful about what day or time you're choosing to post a training for, because maybe their kids are using whatever available devices they have in the house for learning. So you shouldn't do a training in the AM if parents need to make sure that that technology is available for their kids to learn during the daytime.

Within these virtual meetings, FACE staff sought to maintain their hands-on mentorship and accomplish many of the same goals they had previously pursued in the pre-Covid era. As Rivera observes:

Structuring your agenda, making sure that whatever's coming up on the school calendar for your parent leadership spaces, you guys are hitting your targets, you guys are hitting the mark on deliverables and different compliance pieces. So it is mentorship. It's also about hearing them and what they want to see addressed in those monthly meetings as well.

Participants assert that FACE was largely successful at keeping parent governance structures up and running and functional throughout the pandemic. According to Mendez:

[O]ur parents, once again, with everything they had on them, continued to represent their families. All of our councils continued to meet, all 36, having virtual meetings, continued to advocate despite so many of our parent leaders suffering loss themselves; suffering either personal loss of family, or suffering loss of just security in the sense of financial security…A week after the pandemic, when the whole city shut down, we had [inaudible] training a week after. We didn't skip a beat; we just kept going. And our parents were at that training; they were there.

In the process, FACE staff are also learning valuable virtual skills themselves. Rivera says:
It feels like now, I have a new set of skills that I can work with, on how to do things digitally. Whereas before, most of my work or all of it really hinged on that personal touch, like me doing trainings in person and making sure that I was doing outreach and all those things. Now those things, I do digitally because I’m still working from home and we’re still learning remotely…On a personal level, as an employee, it feels nice to have a new set of skills to do those same things that I did in person, but to adapt them to the virtual realm.

**Virtual tools increased access and attendance**

Paradoxically, while the pandemic shuttered the school system and disrupted business as usual, shifting to a virtual environment drastically increased parent attendance at virtual meetings and events, providing increased access for parents who were previously unable to attend meetings in person. According to Aubert, FACE organized a virtual forum with the Chancellor which was attended by 90,000 Spanish-speaking parents, (more people than could fit in Madison Square Garden, she notes). As Madani explains,

…we found out that our participation has increased more than 100% when it came to virtual trainings, virtual informational sessions. It's crazy how some [monthly] meetings that happened at a CEC level or at a city level with parent leaders…would have maybe four or five parents attend, and everybody else are just staff members from the school or from the district. And then [they] happen virtually, and you have 80 to 100 parents attending, because this way a parent can cook, a parent can clean, they don't need childcare. They can do their thing at home and still listen to the information that they need to be updated on.

According to Graham, "We had an information session in July 2020 that 60,000 people attended. So, our scope has definitely expanded with the virtual environment that we’re living in.”

**Parent University**

In November 2020, in response to the challenges of remote learning, DOE Chancellor Richard Carranza launched Parent University, which, according to the DOE website, is “a new online platform that offers a centralized catalog of courses, live events, and activities to help connect with families and support students. The platform offers all New York City parents and guardians access to live and on-demand courses and resources across multiple discipline areas
and grade bands.” In a November 2020 press release, the Chancellor emphasized the department’s commitment to parent empowerment through this new project: “Through Parent University we’re finding more ways to empower parents and guardians as partners. We know our families are busier than ever, and this platform is designed to meet parents where they are, whether that’s pre-recorded courses, or live virtual events.” The FACE team worked with the Division of Instructional and Information technology to design and operationalize Parent University. In order to compile this treasure trove of resources, the FACE team mobilized all the expertise it could find throughout the DOE, enabling the Parent University (PU) to offer a broad spectrum of classes covering topics such as ‘Parent Elections, Grievances, and Outreach”; “Implicit Bias Presentations”; “How to Talk to Loved Ones about getting Vaccinated”; “How to Apply to Middle or High School”; “Mindfulness for Parents”; “Positive Reinforcement at Home”; and the “Impact of Sleep, Movement, and Nutrition.” All families can create a free account to register for any online workshop, event, or resource completely free. According to Newman, PU currently has approximately 55,000 subscribers. Graham describes the range of offerings from PU:

[W]e have everything from how to calculate slope and help your child calculate slope, to a really good and solid series of how to support your children in the special education component…Like transitions and how to get ready for college, or if your child has an IEP and so forth. So, it's a very wide range…

“IT's all in one place,” Taylot says. “So you can check, you can search a topic and find something. It's in different languages, and folks get, for a lot of them, folks get a certificate of completion…you have to be on a computer...but I think this will pick up because they also keep the recordings, so you can go back and watch the recordings and learn from that.”

Participants note that there was a serious need among families for a lot of this information about how the DOE as an institution functions:

It's not just about technology and it's not just about what we offer as FACE as an office, but as an institution, as the DOE. There's so many things that parents don't know like, how to read your child's IEP [Independent Education Plan], if your child has an IEP. How to ask for referral services to be evaluated, to see if your child needs an IEP, different things like that.

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4 Ibid.
Parent University classes teach critically important digital literacy skills to (often older) parents and guardians “who’ve been on the other side of the technology divide” according to Rivera.

It’s a platform that parents can literally log on and it's like a university registrar. You're choosing your courses and you can see the videos on demand. When they were giving it live, you were unable to see it. It's a different platform that I think is working on making itself palatable to parents and guardians who’ve been on the other side of that technology divide of that digital divide. That didn't even know how to work a smart phone. Didn't know that I could actually see a video while connecting with other people to host a meeting. How do I prepare an agenda, but also how do I share that agenda on the screen? Different little things that, perhaps, me and our generation take for granted, because we're savvier with technology, but other people aren't.

Mendez emphasizes the extent to which virtual tools have increased the accessibility for parents to access the institution right from their homes:

[A parent] now, in the privacy of their home, could log in to a meeting; be part of the conversation; reach the chancellor directly. The chancellor started to have town halls...he always had town halls, but we'd have town halls virtually. And be able to share their feedback, be able to advocate, and be able to do that in a way that they couldn't do it before, that maybe traveling to a meeting, staying very late at a meeting, maybe wasn't possible for them because they have children. They had to care for them. Now they can do that.

The PU platform is more than a top-down channel for central-level administrators and experts to deliver instruction; it also increases horizontal connectivity and content-sharing across schools and networks of parent leaders on the ground who are empowered to lead their own workshops and upload their own content, now able to share their knowledge and skills with a citywide audience. “They host trainings for their own families. In fact, a lot of parent coordinators have been using Parent University as a platform for their own community groups,” Graham says. “So instead of telling a parent to go and see something, they'll host a watch party and use that as content…parent leaders are actually really pleased by the level of scope and reach that they’re able to achieve with an online platform.” According to Rivera, Parent University was born from FACE... it was about laying the groundwork and connecting with those parent leaders in our different schools and districts to make the best use of that platform for course content and learning. But also I think that even a lot of school administrators and parent coordinators and district staff that we liaise with also found a utility in that, because they themselves can also upload course content or different workshops onto that platform and have it be readily accessible for an entire
city. So, whereas you were probably doing a short little workshop for your school or your district, now, an entire city can see that, can have access to that.

Offering these online learning opportunities in multiple languages, unsurprisingly, has been one of the agency’s most effective strategies to stay connected to English Learner families amidst pandemic school closures: to provide them with critical technology-based skills to support their child’s learning at home. For instance, the virtual course “What is Special Education” is offered in 8 different languages: Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Korean, Arabic, Urdu, French, and Russian. As Newman says, “[Parent University] has multiple languages, so they have to just click on the Google Translate and then can be translated into their language of choice.”

The Digital is Depersonalized
While virtual meetings may broaden the scope of attendance, they did not necessarily deepen participation among, or relationships with, parents. While it may be relatively easy for parents to pre-register and log into an online meeting on a screen, according to participants, this is no substitute for the interactive, one-on-one relationship-building with parents that the FACE team had done in prior years. As Rivera reflects,

We're creatures that are very social. We thrive on being social…[Going virtual] is difficult. A lot of what we were teaching when we were outreach specialists was about building those personal connections, but doing that face to face. Asking people for their contact information, having a clipboard ready with a sign in sheet, and then using that sign in sheet to do one-on-one calls with people and following up with them after a meeting and so on, to give them your elevator pitch about who you are and why you come to this work. All that has been transformed because we're in a digital space...It's very depersonalized when you're doing things digitally, because you're just not there physically. When you're getting a text message or you're getting an email, [it’s hard to know] what the tone is or what the intention is. A lot of it gets lost because it's just in print…And so I think we're more effective in person..when we're able to engage people one-on-one, and there's no room for interpretation…a lot of intention and inflection is lost in that digital communication.

Rivera worries that, in virtual spaces—where she can no longer interact in person with families—she is losing the “personal touch” which characterized her family engagement work before Covid:
So it's hard. It's definitely a learning exercise for all of us and a point of growth for all of us as an office about how we can make a process that hinges so much on the personal touch to still be effective but now also socially distanced. Where I would feel uncomfortable giving my phone number to a perfect stranger, especially if they asked me for that information at a meeting that was happening virtually, and I have no sense or pickup no vibes from that person from the screen.

**Conclusion**

In closing, this chapter provided an exploratory snapshot of how the country’s largest public-school district was impacted by the pandemic—through the perspectives of FACE staff who experienced it first hand—as well as the way in which NYC-CS and FACE staff were able to respond to families’ pressing needs. As shown above, Covid-19 school closures shed light on and exacerbated a “digital divide” along with stark racial and economic disparities among the city’s families and communities. The vital institutional role that schools play as a social life line was demonstrated by the tens of thousands that relied on the school system for meals and access to computers during the pandemic. The crisis highlighted the salience of the full-service community school strategy: because community schools were equipped with extensive social supports and had established trusting partnerships with CBOs and stronger ties with families, they were able to identify and respond to people’s needs more efficiently. FACE staff, now restructured into borough empowerment teams, successfully carried out the near impossible task of transitioning the entire system of parent governance structures to a virtual platform in a matter of days. Partly enabled by the fact that they had spent the previous years establishing deeper relationships with students’ families, FACE successfully created a system of frequent communication and information dissemination; established a virtual platform for parent governance bodies to continue meeting as the crisis unfolded, while simultaneously both learning the new technology themselves and training parent leaders on how to use it. Paradoxically, shifting parent governance meetings and trainings to a virtual platform led to increased attendance for many parents who could not make it to in-person events. However some FACE staff felt that digital environment was de-personalized and limited the opportunities for deeper engagement and leadership development.
CHAPTER 9
INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZING
UNDERGIRDED BY HOLISTIC COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

In 2014, New York City, the largest urban school district in the country, launched an ambitious Community Schools Initiative after years of market-based reforms. Using a mixed-method exploratory study, I set out to investigate a major component of this Initiative—the family engagement program.

Summary of Study
The qualitative portion of my study asked the following research questions: What were the driving forces in bringing the Community Schools Initiative into being and in lifting up the importance of family engagement within that initiative? Through what particular processes and structures did the Department of Education develop and implement the family engagement component of the community schools? What were the features of their approach that made it effective (or not) in reaching and engaging parents? What were their successes, what were their challenges, and how did they address the latter? How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the family engagement work? In the quantitative research portion of my study, I asked: Are NYC community schools associated with higher levels of family involvement compared to traditional NYC schools? What contextual factors predict higher levels of family involvement in community schools?

In order to answer these questions qualitatively, I conducted in-depth virtual interviews, by zoom, with 24 participants including Family Outreach Specialists who supported parent engagement at community schools, senior-level DOE staff, community organizers who originally advocated for the Community Schools Initiative, as well as nationally-recognized experts who were part of the advisory board. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed; the transcripts were coded, using Max QDA software, through a set of inductive and deductive codes in order to identify key themes that emerged from the data. In order to answer my quantitative question, I employed a quasi-experimental design—using CEM (Coarsened Exact Matching) and multi-regression analysis—to compare data on school-level
aggregate parent engagement outcomes with outcomes of a matched group of comparison schools that were not part of the program.

In Chapter 4, I described the leading role that educational justice and community organizing groups played in mobilizing parents in low-income black and brown communities across the city, to solicit their ideas and demands for the schools they wanted for their children. Parents repeatedly demanded more resources and services for the schools. This outpouring produced a blueprint for holistic, full-service community schools to meet the needs of the “whole child” and family, a blueprint which was adopted by de Blasio’s mayoral campaign and implemented by his newly elected administration. I found that a unique and powerful feature of this school reform effort was the hiring of outside community organizers and parent leaders into the DOE as part of its Family and Community Outreach (FACE) team. The FACE team proceeded to host “core leadership trainings” inviting hundreds of historically marginalized parents into the downtown Tweed headquarters, where they learned about school governance and developed new skills and confidence to advocate for their children’s education.

In Chapter 5, I found that, through their Ladders of Engagement program, the Family Outreach Specialists used explicit community organizing strategies and techniques to reach, mobilize, recruit and empower large numbers of community school parents and train them as active leaders. They moved parents up the Ladder through door-knocking, building one-on-one relationships, using pledge cards, conducting large scale phone banks, organizing Community School Forums, and drawing parents on to school decision-making bodies such as PTAs and Community School Teams. I reported that the FACE staff believed the results of these methods to be largely successful: they helped parents develop meaningful new relationships, both with staff and with other parents; increased their active participation in the school and on school decision-making bodies; helped some parents find pathways to employment in the school system; and propelled some of them to take collective action in the broader civic sphere – in one case, stopping school closures in their community.

In Chapter 6, I found that by implementing four new structures at the school level, community schools enhanced their capacity for family engagement: a partnership with a community-based organization (CBO), the hiring of a Community School Director, the formation of a Community School Team, and the hosting of Community School Forums. I found that, in some cases, Outreach Specialists faced resistance to the new family engagement
approaches from pre-existing parent and staff structures. The specialists had to learn to navigate these complex relationships, and either win over or work around these barriers, sometimes creating parallel structures. Meanwhile, staff and parents at many schools had an open mindset from the start and desired to take advantage of the extra support provided by FACE. The overall Initiative also ran into substantial challenges at the macro level, particularly those inherent in scaling up and sustaining such an ambitious undertaking, according to some participants I interviewed. The FACE team staff found it difficult to keep pace with the rapid expansion in the number of community schools added each year and then the restructuring of the DOE which led to the FACE team being absorbed into the entire NYC public school system.

In Chapter 7, I found that community school status had a positive and statistically significant effect on several school-level parent engagement outcome variables. Community schools, when compared with matched comparison schools, were associated with: higher increases in parent survey response rates, higher percentages of parents who were asked to – or have – volunteered in the past year to support their school, and a substantially higher chance of receiving an “exceeding target” rating on the “strong family-community-ties” category of school quality.

In Chapter 8, I discussed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic—which shuttered schools in March 2020—on the family engagement work of community schools. The FACE staff members were now reorganized and integrated into the larger Division of Community Empowerment, Partnerships and Communications, which served all schools not just community schools. Participants described the monumental task of shifting the entire family and community engagement apparatus, as well as parent governance structures, to a virtual environment. I found that the social service infrastructure and neighborhood connections established through the community schools served as a social safety net in certain vital ways during the Covid-19 school closures, suggesting that community schools had become neighborhood hubs and therefore were essential to the community during a crisis. FACE staff worked to maintain constant and clear communication with families: updating them on remote learning; creating new virtual platforms and guidelines for parent governance bodies throughout the pandemic so that thousands of parents could attend the meetings.
Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature

Through this study of NYC community schools and their embedded Ladders of Engagement program, I have traced several effective processes through which a large urban school district increased levels of parent participation and leadership in schools and at a district level. This was accomplished through two major strategies: 1) a district-wide community schools strategy which provided wraparound services to students and parents at struggling schools and 2) an unusual and transformative community organizing approach to family engagement in the community schools, empowering parents as leaders in the school change process. These combined strategies reinforced and enhanced one another.

Thus, this study contributes to two key bodies of research: 1) how the community school model can be particularly effective at increasing parent engagement and leadership; and 2) the power of community organizing methods to recruit, train and mobilize parent leaders. This study bridges these literatures; it shows that a district can implement these strategies successfully in tandem with one another.

Contributions to the Community Schools Literature

While much research has focused on the nature of the community school model, or the impacts and efficacy of individual community schools, few studies have examined why and how a large urban school district comes to adopt and implement an ambitious, large-scale community schools initiative, especially in a policy environment dominated by market-reform strategies. Nor have many scholars analyzed how districts can design and implement such an initiative in an equitable way that centers the voices of families of color. Nor have they identified the essential factors or preliminary conditions that may affect the success of district-level community school initiatives post-implementation. My study sheds light on these less-explored elements.

In chapter 4, the grassroots education activists I interviewed described a high demand among low-income families of color for the wraparound services, extended learning opportunities and extra-curricular programming that is associated with community schools, especially when contrasted with failed market reform efforts and school closures that had disrupted these communities in the past. I found that community organizing groups played an indispensable role in a) drawing out and articulating this demand and “people-powered
educational vision” for community schools, and b) strategically intervening in de Blasio’s mayoral campaign, shaping the administration’s education equity agenda, and ultimately ensuring that the NYCDOE’s Community Schools Initiative was designed and implemented in an equitable way which centered the needs and voices of black and brown families. This finding supports prior research that has documented the effectiveness of community organizing in winning meaningful school reforms (Warren et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2015; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Quinn & Carl, 2013). The ability of education justice activists to garner this popular support for increased wraparound services to aid struggling schools—a demand which was repeatedly voiced by families in the 75 neighborhood assemblies and on the “idea bus” leading up to the 2013 mayoral election—was a crucial factor in influencing the new administration to adopt the community school strategy, rather than some other strategy, to improve the City’s most disadvantaged and low-performing schools. It also suggests that poor families of color, targeted most frequently with school turnaround schemes, when given meaningful opportunities for input, prefer policies that provide additional resources and supports to their children’s existing neighborhood schools rather than punitive measures to sanction or close these schools, or rather than school ‘choice’ policies which often entail sending their kids further away to schools in other parts of the city. Furthermore, in light of the subsequent successes and positive impacts of the community schools documented in this study and especially in the RAND evaluation (Johnston et al., 2020), my findings on the community-driven origins of the initiative suggest that the implementation of community schools (and school turnaround initiatives in general) are more successful when they meaningfully incorporate family and community voices right from the start. Additionally, because full-service community schools are expensive, they may require the kind of robust grassroots advocacy that I documented in this study in order to overcome opposition and to hold school systems accountable for authentic implementation. Expanding such beneficial but costly programs may likely require sustained organizing as well.

Secondly, this study contributes to our understanding of why community schools are particularly well positioned to develop significant forms of family engagement. Unlike prior school turnaround initiatives, which often take a punitive “accountability” approach and place a narrow emphasis on raising test scores, the Community Schools model embodies a different philosophical approach that focuses on addressing the needs of the whole child and the whole
family. This holistic model – which emerged from the grassroots “uprising” described in Ch. 4 and from decades of youth development work by NYC community organizations such as the Children’s Aid Society – includes physical and mental health services, an extended school day, a culturally relevant curriculum, afterschool enrichment programming, adult education classes, and the opening of the school facilities during non-school hours. Perhaps most significantly, the NYC Department of Education explicitly established family engagement as one of the six key pillars of its Community Schools Initiative.

My study adds to the literature about how community schools can engage and benefit families (Blank et al., 2003; Heers et al., 2016; Maier et al., 2017; Warren, 2005; Weiss & Reville, 2019). In particular, I examined how the NYC initiative put in place specific new structures and staff positions to build capacity for meaningful family engagement. As described in Chapters 4-6, the NYC Community Schools program included the creation of: a new Office of Community Schools to coordinate services and supports across the city; a citywide team of Family Outreach Specialists to support the capacity of community schools to recruit parent leaders; a partnership between each community school and a lead Community-Based Organization (CBO) to provide comprehensive services; a Community School Director for each school to coordinate the school-CBO partnership and the provision of services; a Community School Leadership Team to foster collaborative decision-making in the implementation of the model; and lastly, annual Community School Forums to bring together all the school stakeholders to develop and implement the overall plans for the school, and especially to foster parent participation and leadership in school decision-making. Perhaps most significantly, NYC-CS provided essential services inherent in most community schools, but, as described in the next section, went beyond that paradigm, by using community organizing methods to support active parent leadership.

My quantitative analysis corroborates prior studies that demonstrate community schools have a positive effect on family engagement (Blank et al., 2003; Maier et al., 2017; Castrechini & London, 2012). I found that community school status had a positive effect on several indicators of a school’s parent engagement levels. Community schools in my matched sample were associated with, on average, higher increases in parent survey response rates, higher percentages of positive parent survey responses to a broad range of questions pertaining to the “strong family-community ties” element of school quality (a significantly higher chance
of receiving an “exceeding target” rating on this element), higher percentages of parents who report that they were asked to or had volunteered in the past year to support their school, and with slightly greater increases in parent respondents’ satisfaction with staff communication.

**Contributions to the Community Organizing Literature**

As evidenced by the processes analyzed in chapter 5, this study supports findings from prior research that community organizing methods are a powerful and effective way to engage parents in schools. As I described in Chapter 2, research suggests that community organizing efforts for school reform often share core processes, such as: 1) a focus on one-on-one relationship-building between parents, and between parents and educators, to build social capital; 2) political education to help parents situate their personal challenges within a broader analysis of structural injustice; 3) leadership training and development for participants to build the skills and sense of self-efficacy to become active leaders and equal partners in school governance; and 4) taking collective public action to effect social change (Henderson, 2010; Mediratta, 2013; Warren, 2022; Warren et al., 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren et al., 2015). My findings revealed that the FACE team’s Family Outreach Specialists used these strategies as well.

While a substantial body of literature has described these core processes of organizing for school reform, much of it has focused on the campaigns and strategies of relatively small, community nonprofit organizations—rich in spirit and political acumen but poor in resources—and how they fight to change school policies working mostly from the outside. These community organizations often face substantial limitations in their resources (usually relying on grants and foundation funding) and thus limitations in the scope and capacity of their work (Warren & Tynan, 2021). That is, they may be able to organize deeply, but not broadly. Organizing efforts are often restricted to one neighborhood, one or several schools, or one constituency (Warren and Mapp, 2011). However, my study demonstrated that such organizing practices can be successfully institutionalized and carried out on a much larger scale, by a major urban school district and still remain true to community organizing processes. My research showed the significant power that accrues when governmental resources are leveraged to support grassroots organizing.
The emergence of this "institutional organizing" was the result of an inside-outside strategy forged between grassroots activists and progressive city government actors during the campaign to shape and launch the Community Schools Initiative. In most instances, such collaboration is temporary, and is dropped by government officials when considered no longer politically expedient. However, in this case, the effort led a public institution—the NYC Department of Education, now operating within de Blasio’s progressive administration—to hire many of the community organizers and parent leaders who were previously working outside the institution, to work inside as central office staff. Working within the institution as the DOE’s new Family & Community Outreach Team, these organizers (now called Family Outreach Specialists) brought their organizing skills and experiences and leveraged their neighborhood relationships to implement a family engagement program that would genuinely empower parents and develop their leadership skills. Thus, this study shows how a community organizing approach can be adopted and enacted by a large urban school district.

The different strategies used by the Family Outreach Specialists reflect the core organizing processes delineated in the literature on community organizing – both for school reform and more generally. My analysis and elaboration of these processes adds to prior studies on how community organizing has been used to develop parent leadership as part of school change efforts (Warren, 2001; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren, 2005). In some cases, my findings are similar to those of previous studies, and in other cases they differ in that they are describing both some new tactics and also old ones used on a much broader scale. I documented several organizing strategies that the FACE team used to engage parents: firstly, the DOE sent organizers, before they were officially called ‘FACE’, out into low-income communities to knock on doors in order to meet families where they’re at, build face-to-face relationships with parents, listen to their concerns about their children’s education and raise awareness of the new community schools. While door-knocking is a commonplace tactic for community and political organizing campaigns (Swarts, 2011; Trapp, 1986), it is almost unheard of as a school engagement strategy. It does, in some ways, resemble the parent-teacher home visit model implemented in Chicago and other districts to break down geographical and cultural barriers between educators and families (Warren & Mapp, 2011, pp. 180-181). While those visits may allow more time for deep relationship-building, they are conducted on a smaller scale around a limited number of schools, whereas the Renewal Summer campaign knocked on 45,000 doors
across the largest-school district in the country. It was also part of a broader program to identify and recruit parents into a leadership pipeline, rather than a more restricted focus on assisting parents to support their child’s learning at home.

Afterwards, operating as the FACE team out of the central office, Outreach Specialists supported the family engagement capacity of community schools year-round. They ventured into community schools and their surrounding neighborhoods to conduct one-on-one conversations. In the process they formed face-to-face relationships with parents, modeling these practices for school staff and serving to connect families with schools. As documented in prior studies, these relational one-on-ones are a core organizing tactic to build relationships, identify individuals’ concerns, skills and passions, and ultimately to build trust (Schutz & Sandy, 2011; Speer & Hughey, 1995; Trapp, 1986; Warren and Mapp, 2011, pp. 39, 43, 62;). While scholars have discussed the need for educators to have one-on-ones with parents, they have not examined how they can be conducted in a systematic way on a large scale. This study demonstrated how one-on-ones were institutionalized across more than 200 community schools by a district-level team of outreach staff that had the right training and could assist schools by focusing on this form of deep relationship-building. In some ways, this district-led initiative resembled the Logan Square Neighborhood Association’s Parent Mentor Program in which hundreds of Latino parents were brought into school classrooms as parent mentors (Warren & Mapp, 2011, pp. 175-177). Not only did the outreach staff make these face-to-face connections, but they used pledge cards, a tried-and-true organizing tool in housing and other political campaigns (Burgess, Haney, Snyder, Sullivan & Transue, 2000), but not in education settings. The cards were used to encourage parents to commit to take actions such as attending and participating in school events and leadership trainings and offering them multiple ways to get more involved in their child’s education and school decision-making.

Another key tactic, which is designed more for breadth than depth, is use of the political campaign practice of phone-banking (Bond & Exley, 2016, pp. 41-45). While phone-banking is a common organizing tool typically used in electoral campaigns, it is less thought of as a method to be used in schools. While it is not unusual for school staff to call parents at home when needed, these phone banks represented another level of sophistication, one that resembled a “Get-Out-the-Vote” campaign. In chapter 5, I documented how FACE organized phone banks for community school parents across the city at the school- and district-level to
allow for large-scale parent-to-parent outreach and recruitment. By using a Voter Activation Network (VAN) computer system, FACE tracked parent phone contacts, responses, and participation in a systematic way which enabled them to move parents from rung to rung up a leadership ladder. FACE recruited parents into the phone banking process, so that they developed outreach and organizing skills as they recruited other parents.

Another important new structure established by the Initiative became one of the key organizing tools used by the Family Outreach Specialists: the required annual Community School Forums. The FOSs mobilized parents around the forums and encouraged them to take on leadership roles. The months of preparation for these forums constituted a new collaborative planning process; those parents who became involved early on gained real hands-on leadership skills as they helped plan the event, conduct outreach to other parents and community members, and then took on facilitation roles at the forum itself. On a broader scale, the forums provided a platform for all parents and community members to share their ideas for the school with educators and help develop the vision and Comprehensive Education Plan for the school in the coming year. These forums resemble the democratic, participatory, base-building events in other community organizing campaigns, such as the gatherings organized by the Industrial Area Foundation that brought together school stakeholders in neighborhood churches. These large events gather all members of a community into the public space to realize their shared concerns and collective power. It should be emphasized that in the NYC case, these forums were institutionalized: they were required by the DOE and, for many schools, became part of the organizational culture. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter 6, some principals said they could never imagine going back to the old way of operating, in which school goals and plans were almost solely driven by the staff.

Perhaps one of the most important elements of the Ladders of Engagement, which distinguishes it from more traditional family engagement efforts, is its strong focus on parent leadership development. This focus is central to most community organizing strategies, whether in the education arena or not (Evans & Shirley, 2008; Henderson, 2010; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren, 2013; Warren, Mapp & Kuttner, 2015; Warren & Tynan, 2021; Warren, 2022). Through core leader trainings at the citywide and school level, parents learned about school budgets and governance (including parent governance structures), developed public speaking and facilitation skills, learned how to conduct parent-to-parent outreach in a
systematic way – all of which served to instill new knowledge, marketable skills, confidence, and a sense of self-agency to advocate for their own child and for the broader school community. Participating in this community change process was a lesson in civic skill-building that reverberated beyond the school system, as some parents became active leaders in their neighborhoods, formed stronger ties with local government, and even ran for office.

Leveraging Institutional Resources to Generate Social Capital

Scholars studying community organizing have often highlighted the role of relationship-building and the subsequent generation of social capital as key processes through which low-income communities build solidarity and take action (Warren, 2001; Warren, Thompson & Sagert, 2001). As stated in Chapter 2, education organizing is no exception (Ishimaru, 2014; Warren & Mapp 2011, pp. 24-26; Warren et al., 2009; Warren, Thompson & Sagert, 2001). My study found that relationship-building was a central underpinning of the Ladders of Engagement program, from the one-on-ones in the neighborhood to the community school forums to the leadership trainings at Tweed.

In their book *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform* (2011), Warren & Mapp describe cases in which community organizations first bring parents together outside of the school system; this is particularly important since research shows that working-class parents are less connected to each other around their children’s schools than their more affluent counterparts (pp. 24-25). Organizers create spaces for relationship-building, identifying social and cultural commonalities, often in small intimate settings such as house meetings that allow people to share their pain, realize their challenges are not a result of individual failure but of systemic inequities, and build the confidence necessary to take public action (p. 25). In my study, however, I show that the organizing in NYC-CS was actually led by the school district, so it was the institution itself that created the spaces for relationship-building and fostered the development of both bonding and bridging social capital.

Bonding Social Capital Among Parents

The Family and Community Outreach Team prioritized relationship-building as a key organizing strategy. The implementation of full-service community schools bolstered by
FACE’s *Ladders of Engagement* initiative generated powerful forms of *bonding social capital* among thousands of parents. The program enabled them to gather and form relationships within and across community schools, whether at core leadership trainings at Tweed, large Community School Forums, Community School Team meetings, or parent-to-parent phone banks. Through these structures and collaborative spaces, parents and caregivers were able to actively participate, share and listen to one another, identify common concerns about their children’s education, and gain a level of collective consciousness that their personal challenges were shaped by structural inequities that impacted other black and brown parents as well, according to the family outreach specialists that I interviewed. Through these practices, the community schools were turned into “institutional sites for social capital building,” a phrase coined by Warren and Mapp (2011) for similar processes elsewhere, but ones which were driven by outside organizers. Ultimately, the New York program was a community-building process which led to the development of trusting relationships – bonding social capital – and new forms of solidarity creating the conditions and confidence for collective action among public school parents who supported one another’s leadership development as part of a community change process.

**Bridging Social Capital Between the School System and Families**

In addition to these new spaces for parent-to-parent connection, the Department of Education provided an unprecedented amount of institutional resources and services to community schools and their families — not the least of which was dedicated family outreach staff — to build each school’s dual capacity for connecting schools and families. Thus, the program generated particularly distinctive forms of *bridging social capital* between school staff and parents of color, catalyzing a shift in the relationship between the institution and historically disenfranchised families. While the historic relationship between the DOE and families of color had often been contentious, especially during the Bloomberg years, the Community Schools Initiative and its core leader trainings of parents expanded and cultivated what had previously been rare opportunities for bridging social capital between these different stakeholders. This happened at different levels. Firstly, as described in chapter 4, at the citywide level, the FACE team literally “opened up the halls of power” and the institution’s accompanying resources to low-income black and Latino parents across the City, a space from
which these families had historically been excluded. Recruiting hundreds of black and Latino parents to come to the Tweed building DOE headquarters, parents learned the inner workings of the education governance system, including where and how school decisions and budgets were made. FACE staff brought these parents together with hundreds of educators, school staff and administrators in trainings where stakeholders shared and learned from each other’s perspectives; they developed new relationships across race and class, while identifying shared concerns and building unity around common goals to support children and families in holistic ways. FACE staff trainers explicitly addressed power dynamics by challenging the institutionally-embedded deficit-based views of families of color held by many white school staff, with programmatic training on cultivating an asset-based approach towards families, one which values their cultures, wisdom, and expertise, and uphold equity. FACE’s core leader trainings resemble the Parent Leadership Academies organized by the One LA Initiative in which educators and Latino immigrant parents were brought together to learn school budgets and the education system and to advance parent leadership skills so that they could better advocate for their children (Warren & Mapp, 2011, pp.84-86). These sessions strengthened connections and trust between parents and school staff – that is, they generated bridging social capital. But in this case, as in others, the New York initiative differed in that it was run primarily by organizers who were now part of the DOE and who were bringing families into the downtown headquarters, the “seat of power” of the school system, which had been notoriously insulated from much contact with grassroots communities.

I found the FACE organizers acted as a relational bridge between the families and the schools, and between the schools and the central office. In this role as a go-between, they brought a channel of accountability directly from the school community back to the administration. This was evidenced several times throughout the study. At times, the FACE organizers were there to emphasize the initiative’s focus on the well-being of the “whole child” and family instead of an exclusive drive to raise test scores. This internal accountability dynamic manifested when FACE staff (who, again, operate within the administration) mobilized their parent leaders on the ground to resist and stop the Department’s plan to close several schools in Far Rockaway. And, because FACE staff had built extensive relationships and bonds of trust among families, and were in constant communication with them and knew
where they lived, the DOE was better equipped to respond to the Covid-19 crisis, and to get families meals, computers and other vital services.

**Bringing It All Together: The Confluence of Two Powerful Approaches**

My study revealed how the New York City Community Schools Initiative combined two powerful family engagement strategies described in the bodies of literature in Chapter 2: the full-service community schools model and the community organizing approach to develop parent leadership. Along this vein my study suggests that, unsurprisingly, social services to meet the needs of the whole family and organizing approaches to transform how parent outreach and engagement is done, can and should be implemented together. Each is more effective when it is buttressed and enhanced by the other. Full-service community schools address the basic needs of children and families, who spend more time at the school taking adult-learning classes, doing after-school enrichment, or receiving health services, and forming relationships with school staff and other parents. Parent organizing and outreach programs harness this infrastructure, leveraging opportunities to recruit parents, provide them with leadership trainings and opportunities, cultivating their civic skills and capacities. Parents are then in a stronger position to take action as public leaders on behalf of their communities. While service-provision models and paradigms do not often include an explicit focus on addressing power differentials or moving parents into civic and political action (Warren, 2005), FACE integrated these approaches as mutually reinforcing systems.

**The Need to Address Racial Equity and Power Differentials Explicitly**

There is no question that in the early years of the initiative, FACE leaders expressed a radical vision using schools to build power among families in black and brown low-income communities. They conveyed an authentic commitment to power-sharing with families and fostering collaborative school governance. However, it’s unclear that this goal was fully realized, as the initiative faced the inevitable bureaucratic challenges of rapid scale-up and grassroots activity dissipated. Carson, from the Coalition for Education Justice, thinks that community schools have the potential to be a vehicle for anti-racism and social justice, but currently still fall short of realizing those deeper aspirations:
Yes, there’s a lot of money that goes to them but everything isn’t about the dollar. It’s not always about how much, but it’s also about how are we spending those dollars and where are we putting in those investments? How do we train up staff? How do we build good school environments? How are we treating students? How are we viewing students? Do we have restorative practices or are we still over-policing students? Have we built strong enough connections, that we no longer have metal detectors or are we still just relying on the same oppressive systems?

But participants suggest that seeds were sown in community schools that laid the groundwork for self-determining communities with transformative possibilities to advance racial and economic equity. As Troy Williams, from the Coalition for Community School Excellence, notes:

Part of the beauty of community schools is that they support people in our communities to take agency and be self-determining…I like to say that if you’re familiar with the seven principles of Kwanzaa, I feel as though the nguzo saba is exactly what should be applied to community schools…that they should be self-determining, that there should be cooperative economics, that there should be purpose. All of those principles apply when you talk about community schools, and when you talk about black and brown people that are primarily being impacted by these services.

Carson is ready to see a more explicit push for racial, immigrant, and gender equity in the community schools:

I feel like the next iteration of community schools has to be that they are the beacon of anti-racism, anti-xenophobia, anti-homophobia, anti-queer phobia, anti-trans phobia, because that is the work of community. And I think that those are the places that haven’t been pushed in community schools. And if you’re not gonna do it in a community school, that has all the infrastructure to be able to do it, then where are you going to do it?

Jacobs, from the Office of Community Schools, acknowledges:

We’re currently looking, as an office, at how we can strengthen and bolster…the principles of community organizing…We’re taking a hard look at the idea of shared power and shared leadership in Community Schools…How are we sure that families are actually making decisions or actually co-leading their schools?... How do we ensure that Community Schools is explicitly anti-racist in its practices and in its programs and…that we’re truly creating spaces.
of shared power, not just where there are structures and practices in place but what’s the underlying work that’s really happening?

Williams reflects on how, amidst the Covid crisis, the Community Schools model was a healing strategy with transformative potential:

It’s not simply wraparound services, it’s a healing strategy. We talk about healing, that opens up a whole other window of consciousness around why this is important. Because there’s a difference between healing and fixing. Fixing something is mechanistic, healing something is organic and it requires a different kind of touch. When you fix something, you do a quick diagnostic and you know whether or not it’s working. You can’t do that with human beings…And then you have children that are coming and they’re eager to come and they’re learning and they feel as though they’re being acknowledged and they feel as if there are adults who can relate to them and their families are being supported in the process and brought in to have input into their children’s educational destiny. That’s a healing model, that’s a strategy…that’s a consciousness that you’re bringing into education which is revolutionary compared to some of these other things we see out here.

**Challenges Faced by the Initiative**

Due to the success of the community schools and the significant benefits reaped from their Ladders of Engagement program, it was therefore a progressive move on the part of de Blasio’s DOE to expand the number of community schools and FACE’s Ladders of Engagement along with them. However, I found that there were myriad challenges in implementing and sustaining such an ambitious scaling up of this program. The number of community schools in the program increased more than six-fold during the first five years, starting with 45 in 2014-15 and growing to 262 by 2018-19. Each Family Outreach Specialist had a rapidly expanding caseload of schools to support, making it increasingly difficult for the FACE team to keep up the level of hands-on support they had previously been able to provide and to stay true to the grassroots organizing model. Several Outreach Specialists I interviewed expressed the sharp need for increased staff to support the parent engagement activities of new schools joining the initiative. While the FACE team did expand, it was not nearly enough to keep up with the community school proliferation.

Then, in the summer of 2018, the DOE decided to restructure. The FACE outreach team was decoupled from the community schools and absorbed into a newly formed, larger
Division of Community Empowerment, Partnership and Communications, which supported all the NYC public schools. The problems experienced by the NYC-CS Initiative—first in its rapid expansion and then in the DOE restructuring—reflect the general challenges described in the literature of implementing, scaling up, and sustaining serious school reform. These include such issues as: administrative instability and turnover (Daniel, Welner & Valladares, 2016; Gaynor & Clauset, 1984); the need for sustained commitment to a certain course of action over a period of time (some scholars say at least five to ten years) in order for a reform to take hold (Daniel, Welner & Valladares, 2016); and the necessity of providing and sustaining sufficient funding and staff levels to realize the full potential of the reform (Bryk et al., 2010).

Several Family Outreach Specialists I interviewed explicitly noted the need for increased staff to support the needs of new schools joining the Initiative. Others expressed regret for what was lost in the expansion. For example, Rivera lamented the loss of personal touch she’d been able to maintain when her portfolio was restricted to a smaller number of community schools. Participants also gave the impression that, while the community school structures and services remained in place, certain grassroots elements of the Ladders of Engagement model had begun to dissipate during the first several years, perhaps as a consequence of the short staffing. For example, funding for the door-knocking—which significantly boosted family engagement levels according to my quantitative results—was discontinued after that original Renewal Summer. Some FACE members thought door-knocking should have been done annually, for every new cohort of schools entering the Initiative. Other Outreach Specialists noted that after the first three years of the program, due to their ever-expanding caseloads, they no longer played an on-the-ground role in supporting Community School Forums. In some cases, without sufficient resources and organizing ahead of time, the forums drew fewer participants and were less effective. The timeframe of the NYC-CS endeavor is also critical. Even though many of the Community Schools structures were still in place after the DOE’s reorganization—the partnership with the CBO, the provision of services, the Community School Director, etc.—the FACE staff’s grassroots outreach and organizing had been diffused after the first three years. As noted above, it may require a substantially longer period of time for full implementation of a school transformation.
Implications for Practice / Policy Recommendations

The NYC initiative examined in this study serves as an exemplary model for urban school districts seeking either to implement a districtwide community schools initiative, a community organizing approach to parent engagement, or, ideally, both. This study attests to the power of the full-service community school strategy as a holistic and equitable model for school turnaround which districts should adopt in place of other school turnaround models, many of which have been shown to disrupt communities. (As one example of the holistic benefit brought to entire communities by the community schools model, I discussed in Chapter 8 the social service infrastructure and neighborhood ties accompanying community schools showed that they were particularly resilient and able to provide vital services during the Covid-19 crisis.) School districts that want to utilize these strategies to increase parent participation in schools, cultivate more meaningful forms of family engagement, and support parent leadership should:

1) From the beginning, collaborate with community, parent, and education justice groups to design, plan and lay the groundwork for implementing these initiatives. In order to garner meaningful feedback and participation from impacted families and communities in the planning and design of such initiatives, school staff and advocates can emulate the strategy used by the Coalition for Educational Justice – organize public, interactive and easily accessible neighborhood visioning sessions to gather people’s ideas on school improvement efforts. This study along with prior research suggests that school turnaround efforts are more successful when they incorporate meaningful community input from the start.

2) Hire district-level outreach staff to support schools’ family engagement capacity. These family outreach workers can serve as external supports to build the family engagement capacity of schools on the ground and, as mentioned above, act as relational bridges between the district, school staff, parents and community partners on the ground. Institutional supports such as these are critical for increasing the quantity and quality of parent engagement, participation, and collaborative practices in under-resourced urban schools, ones in which school leaders and educators are typically
overburdened with instructional responsibilities, the pressure to raise test scores among students, and discipline issues. Moreover, this extra layer of support is vital, in light of the fact that in most school systems, parent engagement infrastructure is typically restricted to a parent coordinator who is confined to one school, often largely beholden to the principal and preoccupied with menial tasks such as photocopying.

3) **Hire family engagement staff with community organizing experience and train all engagement staff in organizing approaches.** Train all levels of family engagement staff in explicit organizing strategies such as how to do relational one-on-ones, canvass neighborhoods, organize phonebanks, facilitate leadership trainings, and organize inclusive, participatory base-building events. Conduct community canvasses in neighborhoods surrounding community schools to raise knowledge and awareness among local families so they can take advantage of new services and programs.

4) **Train all school staff and educators in culturally responsive and personalized parent outreach methods** that respect and value the culture, knowledge, and assets of marginalized families, rely on frequent two-way communication, and tap into families’ talents and skills.

5) **Host annual, participatory forums at each community school** providing an opportunity for families, educators, students and staff to come together, identify common goals and concerns, and discuss them through an ongoing, collaborative and democratic process.

6) **Hold leadership trainings or academies for parents** to provide them with new knowledge about school governance, skills, and a sense of confidence and self-efficacy to join school decision-making bodies and advocate for their children and for other parents.

7) **Provide multi-tiered participation and leadership opportunities, similar to the Ladders of Engagement model**, which are tailored to meet the differing needs and interests of a wide range of parents.
8) Provide full and sustained funding and resources to ensure long-term success, despite shifts in institutional culture.

Study Limitations and Areas for Future Research

As mentioned in Chapter 3, this study had several substantial limitations in its scope, which open the door to further research on the NYC-CS and other community school programs and parent organizing initiatives. First and foremost, due to the Covid-19 pandemic school closures and the accompanying barriers to identifying and recruiting study participants, this research unfortunately does not include the direct perspectives and voices of the program’s parent participants. Future research should include: the stories of their and their children’s experiences with the community schools, their participation in Community School Forums, their perceptions of the core leadership trainings and any knowledge and leadership skills gained from these trainings, their perceptions of the program’s successes and challenges in eliciting their active participation, and the extent to which they felt empowered as school leaders. It’s also true that if I had been able to interview parents who were not program staff, they may have provided more critical perspectives of the initiative which have not been captured here, and a deeper level of insight into where things could have been done differently or needed to be improved. In some cases, FACE staff, in their wish for the program to succeed, may have exhibited a positive bias in their interpretations of the outcomes (although a number showed willingness to point out weaknesses where they perceived them). Future studies of this or related initiatives certainly should include parent voices. This study also did not include interviews with community school staff heading family engagement work such as principals, Community School Directors and Parent Coordinators who also have crucial insights into the dynamics of family engagement at the school-level. Because of Covid-19 school closures the study also did not include direct observations of parent engagement activities at the community schools: e.g. PTA and Community School Team meetings, Community School Forums, parent leadership trainings, etc. School-level case studies should be conducted to examine and compare the different perspectives of school staff and teachers and to observe parent engagement activities in person in order to get a more complete picture of the processes, dynamics, successes, and challenges associated with this and similar initiatives.
Future quantitative researchers should consider developing ways to quantify and measure the deeper forms of parent empowerment and levels of leadership development occurring in such initiatives, perhaps through the development of new survey tools, as opposed to relying on standard survey measures of parent engagement provided by education departments such as the percentage of parents volunteering or attending school events, or how parents perceive school staff’s level of engagement.

**Conclusion**

Public schools have been under attack for the last several decades. Since the publication of “A Nation at Risk” in 1983, the neoliberal market-based reform model has dominated national school reform discourse. This approach has painted urban public-school systems as failures that must be radically overhauled, using business methods, personnel and terminology. Components often include: strong mayoral control of schools; top-down prescriptive governance structures, instruction methods, and content; imposition of standardized tests and narrow curricula that “teach to the test”, especially in English and math; labeling schools as failures on the basis of test scores; closing many public schools and opening privately run charter schools in their place. Former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos greatly accelerated the school privatization agenda at the national level—one which had been advanced by the two previous administrations as well—by proposing billions of dollars in cuts to public schools and federal programs such as community school grants, while investing millions in charter schools and private school vouchers.

However, a robust education justice movement led by students, parents, teachers, and community organizations has sprung up in opposition to this narrative. This movement has put forward the necessity of investing in struggling schools rather than punishing or closing them, and of meeting the needs of students and families. This vision has been manifested in the growing community schools movement, perhaps the most prominent alternative to the market reform agenda today. What’s more, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis showed that full-service community schools – ones that have strong ties with families and neighborhoods – are more important now than ever. Indeed, community schools have been particularly well-positioned to respond to the disruptions of the pandemic, through their partnerships with community-based organizations and their unique ability to mobilize resources to identify and address
families’ needs. The fact that community schools have been taking off nationally is an encouraging sign: there are now approximately 10,000 community schools operating across the country (Camera, 2021). The U.S. Department of Education recently expanded its Full-Service Community Schools Program to distribute $68 million in grant funds to support local schools and districts, up from only $10 million in 2015 when the program was launched (Coalition for Community Schools, 2022).

Community organizing groups are increasingly embracing community schools as the most holistic and equitable vision for public education that can meet the needs of marginalized students and families and their broader communities. Indeed, one prominent national organizing group, the Journey for Justice Alliance, based in Chicago, is pushing a campaign to establish 25,000 full-service community schools across the country by 2025 (Journey for Justice Alliance). At the same time, scholars, educators and practitioners are increasingly recognizing the contribution and importance of community organizing efforts to 1) engage parents in more meaningful ways and develop their leadership and 2) defend public schools and win more resources and programs such as community schools.

Once funding is secured for community schools and other initiatives, community organizing groups will play an essential role in holding school systems accountable for authentic implementation. If community schools have been doing their job, if parents and families have been truly engaged, and social capital has accumulated, then an expanded base of support has been built for public education and specifically for community schools. That’s what happened in Far Rockaway when parents rose up in opposition to school closings. As Carson said, “Once these parents have had these services, no one can take them away.”
APPENDIX
APPENDIX A – SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FACE STAFF

1. Can you tell me about your background and how you came to be involved with the NYCDOE family engagement work?

2. Before we get into FACE, can you talk about the origins of the community school initiative? I understand it was a grassroots effort of education organizers that won this agenda? Were you or any of your parent organizers involved in this?

3. Can you talk about how the DOE was restructured under Mayor De Blasio at that time, and how and why the Family and Community Outreach Team was created? What was its mission and why was there a need for it?
   a. In what ways was the FACE team connected to the newly created Office of Community Schools?
   b. How did the initial FACE team get selected? Were parent leaders recruited?
   c. Did this represent a shift in mindset from the previous administration? How so?

4. Can you describe your role at FACE and give a brief overview of the key program components or initiatives that you oversaw?

5. Can you talk about the early community canvassing/door knocking campaign? What was that like? What were the key goals? Successes and challenges?

6. Can you discuss your experience with the core leadership trainings? What role did they play within the Ladders of Engagement Model and the Dual Capacity Framework?
   a. I heard that you partnered with CEJ on these trainings, what was that like? How was outreach conducted?
   b. Who facilitated them and who attended? Parents and school staff? New parents or the usual suspects?
   c. In what ways did parents benefit from them? To what extent did they draw new parents into the education system?
   d. In what ways did these trainings benefit school staff?
   e. Could you walk me through what a typical training was like?
   f. What do you think were the main successes of these trainings? What factors contributed?
   g. Key Challenges? How challenging was it to build trusting relationships between DOE administrators and parents?

7. Can you talk about FACE’s family engagement work in the community schools? What was the role of the family outreach specialists?
   a. In what ways do they coordinate with community school staff to support family engagement efforts?
   b. What types of engagement opportunities and activities do they offer to parents?
c. What was your outreach staff’s experience with supporting the creation of Community School Teams?

d. Were you met with resistance from school staff or the old parent governance structures?

8. Describe the Ladders of Engagement Model. How was it implemented? How and to what extent did it shape your work at FACE?
   a. What was the role of family outreach specialists in this model?
   b. Can you take me through some of the ways of getting parents onto the ladder? How do they move up the ladder?
   c. What types of leadership opportunities were offered to parents?
   d. Can you think of an example school where this approach worked well? How so?
   e. In what ways was the initiative successful at moving families up the ladder? Would you say there was a significant increase in family participation in community schools?
   f. What were the major obstacles, challenges or limitations in moving families up the ladder?

9. What was the role of the FACE outreach team in the Community School Forums?
   a. Can you describe the planning and outreach process for a forum?
   b. I hear there is a big focus on accessibility, translation, childcare. Can you speak to that?
   c. Can you talk about a successful CS Forum that you worked on?
   d. In what ways do they feed the ladders of engagement?
   e. What have been the key successes with engaging families in these forums?
   f. Main obstacles or challenges?

10. To what extent do the social and educational services offered by community schools play a role in drawing the family into the life of the school?
   a. to what extent are families aware of, utilizing, and benefitting from the services? What about the broader community?
   b. In what ways do the Community School Directors engage and support parents and families?

11. Can you talk about the relationship between citywide family engagement and school-level family engagement? Did parents who attended citywide trainings go on to be involved in their child’s school? Or vice versa? Was there a disconnect?

12. What do you perceive to be the major successes pertaining to family engagement and participation in the community schools?
   a. What factors have contributed to this success? Can you give me an example?
   b. Have a broader set of best practices emerged?
   c. Can you tell me about a school you’ve worked with that you believe has made meaningful progress in family participation? How did it happen? What were the key factors at play?
13. In what ways has the initiative fallen short of your desires? In other words, is there something you’d like to see the NYC-CS achieve, but have not been able to do?

14. What does meaningful parent leadership and collaborative decision-making power mean to you? To what extent would you say this has been achieved in the initiative?

Covid-19
1. Can you walk me through how your team has responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and school closures? In what ways has the pandemic changed your family engagement work?
   a. In what ways is your office supporting parents and families during these school closures? What types of supports or structures have you put in place?
   b. What are you the greatest needs that you’re hearing from families right now?
   c. Is your office tracking Covid-19 cases and deaths among students and their families?
   d. What health or social services are being offered to families during school closures?
   e. Is the DOE or Health department providing Covid tests for students and families? How is this being implemented? Does your office play a role in promoting testing among families?

2. To what extent have PTAs and parent governance structures been active during the pandemic? Are they playing a role in provide relief for school communities? If so, what are they doing? How are FACE staff supporting them?

3. To what extent do you feel that the structures and service infrastructure set up by the NYC-CS enabled the DOE to be more prepared or better positioned for a crisis like this?

4. Have any strategies been particularly successful or have any best practices emerged in supporting families during Covid? Can you give me an example?

5. What have been the outstanding challenges?

6. Can you talk about the parent university that the DOE recently established? How did that come about?

7. Overall, what do you perceive to be the major successes of your team’s family engagement initiative in the community schools?
   a. What factors have contributed to this success? Can you give me an example?
   b. Have a broader set of best practices emerged?
   c. To what extent has the initiative been able to foster collaborative and shared decision-making
8. Can you talk about some of the ways in which the initiative is measuring and trying to quantify family and community level impacts of the initiative? I know there is the strong-family-community ties metric and the trust metric.
   a. According to your knowledge, or any data the Dep has collected, are levels of family involvement in community schools increasing?
APPENDIX B – SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS

1. Can you tell me a bit about your background and how you came to be involved with education organizing work?
   a. How did your experience as a parent in the NYC school system influence your decision to become a parent organizer or shape your role as…
   b. Can you talk about the historic relationship between the Dep. of Education and families of color, particularly under the Bloomberg administration? How did schools tend to view parents of color?

2. Can you walk me through the organizing campaign that CEJ led to win the Community Schools agenda for the incoming De Blasio administration?
   a. Who was in the coalition, and what role did CEJ play?
   b. Can you describe CEJ’s vision for CS, and how that platform was created?
   c. In what ways did you engage parents and families in designing this vision?

3. Your essay says you helped place parent and community organizing at the center of the community school’s movement? Can you talk about that? What do you mean by parent organizing? Why is it so integral to community schools?

4. Can you describe the City’s process of designing and launching the Community Schools initiative?
   a. What role, if any, did CEJ play in the launching of the initiative?
   b. To what extent was community, family and stakeholder input incorporated?
   c. Did community groups have say in which schools would be selected as CS?
   d. What do you think were the major successes of getting this initiative off the ground?
   e. What were the most significant challenges or obstacles?

5. Can you talk about the early community canvassing/door knocking campaign? What was that like? What were the key goals? Successes and challenges?

6. Can you talk about the core leader parent trainings that you partnered with the DOE on? Can you walk me through what that process was like?
   a. How was outreach conducted for these trainings? How did you identify and recruit parents?
   b. Who facilitated them and who attended? Parents and school staff? New parents or the usual suspects?
   c. In what ways did parents benefit from them? To what extent did they draw new parents into the education system?
   d. What was it like trying to teach DOE staff and higher ups about a transformative or organizing approach to family engagement? Encouraging a cultural shift? In what ways did these trainings benefit school staff?
   e. Could you walk me through what a typical training was like?
f. What do you think were the main successes of these trainings? What factors contributed?
g. Key Challenges? How challenging was it to build trusting relationships between DOE administrators and parents?

7. In the early years, did the DOE continue to work with community groups on implementing the first cohort of CS? To what extent did they remain accountable to the community and activists?

8. What do you know about the family empowerment component of this initiative including the FACE team and their Ladders of Engagement model?
   a. Have you worked with FACE (Family and Community Outreach Team)?
   b. Have you attended any of their citywide or school-level parent leadership trainings? If so, what was your experience?

9. How is the community school’s whole child approach contrast with the educational policies of the previous administration? Particularly in regards to family and community engagement?

10. What role do the CBOs and the social and educational services play in drawing the family into the life of the school? To what extent are families aware of, utilizing, and benefitting from the services? What about the broader community?

11. What do you perceive to be the major successes pertaining to family engagement and participation in the community schools?
   a. What factors have contributed to this success? Can you give me an example?
   b. Have a broader set of best practices emerged?
   c. Can you tell me about a school you’ve worked with that you believe has made meaningful progress in family participation? How did it happen? What were the key factors at play?

12. In what ways has the initiative fallen short of your desires? In other words, is there something you’d like to see the NYC-CS achieve, but have not been able to do?

13. What does parent leadership mean to you? What does it look like in the community schools? To what extent are these schools promoting collaborative decision-making power, a purported goal of the initiative?

14. How does an organizing or transformative approach to family engagement go beyond traditional family engagement?

Covid-19

15. Can you talk about the role of the community schools and their CBO partners during this pandemic?
   a. Are CBOs continuing to provide social services to assist to impacted students and families? What kinds of services?
b. I understand that the community schools were selected to operate the Emergency Learning centers or Regional Enrichment Centers for the children of essential workers? How did that come about and why? (How many centers? How many students?)
c. Do the CBOs deep relationships with communities make community schools particularly well positioned to respond to this pandemic?
d. Have parent leadership networks been activated to provide relief for school communities? If so, what are they doing? How are FACE staff supporting them?
e. I heard CS were giving emergency cash grants to families.
APPENDIX C – ADMINISTRATIVE DOCUMENTS


FACE Office (2017) Strong Schools, Strong Communities [PowerPoint Slides].


NYC Department of Education (2019, Jun 5) New York City Community Schools, Office of Community Schools Research Advisory Council meeting [PowerPoint Slides].

NYC DOE Office of Family and Community Empowerment (FACE) (undated) Parent Leadership Roles and Responsibilities [PowerPoint Slides].


NYC DOE Office of Family and Community Empowerment (FACE), One-on-One Meetings: A Tool for Building School Relationships (no date)

NYC DOE, Functioning in the Virtual Environment: Guidance for PAs / PTAs and Presidents’ Councils (June 4, 2020)


Office of the Mayor and NYC Department of Education (2015). New York City Community Schools Strategic Plan: Mayor Bill de Blasio’s Strategy to Launch and Sustain a System of Over 100 Community Schools Across NYC by 2017.

APPENDIX D – NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL SURVEY ITEMS USED TO CALCULATE THE “STRONG FAMILY-COMMUNITY TIES” ELEMENT (2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outreach to Parents</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Please mark the extent to which you disagree or agree with each of the following. At this school... (1=Strong disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly agree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>parents/guardians are invited to visit classrooms to observe the instructional program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>teachers understand families' problems and concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>teachers work closely with families to meets students' needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>school staff regularly communicate with parents/guardians about how parents can help students learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>School staff regularly communicate with me about how I can help my child learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>I am invited to visit classrooms to observe instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>I am greeted warmly when I call or visit the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Teachers work closely with me to meet my child's needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>I feel well-informed by the communications I receive from my child's school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>My child's school communicates with me in a language and in a way that I can understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement in school</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Since the beginning of the school year, how often have you... (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>been asked or had the opportunity to volunteer time to support this school (for example, spent time helping in classrooms, helped with school-wide events, etc.)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>communicated with your child's teacher about your child's performance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>seen your child’s projects, artwork, homework, tests, or quizzes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>During the school year, how likely are you to... (1 = Very unlikely, 2 = Somewhat unlikely, 3 = Somewhat likely, 4 = Very likely)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>attend a general school meeting or school event (open house, back to school night, play, dance, sports event, or science fair)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>go to a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference with your child's teacher?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Coalition for Community Schools (2022). *Ready, Set, Apply! Full-Service Community Schools Grant to Make Historic Impact for Students.*


