



ORGANIZED
COMMUNITIES,
STRONGER SCHOOLS

A Research-Based Workshop Series

Community Organizing to Build Partnerships in Schools

The Alliance Schools Movement in Austin

A CASE-STUDY JIGSAW ACTIVITY WITH FACILITATOR'S GUIDE AND GROUP READINGS

Developed by Anne T. Henderson

based on *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith*
by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

July, 2010



Organized Communities, Stronger Schools

A research-based workshop series

INTRODUCTION to the Workshop Series

This series of four workshops is based on a six-year research study of the impact of community organizing to bring about improvements in local schools by residents in seven low- to moderate-income urban communities. The study – Organized Communities, Stronger Schools – was conducted by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister between 2002 and 2008. The findings were published in seven case studies by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in 2009, and in a book, *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes*, by the Harvard Education Press in 2009.

The goal of the study was to answer the question: Does the political will generated by community organizing for education reform enhance the capacity of schools to improve student learning? The researchers concluded that it does. They found that effective community organizing

- ◆ stimulates important changes in educational policy, practices, and resource distribution at the system level;
- ◆ strengthens school-community relationships, parent involvement and engagement, and trust in schools;
- ◆ contributes to higher student educational outcomes, including higher attendance, test score performance, high school completion, and college-going aspirations.

The case studies documented how seven communities (Oakland, Los Angeles, Austin, Chicago, Miami, Philadelphia, and the Bronx) mobilized to identify problems, develop solutions, pressure policy-makers and administrators, and contribute important assets to address the challenges their low-performing school systems faced.

The workshops focus on community organizing strategies in four communities. Through a “jigsaw” reading-and-discussion activity, each workshop helps participants understand the organizing efforts of one community, explore the implications those efforts may have on their own community, and identify next steps they want to take. The four workshops are:

- ◆ Oakland – Community Organizing to Transform a School District
- ◆ Los Angeles – Youth and Community Organizing to Improve Curriculum
- ◆ Austin – Community Organizing to Build Partnerships in Schools
- ◆ Chicago – Community Organizing to Rethink the Teacher Pipeline

The full case studies series and the four workshops are available for free download from the Annenberg Institute Web site at <www.annenberginstitute.org/wedo/Mott_tools.php>.



Community Organizing to Build Partnerships in Schools

The Alliance Schools Movement in Austin

FACILITATOR's Guide to the Workshop

In Austin, Texas, a grassroots network of community organizations, schools, and unions joined together to transform the culture and capacity of half the poorest schools in the district. This workshop is designed to help participants understand how the work of Austin Interfaith – a collaboration of local faith-based congregations, the teachers union, a dozen public schools, and an electrical workers' union – was able to significantly increase student test scores in schools with a high level of engagement in its Alliance Schools effort, compared to schools with a low level of engagement. In the course of the workshop, participants will

- ◆ get an overview of the organizing effort in Austin,
- ◆ become familiar with specific components of the effort,
- ◆ construct a composite picture of how Austin accomplished the transformation, and
- ◆ consider how Austin Interfaith's work can inform their own work in their local community.

The materials for this workshop were adapted from a case study on community organizing in Austin, *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith*, by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister, part of the research study series on Organized Communities, Stronger Schools, published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

The two-hour workshop consists of four main segments (including time for transitioning):

Welcome and introduction to the workshop	20 minutes
<i>PowerPoint presentation on the Austin study</i>	
Jigsaw activity	
Understanding a piece of the work (small groups)	40 minutes
<i>Reading and discussing excerpts from the study</i>	
Putting the pieces together (full group)	30 minutes
<i>Reporting out on small-group learnings</i>	
General discussion	20 minutes
<i>Implications for the group's work and next steps</i>	
Comments and closing	10 minutes

IMPORTANT: To be most effective, the full participant group should be at least 10 but not more than 35 people. This will ensure at least 2, but not more than 7, people in each small-group discussion.

Facilitator's Instructions

As the facilitator for this workshop, you will welcome the participants, narrate a PowerPoint presentation that introduces the experiences of Austin Interfaith, provide instructions and materials for the jigsaw exercise (small-group readings and discussions of different excerpts from the Austin case study, followed by report-outs to the large group to gain a fuller understanding of Austin Interfaith's work), and finally wrap up the discussion pointing to next steps.

Materials provided for this workshop

- ◆ Facilitator's instructions and workshop agenda
- ◆ A short PowerPoint presentation with background on the research study and an introduction to the Austin story
- ◆ A handout for participants with
 - background on the study of Austin Interfaith
 - agenda for the workshop
 - discussion questions for the five small-group reading assignments
- ◆ Readings adapted from the full case study for each of the five small groups

Before the workshop

- ◆ Read the full Austin case study, available online at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDe/Mott.php>.
- ◆ Familiarize yourself with all the workshop materials.
- ◆ Make photocopies for participants:
 - enough copies of "Participants' Handout" for all participants
 - enough copies of each small-group reading for the number of participants in each group
- ◆ Review the PowerPoint presentation and adjust the script as needed.
- ◆ Arrange for the necessary equipment to show the PowerPoint (projector, laptop, extension cords, etc.). Note that there is a short, embedded film clip: you may need sound amplification for a larger group.
- ◆ Assemble materials for poster reports: poster paper, markers, easels, etc.
- ◆ If you are not familiar with the jigsaw exercise protocol, you can find information about it at <www.jigsaw.org/overview.htm>. The activity here is an abbreviated version.
- ◆ Make sure there are suitable spaces for five small discussion groups to meet.

Facilitator's Agenda for the Workshop

Total time: 2 hours

Welcome and introduction

20 minutes

- ◆ Welcome participants and introduce yourself. If participants do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves briefly.
- ◆ Show and narrate the PowerPoint presentation on the community organizing study and the context in Austin.
- ◆ Distribute the "Participants' Handout" to each participant.

Jigsaw activity

1. Small-group reading and discussion

40 minutes

- ◆ Give the following instructions to full group: "You'll be working in small groups, each group reading a different section of the Austin study. In your groups, you'll read your section, respond to the questions for your group in the Participants' Handout, and develop a poster report on what you've learned. You'll have about 35 minutes for this activity."

"Please break into five small groups by counting off from one to five."

"Assemble with the others with your number and pick a recorder for your small group to take notes on the group's ideas." [Facilitator: make sure there are at least two people per group.]

- ◆ Hand out copies of small-group readings to each group.
- ◆ After 30 minutes, remind groups to begin completing their posters.
- ◆ After 40 minutes, call the small groups back to the full group.

2. Small-group report-outs to the full group

30 minutes

- ◆ Give the following instructions to full group: "Now we're going to build a complete picture of the Oakland work by having each group report out on what you learned, using your poster report. Going in numerical order, each group will have 5 minutes."

General discussion and next steps

20 minutes

- ◆ Lead a discussion based on the small-group report-outs. (If time is short, skip to the discussion of next steps.)

Community organizing is rooted in local neighborhoods and aims to hold public officials accountable for the poor quality of public services, while at the same time offering support for improvements. How did Austin Interfaith balance its demand and support strategies?

What activities of community organizing can be adopted by local schools? What impact do they seem to have?

Why are school climate and school culture so important to student achievement?

How does community organizing strengthen the democratic process?

- ◆ Allow time for the group to consider its next steps.

What are the implications for your work? What would you like to do with this information?

Comments and closing

10 minutes

- ◆ Invite participant comments on the workshop.
- ◆ Wrap up and adjourn.



Community Organizing to Build Partnerships in Schools

The Alliance Schools Movement in Austin

PARTICIPANTS' Handout

We care about their values, we care about who they're serving, and they've got a track record of accomplishments. They've been more successful than any other group I know, or than we as a district, in getting parents from often disenfranchised communities involved in their kids' education.

— John Fitzpatrick, former member, Austin Independent School District Board

Learning from Austin Interfaith and the Alliance Schools Movement

Community organizing typically focuses on building relationships, developing power, and fostering mutual accountability in poorly served, low-income communities. The effectiveness of these actions is rarely considered in research on school improvement. However, a recent study on Austin Interfaith's Alliance Schools effort convincingly documents a statistically significant increase in student test scores in schools with a high level of engagement in the effort compared to schools with a low level of engagement.

This workshop is an opportunity to learn how Austin Interfaith, a grassroots network of community organizations that included local faith-based congregations, the teachers union, a dozen public schools, and an electrical workers' union, transformed the culture and capacity of half the poorest schools in the district.

After a brief introduction to the work in Austin, we'll do a "jigsaw" exercise that will enable the group to build a deeper understanding of Austin Interfaith's work. First, five small groups will each read a different excerpt from the research study on Austin Interfaith and discuss a set of questions designed to help you get the most out of your excerpt. Then the full group will reconvene, and each small group will report on its piece of the jigsaw to construct the whole picture and discover what is relevant to your work.

Background on the Workshop

This workshop consists of short readings and activities based on the research report *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith*, by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister, published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in 2009. The report is one of a series of case studies that followed organizing efforts to improve public schools, led by community residents, in seven low- to moderate-income communities throughout the country. The goal of this six-year research study was to answer the question: Does the political will generated by organizing in the arena of education reform ultimately enhance the capacity of schools to improve student learning? The researchers concluded that it did.

The full case studies on the seven sites – Oakland, Los Angeles, Austin, Chicago, Miami, Philadelphia, and the Bronx – are available for download from the Annenberg Institute Web site at www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDe/Mott.php. The materials for this workshop are adapted from the Austin case study.

A Vignette on Austin Interfaith

In 1991, Lourdes Zamarron was an active parent at Zavala Elementary School on the east side of Austin, Texas. The mother of three children in the school, she did what was asked of her at school, helping with fundraising and volunteering in the classroom and at school events. Zamarron recalls the day she realized that all was not as it seemed at Zavala. At a PTA meeting, she was stunned to learn that Zavala students were not passing the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) tests. Indeed, the school was the lowest performing in East Austin.

Parents were furious; some pulled their students from the school. Almost half of the school's thirty-eight teachers left that year. As the climate at the school worsened, the principal reached out to Austin Interfaith organizers. With Austin Interfaith's encouragement and assistance, the principal and a handful of teachers and parents, including Zamarron, began to talk – sharing their stories and concerns. They organized a “neighborhood walk,” going in pairs to visit students' homes to talk with families about how things were going in the school and what needed to change.

Zamarron recalls the walk as a turning point for Zavala. The walk helped the school community to move beyond pointing fingers at each other – to see that Zavala's problems could not be blamed on uncaring parents or callous teachers.

Working with the emerging core team of parents, teachers, and the school's principal, Austin Interfaith organizers began analyzing the problems related to Zavala's poor performance. The first issue the core team tackled was student access to health services, and after a year-long campaign, they succeeded in winning city resources for student immunizations and a new school-based health clinic. The victory solidified a sense of trust and shared purpose within the school, enabling the administration, teachers, and parents to face the much thornier problem of low test scores.

During the next year, the school's core team helped to introduce a host of reforms: new language arts and mathematics curricula, a new policy to mainstream special education students into general education classrooms, joint instructional planning time for teachers, a new after-school program, and an accelerated science program. Within two years, student and teacher attendance had improved and TAAS scores had risen.

Austin Interfaith's work at Zavala changed the lives of the people involved in the organizing. Zamarron learned that she did not have to accept things the way they were. It is a lesson she believes her children have learned as well. She remembers having a job and not getting a raise and it was OK with her. She remembers not having job benefits and that, too, was OK with her. Now she sees herself differently. “If you cannot see yourself differently, then you cannot see anyone else differently. ... If I did not have higher expectations for myself, how could I have them for my kids?”

Excerpted from *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith*, by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2009.

Agenda for the Jigsaw Activity

Small-group reading

10–15 minutes

- ◆ Read your group's assigned reading (see handouts) independently and silently.
- ◆ As you are reading your section, highlight some favorite sentences/phrases/ideas.

Small-group analyzing

25–30 minutes

- ◆ Read through the discussion questions for your group number (below).
- ◆ Choose one person to record the group's ideas.
- ◆ As you discuss the questions, ask yourself: What ideas presented in our reading selection would be the most valuable for the larger group to know and understand? How can we communicate these ideas in an interesting way?
- ◆ Design a poster representing the major points or ideas in your section. Use words, pictures, and/or symbols to represent any or all of the major ideas and help others really understand your section.
- ◆ Decide who will report to the full group.

Reporting back to the full group

30 minutes/5 minutes per group

- ◆ Summarize the major concepts and learnings from your section to the entire group, using the poster as a guide.

Small-Group Discussion Questions

Find the questions for your group's assigned reading below.

Group 1: The Austin Context and the Alliance Schools Model

- ◆ What was the reality underlying Austin's image as a prosperous, high-performing school district?
- ◆ What kinds of organizations are part of Austin Interfaith?
- ◆ In what ways was the development of the Alliance Schools strategy a breakthrough in community organizing?
- ◆ What are the key components of the Alliance Schools model?

Group 2: Scaling Up

- ◆ What happened at Zavala Elementary School, the first Alliance School in Austin?
- ◆ How did schools targeted by Austin Interfaith differ from others in the district?
- ◆ How do parents and teachers work together in an Alliance School? How is this different from their relationship in a typical low-income school?
- ◆ What methods did Austin Interfaith use to confront and engage public officials? What results did they get?
- ◆ What were some of Austin Interfaith's major accomplishments?

Group 3: Enter High-Stakes Testing

- ◆ What was the impact of high-stakes testing on the Alliance Schools network?
- ◆ How did the regimen of testing affect the development of collaborative relationships in the schools?
- ◆ What was the “Texas Miracle” and how real was it?
- ◆ Was Austin Interfaith able to persuade the district to develop an alternative assessment to the Texas state test? What happened?

Group 4: Impact on District and School Capacity

- ◆ What are frequent challenges in low-income schools? How did the Austin Interfaith approach address these challenges?
- ◆ Explain the focus on mutual accountability. How is accountability related to democratic values?
- ◆ What were the differences in school climate between high-involvement Alliance schools and schools with low involvement? What areas were most affected?
- ◆ What is “professional culture” and how was it influenced by involvement with Austin Interfaith? What were the perceptions of teachers about changes in professional culture?

Group 5: Findings on Instructional Core and Student Outcomes; Reflections

- ◆ What is the “instructional core” and how did Austin Interfaith’s organizing influence it?
- ◆ How did the study assess the impact of Austin Interfaith on student outcomes? What effects did the study find?
- ◆ What changes in Austin Interfaith schools led to improved student learning?
- ◆ Why is relational trust among adults in a school related to improved student performance?
- ◆ What are the particular challenges of organizing for educational reform? How did Austin Interfaith address them?



Austin Interfaith — Reading for Group 1

Known nationally as an affluent college town with a booming high-tech industry and robust service economy, the city of Austin has received accolades for its exemplary public schools. But not all the city's public schools are high performing. Behind the city's affluence lies a segregated city with persistent educational disparity.

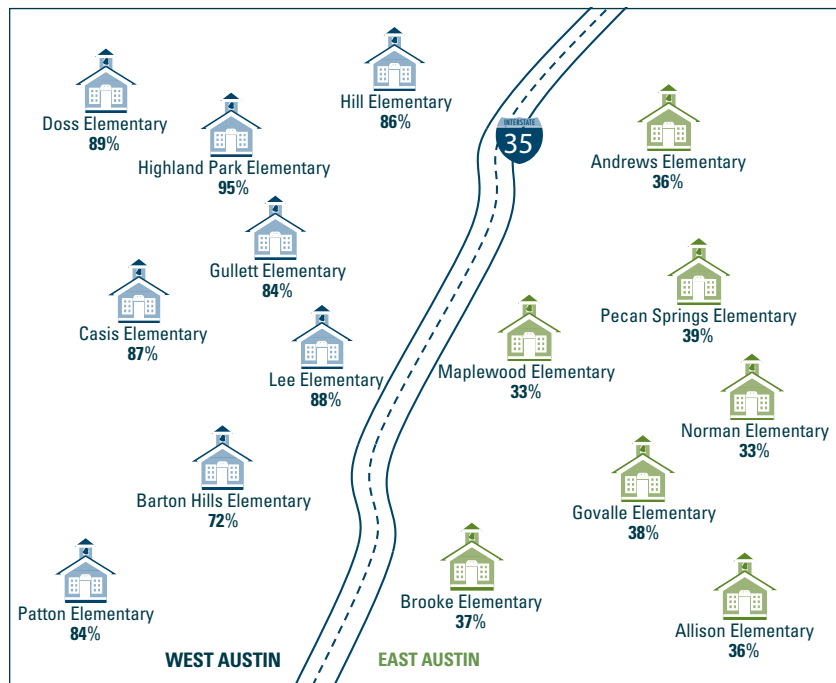
About Austin

Though Austin's public schools have a larger percentage of White, middle-class students than many urban districts, these students live in wealthier enclaves on the west side of the district. The city's low-income population – predominantly Latino immigrants and African American families – live largely in the former industrial core of the city, east of Interstate 35.

The district's struggles to improve east side schools parallel the history of its struggles with racial and socio-economic integration. Following the end of mandated busing for desegregation in 1986, the district turned to a strategy of neighborhood schools. By the early 1990s, residential segregation in the city had effectively resegregated the schools, reinforcing the gap in performance between more-affluent and high-poverty schools. A geographic analysis of student performance on the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in 1995 showed that low-performing schools were concentrated in neighborhoods east of Interstate 35 (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Geographic distribution of school performance: Percentages of students meeting minimum expectations on TAAS, 1995



Excerpted from *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith*, by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2009.

Austin Interfaith's Education Organizing

For more than a decade Austin Interfaith has organized public school parents like Lourdes Zamarron, along with clergy, congregation members, teachers, and administrators, to improve schools serving low-income communities in Austin. When Austin Interfaith began education organizing in the early 1990s, 48 percent of the district's 69,827 students qualified for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program; 37 percent of students were Latino, 19 percent Black, and 42 percent White. Districtwide, only 58 percent of the district's Black students and 62 percent of Latino students met the minimum state standards (data provided by the Austin Independent School District).

Austin Interfaith is affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a national organizing network founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940. Following the IAF model of institution-based organizing, Austin Interfaith builds local networks of faith-based institutions and community members to improve local neighborhood conditions through community organizing strategies. The organization comprises twenty-six congregations of varied Judeo-Christian denominations, roughly a dozen public schools, the teachers union (Education Austin), and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union 520.

As part of the statewide Texas IAF, Austin Interfaith organized low-performing schools on the city's east side into a local network of "Alliance Schools." During an eight-year period, this network grew to involve roughly one-quarter of the Austin school district's elementary schools and one-half of the district's high-poverty schools. In these schools, Austin Interfaith organizers provided leadership training to parents, teachers, and administrators and supported them in implementing reforms to improve student learning. The organization also developed an effective working relationship with the superintendent, leading to a decade of stability and concentrated focus on improving low-performing schools.

The report this reading is excerpted from examines the impact of Austin Interfaith's education organizing on district priorities, school capacity for improvement, and student educational outcomes in East Austin. The findings emerged from a wide range of data, including interviews with district and school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members, as well as teacher surveys and questionnaires and publicly available school data.

The Alliance Schools Movement

Austin Interfaith's education organizing evolved from the statewide efforts of the IAF in Texas to expand funding for high-poverty, low-performing schools. In 1992, the Texas IAF won a commitment from the Texas Education Agency (the state department of education) to direct new funds to low-performing schools through the creation of an Investment Capital Fund. Through this fund, low-performing schools could obtain grants for teacher professional development, parent leadership training, and after-school enrichment activities. Using these funds as an incentive, IAF affiliates assisted low-performing schools in applying for the state funds and in joining what the IAF called the Alliance Schools network.

The Alliance Schools concept drew largely upon the IAF organizing model, in which organizers used a process of individual meetings (called one-on-ones) to identify people with leadership potential who could mobilize others in efforts for change. These meetings, along with small-group sessions (house meetings), also served to build relationships among people based on a deeper understanding of each other and to identify issues of concern that could rally larger numbers of community members. Under the direction of organizer Ernesto Cortes, the IAF had used this model of organizing to build local IAF organizations across Texas. Through the Alliance Schools network, the IAF aimed to bring its model of organizing into schools.

Within the field of community organizing, the emergence of the Alliance Schools strategy was a watershed moment. At the time, organizing groups across the country were developing campaigns focused on school improvement. Many of these campaigns focused on schools as the target of change and, thus, applied external accountability pressure on educators within those schools to accede to community or parent-led demands for improvement. In the Alliance Schools strategy, organizers viewed educators as an essential constituency that needed to be brought into a trusting and collaborative relationship with parents and community members. (Since Texas is a right-to-work state, educator unions in Texas are relatively weak compared to their counterparts in other parts of the country. This context made the IAF an attractive partner to educators.)

IAF organizers introduced community organizing to parents, teachers, and administrators as a strategy for “reinventing” the culture of failing schools. Through training in the principles and practices of community organizing, the IAF aimed to transform the way in which parents, teachers, and principals understood their respective roles in school improvement and, consequently, the way they worked together – as a school community – to achieve shared goals. As Zavala parent leader Lourdes Zamarron put it:

Reinventing the culture of schools was a radical idea. Before becoming involved in Austin Interfaith, the idea of neighbors changing schools did not make sense. The word *power* was not in my vocabulary.

Alliance Schools in Austin

In Austin, the first school to enter into an Alliance Schools partnership was Zavala Elementary School. Austin Interfaith recruited the school principal, teachers, parents, and congregation members living in the surrounding community into a core team to work together on improving the school. Though the work was planned by the participants involved, it followed the broad contours of an approach developed by another IAF affiliate in Fort Worth:

- ◆ leadership training to engage parents and community members in community organizing and school reform–focused activities;
- ◆ individual meetings to cultivate leadership among parents, teachers, and the principal and to foster the development of new and deep relationships with each other;

- ◆ training for the principal, teachers, and parents on how to recruit and support emergent leadership among their peers in the school community for the purpose of school improvement; and
- ◆ ongoing support for a core team of parents, teachers, and the principal in identifying and organizing to address key challenges facing the school.

Core teams were helped to identify their own strategies for improvement. But these efforts, or “campaigns,” were not constructed in isolation from the school reform community. IAF leaders met with a wide variety of school reform experts, such as Richard Elmore and Lauren Resnick, whose ideas on instructional leadership and teacher professional development influenced the Alliance Schools approach.

Austin Interfaith leader Regina Rogoff described how this approach works in practice:

Through the house meetings, stories, and one-on-ones, we try to understand what needs to be changed. What are the problems that people face in their lives? How do we break those problems into issues that can be tackled? We don’t work on hunger per se, but we may hear an example, like our kids are unsupervised after school. You start studying that problem and the issue around after-school care. You develop an action team, you start teaching people how to politically address an issue, and you develop a strategy.

Discussion Questions: The Austin Context and the Alliance Schools Model

- ◆ What was the reality underlying Austin’s image as a prosperous, high-performing school district?
- ◆ What kinds of organizations are part of Austin Interfaith?
- ◆ In what ways was the development of the Alliance Schools strategy a breakthrough in community organizing?
- ◆ What are the key components of the Alliance Schools model?



Austin Interfaith — Reading for Group 2

Scaling Up Alliance Schools Practices

In 1992, when Austin Interfaith began working with Zavala Elementary School, the school ranked in the bottom half of district elementary schools in student attendance and was far below the district average in the percent of students who passed the TAAS tests. By the 1994-1995 school year, Zavala ranked first in the district in student attendance and surpassed the citywide average in reading and mathematics on TAAS.

Zavala's rising student attendance and test scores attracted local and national attention. Newspapers and newsmagazines profiled Austin Interfaith's education successes with stories of rising parent involvement, student attendance, and teacher morale as well as traffic and safety improvements in communities to protect children walking to school, increased access to health services, and improvements to local housing developments. These stories lauded Austin Interfaith and the IAF for their work to build a new sense of community in schools.

In one article in the *Texas Observer*, then–Austin Independent School District (AISD) school board member Geoff Ripps observed that the transformation in Alliance Schools was accomplished

not by drilling children to pass the test. [It was] achieved by instituting a sea change in the schools' very culture. Through door-to-door organizing, house meetings, block meetings, parish and school meetings, IAF leaders made many of these schools the centers of their communities and, in doing so, put the communities at the center of change in their schools.

As word of Zavala's dramatic improvements spread through the district, other schools entered into partnerships with Austin Interfaith. (The total number of participating schools varied year to year, as schools entered and dropped out of the network.) The number of AISD elementary schools participating in the Alliance Schools network swelled to sixteen, roughly a quarter of the district's elementary schools and approximately half the district's high-poverty schools.

These schools served higher percentages of Black and Latino students than the district as a whole. Austin Interfaith schools also have substantially higher percentages of low-income students and students designated limited English proficient compared to the district.

To support new schools entering into the network, the Texas IAF created the Texas Interfaith Education Fund (TIEF) to provide training specifically geared to education reform. In these sessions educators, parents, and community members debated school reform strategies. They also learned the community organizing skills of public speaking and negotiation and how to conduct one-on-one meetings with other parents and teachers to “find out what makes them tick,”

Excerpted from *Building Partnerships to Reinvent School Culture: Austin Interfaith*, by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2009.

according to Amanda Braziel, a fifth-grade teacher at Maplewood Elementary School. She continued:

One of the big things we did was organize a potluck, and in the potluck we presented the questions: What do you see as barriers to your child's education? What do you think Maplewood is doing right and how could we change? A lot of issues arose from those questions, and so when we would meet as a core team, we would talk about how we could work on those issues. And then we organized the neighborhood walk so that we could get more one-on-one time with some of the parents who had attended the potluck. So, we would, in our core teams, identify what we needed to work on, and we would delegate responsibilities and plan together.

Braziel recalled her first experiences with Austin Interfaith:

During my first year, all of the Alliance Schools in AISD had a teacher in-service day, and we got together in vertical teams, pre-K through high school, and we met at a high school and we just really talked and got to know each other and brainstormed issues that we needed to deal with and that kind of thing.

As a member of her school's core team, Braziel became involved in fighting district cuts to art and music teachers at the school. She helped stage a protest outside of the school that drew media coverage and worked with Austin Interfaith organizers and leaders to raise the issue with the school board. Braziel explained:

We just started doing all these things, and it really fit in with my core beliefs about what school and teachers and parents in the community should be about and how we should all work together. [The Alliance Schools model] was just such a neat concept and I loved it.

District Organizing

At the district level, Austin Interfaith advocated for additional resources to support the Alliance Schools, while engaging the superintendent, school board, and municipal leaders in learning about the IAF approach to organizing. The organization staged regular "accountability sessions" in which public officials were asked to respond to reform proposals in front of Austin Interfaith members, ranging in number from several hundred to several thousand.

At the same time, the organization held individual meetings with school board members and district staff to cultivate them as allies and recruit them to attend the TIEF training sessions and regional conferences. Participation in these sessions helped to build greater understanding among public officials of the organization's goals and methods and built support for the organization's reform proposals. As John Fitzpatrick, former school board member, said:

Austin Interfaith has been very effective at lobbying for additional resources for public schools, particularly low-income schools and schools in East Austin. You can point to things like line-item funding, additional funding for low-income schools, additional dollars for parent outreach and parent support, additional focus on things like bilingual education and equivalence for immigrants.

Through its district-level organizing, Austin Interfaith worked with district and municipal leaders to create:

- ◆ a new teacher pipeline program to address shortages in bilingual and special education teachers;
- ◆ a new parent support specialist position for high-poverty schools;
- ◆ after-school and summer school programs and adult ESL programs.

Austin Interfaith also helped to protect and increase resources earmarked for low-performing, high-poverty schools and assisted schools in applying for Investment Capital Fund grants, helping to bring an additional \$1.9 million in funds to district schools between 1998 and 2008.

Adding to these district-level impacts, Austin Interfaith's school-level work influenced parent and community engagement practices in other low-performing schools in the district. The diffusion of these practices was facilitated in part by administrator mobility: assistant principals appointed to principal positions took their experience from Alliance Schools into new schools. The spread of Alliance Schools practices was also fostered by a series of decisions by Superintendent Pascal Forgione, who was appointed in 1999 and with whom the organization had forged a strong working relationship.

Formerly U.S. commissioner of education statistics, Forgione was a strong proponent of educational standards and the use of assessment data to align standards and instruction in schools. He was impressed by the IAF's approach to organizing, which emphasized adult learning and leadership development. In Austin Interfaith, Forgione saw a partner that could educate parents about their school's performance and generate demand and support for improvement. Forgione said:

Austin Interfaith has got to be my critical friend. They're not my best friend. They've got to be critical. They've got to be the conscience of my community. Sometimes I don't want to hear it; most times I don't mind because we have such shared values. But whether I like it or not, that's their job.

Forgione mandated professional development for administrators and teachers in Alliance Schools community engagement practices as part of his "blueprint" (Austin Blueprint for Learning) for improving low-performing schools. The district also hired a former Alliance Schools principal and Austin Interfaith organizer, Claudia Santamaria, to train parent support specialists. "The neighborhood walk has become a generalized good practice in my district, and Austin Interfaith was the one that brought that to us," Forgione observed. "When I interview principals, I ask them about parent involvement, and I'm listening for Interfaith best practices."

Discussion Questions: Scaling Up

- ◆ What happened at Zavala Elementary School, the first Alliance School in Austin?
- ◆ How did schools targeted by Austin Interfaith differ from others in the district?
- ◆ How do parents and teachers work together in an Alliance School? How is this different from their relationship in a typical low-income school?
- ◆ What methods did Austin Interfaith use to confront and engage public officials? What results did they get?
- ◆ What were some of Austin Interfaith's major accomplishments?



Austin Interfaith — Reading for Group 3

Entering the Era of High-Stakes Testing

By the end of the 1990s, the Alliance Schools movement was in full swing, and Austin Interfaith had gained districtwide recognition, along with the support of many school and district administrators. But the work faced a new challenge in the rise of high-stakes testing.

Galvanized by the standards-based reforms of the early 1990s, the use of standardized tests for accountability had become a national passion, and nowhere more so than in Texas, which sent a new president to the White House in 2000 on a tide of good-news stories of the state's miraculous educational improvement. In 1993, the Texas state legislature developed a high-stakes accountability system requiring districts to administer and report scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and mandating that students pass the TAAS in order to graduate.

AISD's scores improved steadily across the decade, as did scores for the state as a whole although some controversy surrounded this claim. In 1999, following allegations that local districts were deliberately excluding the test score results of low-performing students, the Texas legislature mandated inclusion of special education and third- and fourth- grade scores on the Spanish TAAS. The legislature also directed the Texas Education Agency to create a new assessment program, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

Passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 instituted more stringent test-score reporting requirements for student performance. Two years later, TAKS rolled out across the state, accompanied by new and higher benchmarks for student performance, replacing TAAS. In Austin, the school district expanded its testing regimen to include beginning and mid-year diagnostic assessments, in addition to the annual exam. The expanded testing aimed to provide teachers with timely and accurate information on student performance and to counter the effects of high student mobility in district schools. As Forgione put it:

There are so many kids changing schools that you can't just use the data from last year because you've got about 30 percent of your kids who weren't in your school last year.

The resulting pressures were particularly acute for Alliance Schools, which served some of the highest numbers of struggling students in the district. As educators focused on assessment, they had less time for relational practices. The emphasis on testing changed schools practically overnight, organizer Rebecca McIlwain recalled. "The time, space, and encouragement for teachers and principals to do neighborhood walks and other organizing work ended abruptly."

Claudia Santamaria, former principal and Austin Interfaith organizer, said:

The parent conference time that we used to spend getting to know parents and talking about what we knew about their kids, from

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their progress in previous grades, turned out to be talking about taking a test and then talking about the results of that test.

By 2004 the overall number of Austin public schools participating in the Alliance Schools network had decreased from sixteen to eleven elementary schools, and the implementation of Alliance Schools practices within these elementary schools had diminished considerably. In practical terms, this meant a decline in participation on core teams, as well as in community walks and IAF training sessions and organizing activities. (Ironically, this decline coincided with AISD's adoption of Alliance Schools community engagement practices in the Blueprint school improvement plan.)

A New Campaign

In early 2004, with eleven elementary schools in Austin involved in the Alliance Schools organizing, Austin Interfaith and the statewide IAF network initiated a new campaign to challenge the statewide use of test scores as the primary accountability measure of student learning. Through a series of meetings with teachers, administrators, and parents in the Alliance Schools, as well as consultations with education researchers, Austin Interfaith developed a proposal to create a sub-district in which schools would be freed from administering periodic diagnostic tests in exchange for demonstrating their capacity to meet district performance goals. The organization also began working with local and national educators and researchers to define a new performance-based assessment system.

Despite strenuous advocacy from Austin Interfaith during the 2004-2005 school year, the school district declined to release Alliance Schools from the assessment tests, citing concerns about the difficulty of constructing an alternative assessment to the statewide test, as well as the external political pressures on the district. One district administrator recalled telling Interfaith organizers:

We cannot ignore the state system. We cannot act to opt out of it, but you can go to the legislature and see if you can get somewhere with alternative assessments. Now, if you get somewhere with the legislature, then we can talk.

Two years later, in 2006, Austin Interfaith and the Texas IAF succeeded in building political support for a state-level commission to study the expiry of the TAKS. At the local level, Austin Interfaith began to expand its education organizing to include congregation-based outreach strategies. Lead organizer Doug Greco explained:

Now that it's harder to work in schools, we're reaching out within congregations, where we have more space to do the house meetings and parent academies that build the Alliance work.

Discussion Questions: Enter High-Stakes Testing

- ◆ What was the impact of high-stakes testing on the Alliance Schools network?
- ◆ How did the regimen of testing affect the development of collaborative relationships in the schools?
- ◆ What was the “Texas Miracle” and how real was it?
- ◆ Was Austin Interfaith able to persuade the district to develop an alternative assessment to the Texas state test? What happened?



Austin Interfaith — Reading for Group 4

Assessing the Impact of Austin Interfaith’s Education Organizing

What is the impact of Austin Interfaith’s work? Parents and community members, as well as district leaders, argue that the organization played a critically important role in bringing long-invisible constituencies into the public arena and developing their skills, confidence, and power to fight for their children’s needs.

Schools serving low-income communities typically have fewer resources, less-experienced staff, less parent and community involvement, and less-welcoming school environments. Yet teachers and administrators in Alliance Schools consistently described their schools as affirming and participatory places, which they contrasted with other schools in the district that they had experienced. These educators reported greater parent and community involvement and a new sense of trust and shared purpose within their schools. Veteran Alliance Schools principal Joaquin Gloria explained:

Because we’ve talked so much to each other, we don’t need to write so many memos for this or that. The parents know that it’s safe to talk, to ask questions, and to probe and push the teachers’ thinking. And vice versa – parents know that it’s OK for the teachers to push their thinking because that’s the environment that we’ve set up.

Austin Interfaith has drawn considerable local and national media attention, and its work at Zavala Elementary School has been profiled in several books and reports on the Texas IAF’s work by Dennis Shirley, Richard Murnane and Frank Levy, and Mark Warren. A 2002 case study by Elaine Simon and Eva Gold at Research for Action, in collaboration with Chris Brown at the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, provides an in-depth analysis of the organization’s education organizing in four key areas: leadership development, high-quality curriculum and instruction, public accountability, and school–community connection.

Findings: Influence on District Capacity

Educators believe the Alliance Schools organizing increased awareness among district leaders of the needs of low-income African American and Latino communities by, as a district official noted, giving “vision and strategy to voices that weren’t heard as much.” Austin Interfaith gained influence with public officials from its roots in the communities it advocated for and its capacity to bring these constituencies into the political process. Several district leaders noted the congruence between their personal beliefs and Austin Interfaith’s emphasis on democratic engagement

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and equity. John Fitzpatrick, a former member of the school district's board of trustees, explained:

When you're going to accountability sessions, it's not because there's fear Austin Interfaith is going to turn out 10,000 people to vote against you; it's because this is a big group that you can work with. We care about their values, we care about who they're serving, and they've got a track record of accomplishments. They've been more successful than any other group I know, or than we as a district [have been], in getting parents from often-disenfranchised communities involved in their kids' education.

Participation in IAF training sessions and regional conferences enhanced district officials' understanding of the district's diverse communities, helping them to become more effective. Fitzpatrick said:

They've been a guide into a community that I do not belong to and that I do not come from. It's been extremely helpful to have them show me what's going on for over half our kids and families and to expose me to a very different world than the one I grew up in.

In the study of 144 teachers in six schools with varying degrees of involvement with Austin Interfaith, teachers in schools that were deeply involved rated their school highly on the scale Creating Local Accountability. This scale asked teachers to rate whether or not they agreed with statements such as "This district encourages schools to be accountable to their local community."

Angela Baker, a congregation leader within Austin Interfaith, offered a supporting view of the accountability relationship that Alliance Schools developed with families and community members:

I picked up the school newspaper and saw an article about how the teachers and the principal could call parents to accountability if they weren't doing what they felt was their job with their children, making sure they read or whatever the classroom was requesting. But the parents also could call the principal and the teachers to accountability. And I thought, "Oh, that is a refreshing change." You don't see that. Usually administrations really don't want parents or any outsider to be a part.

Findings: Influence on School Capacity

Teacher surveys suggest that schools with higher levels of involvement with Austin Interfaith built greater capacity than schools with lower levels of involvement. In addition, when asked to assess the degree to which Austin Interfaith had influenced their schools, teachers reported a high degree of influence on the climate and culture domains.

School climate

Survey and interview data suggest that Austin Interfaith's impact is particularly strong in school climate, which we specify as facilities conditions, overall school environment, student and parent involvement, and school–community relationships.

- ◆ Teachers in schools that were highly involved with Austin Interfaith rated their school’s climate more highly than teachers in low-involvement schools, with significant differences on measures related to trust, parent involvement, and a focus on student learning.
- ◆ Teachers in high-involvement schools credited Austin Interfaith’s work with “some” to “very much” influence on school climate items related to parent involvement, trust and collaboration, and school–community relations. Even in low-involvement schools – where Austin Interfaith no longer maintains an active presence – teachers perceived the group as having influenced parent and community relationships.
- ◆ Parents in high-involvement schools reported greater access to important information, more opportunities for communication, and more respect from school staff.

Professional culture

Professional culture refers to the way in which teachers and administrators work with, learn from, and help each other develop more effective schooling practices. Teachers in high-involvement schools rated their school’s professional culture more highly than teachers in low-involvement schools on six measures most directly related to teacher collegiality, morale, and joint problem solving; these differences were statistically significant.

Interviews with administrators suggest that the strong professional culture is directly related to the “relational” strategies that Austin Interfaith teaches school staff. Principal Gloria observed:

All of the teachers in our school practice Alliance Schools principles because we incorporate them into our day-to-day routine, into the staff development and faculty development that we do. We do individual meetings; we do house meetings; and that’s how it works.

Teachers in high-involvement schools credited Austin Interfaith with a high degree of influence on the quality of principal leadership, more so than on culture items related to teacher relationships, school commitment, and professional development opportunities. In Austin Interfaith’s organizing model, principals receive extensive training and support in implementing Alliance Schools practices. While the organization’s involvement in schools may have generated new opportunities for professional development and new norms of collegial interaction, it is possible that teachers perceive these changes as the result of principal or district leadership, rather than the group’s efforts.

Principal support for Alliance Schools practices is a precondition to Austin Interfaith’s entry into schools. Therefore, high-involvement schools may be characterized by more-enthusiastic and more-supportive principals. Indeed, teacher respondents on the district’s 2005 school climate survey gave a higher rating to principal leadership in high-involvement schools than in low-involvement schools.

Discussion Questions: Impact on District and School Capacity

- ◆ What are frequent challenges in low-income schools? How did the Austin Interfaith approach address these challenges?
- ◆ Explain the focus on mutual accountability. How is accountability related to democratic values?
- ◆ What were the differences in school climate between high-involvement Alliance schools and schools with low involvement? What areas were most affected?
- ◆ What is “professional culture” and how was it influenced by involvement with Austin Interfaith? What were the perceptions of teachers about changes in professional culture?



Austin Interfaith — Reading for Group 5

Findings: Instructional Core

In our school capacity framework, the instructional core domain encompasses teacher characteristics and classroom dynamics. Though the instructional core domain is less directly targeted by Austin Interfaith’s organizing, we found statistically significant differences between high- and low-involvement schools on teacher influence in classroom decision making. This finding is consistent with Austin Interfaith’s emphasis on fostering participative norms in schools. Indeed, as Amanda Braziel observed, Austin Interfaith’s work challenged school faculty to see themselves as learners, leaders, and as “part of a democracy and that we can do something about the problems we see.”

Findings: Influence on Student Outcomes

Because the goal of Austin Interfaith’s organizing is to transform the long-term achievement outcomes for students and families who rely on AISD schools, the question of impact on student learning is ultimately the most crucial. Austin Interfaith argues that test scores alone should not be the primary measure of student learning and that cultural norms such as engagement and collaboration are essential components of a successful learning environment. Our research suggests that, within Alliance Schools, voice, engagement, and learning appear to be mutually reinforcing. Analyses of school administrative data show a significant positive relationship between the level of a school’s involvement in Alliance Schools activities and student performance on standardized tests.

Our regression model assessed the relationship between each Alliance School’s “intensity” of involvement in organizing and the change in the percent of students meeting minimum expectations on TAAS between 1994 and 2002.

The study team drew two important conclusions from the regression analyses.

- ◆ Intensity of involvement in Alliance Schools activities predicted increases in TAAS scores, ranging from 4 percentage points in schools with minimal involvement to between 15 and 19 percentage points in schools with high involvement.
- ◆ Length of time of involvement in Alliance activities was not a significant predictor of improved student performance. That is, high level of involvement was a stronger predictor of student performance gains than a low level of involvement, even when this low level of involvement was sustained across a number of years.

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Reflections on Findings

Austin Interfaith's signature effort, the Alliance Schools organizing, carried out for more than a decade, yielded new resources for high-poverty, low-performing schools, as well as new skills and relationships among core schooling constituencies. Both of these contributed to substantial gains in student learning. The study team's data show that Austin Interfaith's organizing led to a host of changes inside schools that helped to improve student learning. The organization's work produced:

- ◆ new funding for parent support specialists, after-school programs, bilingual education services, adult ESL programs, and teacher and administrative professional development opportunities in East Austin schools;
- ◆ increased parent and community involvement, which led to higher levels of trust, collaboration, and morale among teachers in schools that were highly involved with Austin Interfaith;
- ◆ improved student performance on the state-mandated TAAS. Analyses of the relationship between Austin Interfaith's involvement in schools and student performance on TAAS (1993–2002) show that deep involvement with Austin Interfaith predicted gains ranging from 15 to 19 points in the percent of students meeting minimum standards on TAAS. Lower levels of involvement predicted gains of 4 points.

Austin Interfaith's success underscores the growing consensus among education experts about the role of trust in schools. Researchers at the Chicago Consortium for School Research, for example, found that elementary schools in Chicago with a high degree of relational trust were more likely to embrace reform initiatives and to show improvement in academic productivity. In their book *Trust in Schools*, Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider assert:

We view the need to develop relational trust as an essential complement both to governance efforts that focus on bringing new incentives to bear on improving practice and to instructional reforms that seek to deepen the technical capacities of school professionals. Absent more supportive social relations among all adults who share responsibility for student development and who remain mutually dependent on each other to achieve success, new policy initiatives are unlikely to produce desired outcomes. Similarly, new technical resources, no matter how sophisticated in design or well supported in implementation, are not likely to be used well, if at all.

Within Alliance Schools, Austin Interfaith engaged in a long-term process of recruiting and training parents and teachers to view themselves as leaders and to work together in a participatory and action-oriented problem-solving process. Organizers helped to build cohesion in schools and energize the school community with a new sense of shared purpose and potency. When the organizing efforts were sustained at a high level of intensity, this organizing contributed to notable gains in student learning.

Yet, the work in Austin had many challenges, not only those brought on by the rise of standardized tests. Parents, teachers, and district officials consistently noted the disruption that principal turnover created in their schools. In some cases, a change in school leadership was accompanied by extensive staff turnover. In addition, new principals, in particular, struggled to prioritize the “soft fuzzy stuff” of relationship building in an overall context in which they feared being “kicked out of here if reading scores don’t go up,” as Superintendent Forgione put it.

Community organizing is inherently labor-intensive and messy, requiring patience, perseverance, and a high tolerance for ambiguity. But school-based organizing demands a higher level of content expertise than organizing in neighborhood arenas such as housing or environmental conditions. Education organizers must understand the schooling context and be able to build effective relationships with a wide range of stakeholders – district officials, school staff, parents, and community members – who bring divergent priorities, expectations, and cultural norms. Austin Interfaith maintained a stable core of staff organizers for much of the past decade, and this stability undoubtedly influenced the team’s documented results.

Though an intense focus on reinventing the culture of schools was the cornerstone of the Alliance Schools strategy, it was not the only focus for reform. Austin Interfaith pursued district- and state-level funding opportunities and regularly engaged district officials in learning about the Alliance strategy. This district- and state-level organizing played a crucial role in generating resources to initiate and support the Alliance Schools work and in building educators’ investment in and support for its success.

District leaders’ involvement in the initiative also expanded their capacity to address the needs of constituencies that, historically, were less well served by district politics. As former school board member John Fitzpatrick noted:

I make better decisions on behalf of the entire district because I know a little more about communities of color and low-income communities. Austin Interfaith helped me understand something I wanted to understand, but I didn’t have a lot of practical hands-on experience with.

Discussion Questions: Findings on Instructional Core/Student Outcomes and Reflections on Findings

- ◆ What is the “instructional core” and how did Austin Interfaith’s organizing influence it?
- ◆ How did the study assess the impact of Austin Interfaith on student outcomes? What effects did the study find?
- ◆ What changes in Austin Interfaith schools led to improved student learning?
- ◆ Why is relational trust among adults in a school related to improved student performance?
- ◆ What are the particular challenges of organizing for educational reform? How did Austin Interfaith address them?