



"Reclaiming Our Schools"

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A.....	PROJECT MISSION
B.....	PROJECT BACKGROUND
C.....	PROJECT GOAL
D.....	SHORT-TERM GOALS
E.....	LONG-TERM GOALS
F.....	PROJECT PROCESS
G.....	ORGANIZING STRATEGIES
H.....	ORGANIZING CHALLENGES
I.....	PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS
J.....	LESSONS LEARNED
K.....	NEXT STEPS
L.....	APPENDENCIES

A. PROJECT MISSION

The "Reclaiming Our Schools" (ROS) project focuses on organizing parents locally to become more involved in their childrens' education at five neighborhood schools. There are two elementary schools; two middle schools; and one highschool designed in a cluster to help measure and track an increase of parental involvement over the years. It also makes it convenient for parents that have children in different grade levels to be involved.

B. PROJECT BACKGROUND

This strategy was derived from a series of planning meetings. Improving the Detroit Public Schools surfaced as a concern time and time again by parents and other community members during a planning process to revitalize the Eastside of Detroit.

Many concerns for school improvement in Detroit center around low test scores, unsafe schools/buildings, lack of books, inadequate school supplies, insufficient space, teachers not caring, high student teacher rations, transportation, lack of after school support programs, mis-management of funds by central administration, and a myriad of other problems similar to schools in big urban cities.

In Detroit, the Detroit School Board members, whose job is to take of these kinds of issues, are elected by the people in the

community and the people are dissatisfied with their performance. Parents are angry and upset at the constant issues of basic needs that their children are not getting and a tacit condoning among board members to continue in this fashion.

While you have several parents who regularly attend the school board meetings to ask questions and demand answers to what is happening, most parents do not get involved. Each public school that receives Title 1 government funds for economically depressed and disadvantaged areas in the city is mandated to have parent participation. The Local School Community Organization (LSCO) formerly PTA's are the official school parent bodies of the schools. The LSCO is suppose to provide access for parents to get involved in their schools. The parents are then entitled to have a say in what programs or additions they want to see added that will increase student achievement and assist the children in learning.

However, most of those bodies are made up of 3-5 parents for schools that service in some cases over 1000 students. More often these bodies don't see a school budget and are limited to what the principal will allow them to do.

The LSCO's tend to be very political and intimidating to many parents. The LSCO chair is typically good friends with the principal of the school and gets it's directives from the principal. There are a few LSCO's in the city that tend to be very effective, however, they are established at the perceived more

prominent schools. The LSCO has not proven a viable option for parents to participate in their schools.

When asked, one parent commented that at her first LSCO meeting, the small group of parents inquired about her own educational background and credentials. She happened to have had secondary education, however this was a prime example of the scrutiny and intimidation parents face when they do try to become involved. This parent has not attended another LSCO meeting.

Another issues that links directly to the lack of parental involvement in the Detroit Public School system is the endless list of school classifications and confusion.

In what I view as a desperate attempt and urgency to improve Detroit Public Schools, there have been several educational strategies attempted by different schools. Detroit now has an entire list as follows:

- Neighborhood Schools
- Schools of Choice
- Charter Schools
- Technology Schools
- Comer Schools
- Academy Schools
- Empowered Schools
- Theme Schools

The list goes on and the irony is that some of the school classifications are really one in the same. The perception among parents and the community is that one is better than the other. Almost all are better than a regular neighborhood schools in which my project is focused, although test score comparisons showed no significant difference at many of the schools, some scored lower than the neighborhood schools. What this has done is confuse many parents and perpetuate the division and dis-organization among parents to get involved.

Politics and confusion are two reasons many parents do not get involved. Despite a myth perpetuated in Detroit that parents just don't care about their children, politics and mis-information are two of the real reasons they are not involved as spoken from parents themselves.

Education Reform is a very broad movement in Detroit and a very big issue around the country. According to a study, entitled "A Nation At Risk", produced during the Reagan Administration test scores and achievement over the last several decades have continued to decline despite the increased number of dollars being dumped into the system. The schools with higher test scores and better overall achievement tend to be those that have a high rate of parental involvement.

C. OVERALL PROJECT GOAL

Although there are several goals in theory for this project, I have narrowed the focus down to one overall measurable goal for the next twelve months as follows:

Establish a working advisory committee for "Reclaiming Our Schools" with representation from parents, youth, school administration, principals, community leaders, and other stakeholders to work and carry out the project mission.

D. SHORT-TERM PROJECT GOALS

- Identify and prioritize parent concerns
- Establish sub-committees to the advisory group to do more of the leg work and planning between the full advisory committee meetings at the schools
- Increase parent participation at the committee level and in the five schools
- Develop working relationships and open lines of communication with key staff at each school, school area offices, and downtown administration

E. LONG-TERM PROJECT GOALS:

- Facilitate ongoing recruitment campaigns at each of the five schools

- Work with the LSCO to strengthen its status and/or work beside it
- Engage parents in monthly concrete activities at each school
- Provide training and workshops for issues identified by parents
- Create a model of parent involvement in five schools that can be replicated throughout the city

The specific outcomes for the final term:

- An advisory committee
- Sub-committees at each of the five schools
- Working relationships with key staff at each school, area and downtown administration offices
- Launch one kick-off event at each school

F. PROJECT PROCESS

At the start of this project we held a series of community meetings in different areas of the city using a survey to identify parent concerns and their top priorities for improvement in the schools.

Once I was confident I had a good understanding of the issues and concerns, I visited nearly 30 schools using a school information sheet developed to determine the vision for each school and whether not they were interested in a school community organization partnership for the "Reclaiming Our Schools" project.

I also developed a set of criteria that could assist in

contributing to the projects success as follows:

- Empowerment Zone / Rebuilding Communities Resources
- Community Groups/Block Clubs
- Parent Volunteer Opportunities
- School Staff Commitments

When I felt comfortable selecting my five schools, I narrowed my organizing to the areas of the five schools I would soon work with. At this point the ground work was laid in terms of getting in touch with the issues, getting the support of the schools, their area office heads, and support from the Detroit Public Schools Superintendent.

In an attempt to begin establishing a constituency of parents from the five schools we flyered the catchment areas of each school announcing a dinner meeting to discuss issues at their particular school and to introduce "Reclaiming Our Schools."

At the first meeting I almost went into cardiac arrest because we got out thousands of flyers and had plenty of food and only 17 parents attended the meeting. Three of the principals from the five schools showed up. At the second meeting there was a similar turnout, however, they were all different people except one person. This made it very challenging to do planning and come to some common agreement on issues and activities. This happened over the next several meetings with the exception one meeting where only one

person showed up. I later found out it was because I scheduled it on the day of the fireworks which is a traditional family night and I never attend the fireworks so it never occurred to me.

I began to get very frustrated trying to build a constituency. I went from flyering to using the list I had built from sign-in sheets to do phone calls and mailings. One important thing to note is that the first meeting was during the last two weeks of school and then school was out. With school being out for the year it was even more challenging to get people out during the summer.

During some of the brainstorming sessions in the small school meetings, educating and informing parents was continually mentioned as a way to begin recruiting parents into the school. One of the parents suggested that we do a candidates night because it was near election time and it would give parents an opportunity to ask question of the people running for the school board and replace the people they were dissatisfied with.

Based on my experience in planning events I asked the small group if they would commit to being responsible for at least one part of the event because we only had 30 days and I could not do it alone and everybody signed up for something. Finally I began to have a break through in maintaining a consistent group of parents.

We met weekly sometimes twice a week to pull off this event. During that period we gained at least 20 parents who came

consistently, followed through on their assignments, and experienced a roaring success attracting over 100 people and 15 of the 17 candidates running for office. The candidates night was complimented on it's professionalism and organization and was acknowledged as the best held throughout the city. My role had always been facilitator until this point. For the candidates night I merely provided a few resources and the parents did the rest.

After this event the parent participation began to die down a little and two things happened that I believe became the glue to keep us together as follows:

- a.) The parents decided to do a second candidates night for the primary election since the first one seemed to be helpful to parents and they new they could do it
- b.) School was back in session in September and the first thing the school board did was cut transportation for many students in the Detroit Public Schools

As we continued organizing for the second candidates night. We also continued to follow what was happening with transportation cuts closely. Although we had some consistency in parents, I felt we were way off track from what I wanted this project and this soon to be advisory group to focus on. The group was focused on larger issues and nothing in particular to the five schools we had chosen to work with. Finally I posed the question during one of our

planning meetings "How many people here today are interested in serving as the official advisory committee?" Several parents agreed and a few others seemed unsure, however, we had an advisory committee.

I saw transportation as a further deterrent from the project goals. The transportation issue became so heated that several of our parents felt we needed to respond to the issue as a parent group. As a strategy to bring the project back in focus, I asked that we narrow our attention to how transportation cuts had effected our five schools. This helped a little with keeping the concept alive and the group bought into it.

As we began to research how the transportation cuts effected our schools, we experienced an influx of several parents attending our meetings, one of which is known as the nightmare of school board meetings. Their mission was to try to get groups of parents to go down to the school board meetings and raise hell. Other parents were looking for a way to get involved and we seemed to be a viable option.

We continued to try to stay focused on our approach organizing parents locally at five schools. Transportation effected only one of the five schools we worked with. The group decided we should prepare a presentation before the school board highlighting safety issues for five to eight year olds, who were originally bussed from one of the poorest communities in the city, and now have to walk

over a mile to school through a highly traffic and industrial area. They also decided to organize a rally that I felt would be the worst idea considering all the circumstances and based on the time that was set no one would have been able to attend. They agreed to postpone this activity, however, they never went back to it.

The nightmare from the school board meetings continued to come to our meetings insisting our approach was the wrong approach and we should just go down to the school board meetings and raise hell.

Many issues surfaced from my parent group including the lack of representation from all five schools. There were only two schools that actually had parents represented with our group. The other parents were from the area or concerned community members. The biggest challenge became trying to get through the planning that would address these kinds of issues and stay focused.

While we were advocating for restoration of transportation for kids at Hutchinson elementary school, one of our two elementary schools, we made a special effort to recruit parents to go down to the school board meetings to help us make our case. We car pooled down to the next school board meeting. We arrived only to find out they had purposely not put us on the agenda. The school board had decided to not listen to any further presentations regarding transportation because the board meetings, over two months, had to recess several times and call in the police to control the crowd of angry parents. Out of my own frustration and realizing we had

gotten parents, who typically do not get involved, to come down to the school board meeting and advocate on behalf of their children to be transported, I demanded an explanation. The board president sent the secretary over, who then grabbed the head of transportation and met with me and a few of our parents privately.

We set up subsequent meetings and are still trying to work out an alternative for bussing for those children. At one meeting the parents were very angry and left the meeting because they became disgusted with school administrators. Some of the parents did come back for other meetings and try to stay involved.

When we reported back to the full committee what happened, they were furious and decided we should attempt to be on the agenda again and express our frustration with following their process to do a presentation and then disrespecting our group and leaving us off the agenda. The committee also thought we should take advantage of this opportunity to introduce the entire project and what we are trying to do to the board as a whole.

In the meantime the group, now act as the advisory committee, for Reclaiming Our Schools hosted their second successful candidates night. They also continued discussion on how to get all five schools represented at the table.

The nightmare of the school board meetings had consistently come to several meetings by this time and volunteered to use her contacts

to get us on the agenda. The nightmare's name is Helen Moore, who has been very active in school issues for decades. She is very well known by all board members and very fluent on what the issues are. In this way she has been a resource, in other ways a hinderance. I continue to strike a balance with her. She yells out at every board meeting and attacks everybody on the board except a few she supports. At one point she had a constituency of parents, however, she is now continuing to advocate alone.

The significance of this woman is her curious interest in our group of parents and what seems to be her deliberate intention to interrupt our meetings, maybe even to recruit them to work with her. I have come to the conclusion that she has decided the only way to improve the school and get parents involved is to fight the board at every meeting. In her efforts as fluent as she is, she has rendered herself ineffective because of her extreme tactics. I believe she is now looking for a constituency to support her in her approach so that she can make her points through other people since they won't listen to her. She has recently hooked up with another group called "UPSET" who continue to rally and attack at the board meetings, however, she still manages to make all of my meetings.

Helen began to bring other people to our meetings despite her belief that our approach was wrong. In one particular meeting, it turned into a yelling match among the parents and for that moment I began to miss the days that I didn't have any parents. It took me

standing up and yelling to get this meeting back in order. Most of the frustration was parents who were just fed up and began arguing with each other not realizing that our end goals are the same, however, our means and strategies to get there were different.

This time getting on the board's agenda was ten time more difficult because Helen called the board pushing to get me on the agenda and they assumed we were the same group by affiliation. The only thing that saved our slot on the agenda was the board secretary calling my organization and speaking with our Executive Director to determine what we were really planning to do at the board meeting.

Six parents from our advisory committee attended the board meeting where I delivered a presentation that focused on who we are and what we are trying to do locally in our community (see attached speech).

As I approached the podium to do my quick presentation I could see the nervousness and panic in the eyes of the board members, who by this time had been called every name in the book and slapped in the face sixty days straight for screwing up transportation. Normally you are only allowed 2-5 minutes to give a presentation before the board, however, because we talked about a more positive approach to working with parents in the schools, we acknowledged the extreme group (UPSET) in that we understood why they were upset, talked about our disappointment in what was happening, and left the voice of reason that calmed everyone in the room. For two months this was

the first time there was total silence in the room and our time was extended from 2-12 minutes. My parents joined me at the podium to talk about what we needed from them in the future and they were proud we chose to handle it this way.

As we acknowledged our volunteers and thanked them, the nightmare (Helen) jumped up and said "what about me, I'm the one who got you on the agenda", however she was the reason they didn't want us on the agenda. The group along with myself did not turn to acknowledge her, we continued and concluded our presentation.

After the presentation two parents in the audience and several employees with the school system volunteered to help us any way they could and our parents collected names and numbers.

This was a very important time in my project because although, we got off track and began organizing around an issue, it was a process that really solidified the group and kept us together over the last several months.

In the meetings to come I was more proactive and shared my concerns with a handful of the parents that I had worked with the longest regarding interruptions by the nightmare and her attempts to disrupt and change the approach of our group. They came ready to support staying on our agenda and one of the parents spoke up and suggested that no one approach will solve our problems, she went on to say there has to be mutual respect ideas around the table and

the ones outside. The group had began to take more ownership of the group and keep the order themselves.

Now that I knew I had a core group of growing and consistent parents on the advisory committee, my goal was to re-focus the group. It was actually a great segway into the five schools. Earlier there were concerns about not having enough representation from the five schools we represent. Over our next few meetings we worked to put together a presentation of ROS to present at each of the five schools through their LSCO's. Each of the advisory members agreed to help present at least one of the five presentations. (see attached presentation).

Within each presentation was a built in strategy to formalize some type of partnership with the parents already at the schools and a commitment to different tasks that would kick-off the project in each school and sign-up more parents to monthly concrete activities.

G. ORGANIZING STRATEGIES

In our organizing as I have tried to layout in a short story, we used a combination of surveys, electronic voting, door to door flyers, presentations, forums, regularly scheduled meetings, mailings, telephone calls and flyers in the schools. We also worked to make it convenient for parents to attend meetings by providing transportation, child care and dinner.

In the future we will use some of the same methods to move forward in our work, however, we will do door to door 2-5 minute presentations very targeted to parents of students, send some flyers home through students, provide incentives as we move further along at each school, and continue to let the advisory committee guide and decide on our next steps.

H. OVERALL ORGANIZING CHALLENGES

- Participation
- Retention
- Focus

I. PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENT

- Established ROS Advisory Committee
- Hosted two successful School Board Candidate Nights
- Developed School/Community/Parent Partnerships
- Established Relationships with key stakeholders
- Created a model approach to education reform adopted in a proposal to the Annenberg Foundation resulting in \$60 million for Detroit Public schools and
- Created a forum for parents to have a VOICE

To elaborate on our advisory committee we have assigned each of the 30 advisory members and other parents we have worked with on established sub-committees at each of our five schools. Each sub-

committee consists of LSCO parents and parents and community members from our advisory committee. As a start to moving into the school we are working with the LSCO and have agreed on a partnership that focuses on parent recruitment and an initial kick-off event at their school.

J. LESSONS LEARNED

There several lessons that I have learned over the course of this project that I think are worth mentioning as follows:

-Parents do care about their children and have very basic concerns such as the safety of their children. Other barriers voiced by parents include:

- *Flyers sent home by the student never make it home
- *Meetings are held at times parents need to work
- *Parents do not feel welcome in the school; intimidation
- *Apathy; not feeling they can make a difference
- *The parent had a bad experience at the school
- *The parent had bad experience as a youth; failure in school
- *The parents are ashamed that they can not assist their child because they may not have the skill

-That the Detroit Public Schools are very political centrally and locally in our neighborhoods and you have to make a lot of judgement calls in terms of who you can trust and relationships that need to be developed in order for you to be effective.

- It takes a lot of work and energy to organize locally and you should engage and delegate to volunteers as soon as possible in order to keep things moving especially when there are very hot issues on the table
- Be careful when scheduling meetings
- Involve all stakeholder in the process at its initial stages of development as partners
- The group needed to go through a process and in my case it was a series of events and activities where they experienced some small successes together that bonded the group and prompted them to begin taking ownership
- Most meeting takes place before the meeting and although you do not want a rubber stamp committee, it is helpful when you have the kinds of conflict and need the group to be supportive
- The group needs to be allowed to make mistakes as part of their growing process
- Other people can come in and try to convince you that your approach may be wrong and in some cases they can be right; in my case we are growing in numbers, progressing into the school, and building the relationships we need in order to be most effective.
- Document your information as much as possible to support what you are doing, also as a reference and guide for yourself

K. NEXT STEPS

As I made some mention to throughout this report, this project will continue in its mission and goals. In addition, other efforts will be planned and organized based on the needs of the five schools in

which we work.

I will also be working to develop other leaders to carry the vision for the project and lead the group. Our advisory committee will eventually elect officers and expand their agenda around school reform.

Progress on this project may be publicized through the suggested CED newsletter in the future.

L. APPENDENCIES

See attachments.