



The Collaborative for Education Organizing:
**Building Excellence
in Public Education**

THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION



*“Education is not preparation
for life; education is life itself.”*

– John Dewey, American philosopher, psychologist,
and educational reformer

Foreword

by Terri Lee Freeman, President

Nelson Mandela reminds us that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” I am proud to work with an amazing group of people who take this mantra to heart in everything they do. The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region’s focus on fostering equity, access, and opportunity for all begins with our children – arming them with a quality education is our first, most important mission.

It is with this mission in mind that we present to the community the groundbreaking work of the Collaborative for Education Organizing (CEO). For the past year and a half, this innovative partnership of funders, nonprofit organizations, and community leaders has worked tirelessly to begin invigorating the voice of a community that demands quality public education in the District of Columbia. CEO embodies our belief that parents, teachers, business, churches, nonprofits, and students themselves play vital roles in ensuring our youth graduate equipped to succeed in life.

This document is intended as a snapshot in time, a picture of a growing movement to empower the community to play a role in our youth’s futures. We hope it will prove both instructional and inspirational, not only communicating our strategy in undertaking this work, but our hopes for its potential to create positive change for students. We hope that you will join us in this effort to give youth the best weapon to succeed in school, thrive in life, and change the world.



Terri Lee Freeman,
President





“Remember that our nation’s first great leaders were also our first great scholars.”

– President John F. Kennedy

CEO in Action

It is a late-August day in Southeast Washington. Classes are scheduled to begin at District of Columbia public schools in less than a week. Jonathan Stith and Ericke Lowery are sitting at a wood-veneer card table in the sparse office that the Youth Education Alliance (YEA) calls home on Martin Luther King Avenue a few blocks from the Anacostia Metro station.

Lowery points to that day's newspaper, which reports that the quality of over-the-summer repairs to D.C. public school buildings has been spotty and that some schools are "not learning ready." Both men grimace and sigh.

Stith and Lowery are used to grimacing and sighing about conditions in D.C. public schools. But more than that – as executive director and officer organizer, respectively, of YEA – they are used to empowering high school students to take action to improve those conditions.

YEA is one of five Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organizations that received grants totaling \$725,000 in 2008 through the Collaborative for Education Organizing. CEO, a new initiative established by The Community Foundation of the National Capital Region, is committed to grass-roots community organizing. It is designed to ensure that diverse voices inform and play a central role in education reform and policymaking in the D.C. public and charter schools. And it is dedicated to doubling the number of D.C. public and charter high school students who successfully complete college after graduating.



Since YEA was founded in 2001, its young student members have persuaded District officials to improve the physical conditions in the city's public high schools, particularly those in Southeast or Far Northeast Washington. Through student-led petition drives, public demonstrations, testimony at government and school system hearings, media awareness efforts and other attention-getting techniques, YEA has mounted successful campaigns to repair and properly maintain school bathrooms, to modernize school buildings and to make school lunches healthier. This year, with the support of CEO, YEA is pressuring District officials to remedy severe inadequacies in high school guidance counseling services.

The walls of the YEA office are covered with posters, artwork and fliers, most of them made by students. "Come and be a member of something that can change how you look at your school," reads a handwritten sign in the doorway.

Among the other makeshift motivational messages on the walls:

"Unite to fight."

"Get power! Get respect! Get heard! And in all thy getting – Get YEA."

"Action: A collective demonstration of power or show of strength."

"Power: The exercise of authority or influence to push things in a given direction. It can be exercised through organized money, organized people or organized information."

And, on an 8-by-11 sheet of white paper, one word, in big type: *"Disagree."*

"We're arousing young people to political action," says Stith. "Sometimes we're the only real caring adult in a student's life. When we demand excellence, that's important. That's the magic of YEA."

Lowery concurs. He is a 2003 graduate of Dunbar High School. Back then, he says, "I was just being a statistic in D.C. public schools with everything that was all wrong. I didn't know any of the stuff I'm now teaching kids about their rights. It feels good." It feels good, he says, to help young people develop public-speaking skills and see them come out of their shells and influence school policies.



Yet, for all of YEA's community organizing prowess, Stith acknowledges, the alliance lacks a steady infrastructure, and YEA's influence is not as substantial as it could be in all corners of the District.

That's where a two-year implementation grant of \$200,000 from CEO to YEA comes in. That support, says CEO senior program officer Lee Christian Parker, will fortify YEA, give it the wherewithal to tackle the guidance counselor deficiencies head-on, and provide the alliance "an opportunity to scale up beyond east of the [Anacostia] river and impact the whole city."

Or, as Stith says, the CEO grant will "allow us to grow up."

The Origins and Organizations of CEO

The Collaborative for Education Organizing was conceived in late 2006, gradually sprang to life in 2007 and has blossomed in 2008. CEO is the brainchild of a handful of local and national nonprofit organizations brought together by The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region. These funding organizations are committed to improving the D.C. public and charter schools in a meaningful and lasting way. Collectively, the funders believe that CEO is filling a void in that important effort.

Before the collaborative existed, there was “severely limited capacity within our education advocacy community to effectively launch and sustain community-driven efforts to build public will and to push for real public education for,” says Carmen James Lane, program officer at the Eugene & Agnes E. Meyer Foundation. “Well-meaning groups often did not have access to good data, a broad base of financial support, knowledge of community organizing strategies, or adequate staffing. Their efforts were often small in scale, scatter-shot, and seldom coordinated.”

CEO co-chair, Angela Jones Hackley of The Community Foundation, agrees. “There are thousands, gazillions, of nonprofits around town, and folks are off doing their own thing,” says Jones Hackley. “This collaborative has to happen because it’s not happening organically.”

From the start, The Community Foundation and the funders sought to forge an alliance “that was going to pressure the system for change regardless of who’s at the helm” in the office of the chancellor or the mayor, says Lee Christian Parker, who, together with program officer Benton Murphy and program associate Luis Francisco Vivaldi, will be facilitating CEO’s efforts.

As the collaborative evolved in 2007, the funders expressed a strong desire that CEO’s strategy go considerably beyond simple grantmaking

and advocacy for school reform. They wanted a multifaceted collaborative that would build the capacity of its grantees, that would strengthen the ability of the grantees to effectively deliver services and make an enduring difference in education. They also wanted a collaborative whose strategy would lead to a tangible academic outcome in District schools.

So, CEO embraced three core tenets: a commitment to concrete goals of the Double the Numbers coalition; a commitment to the concept of bona fide community organizing; and a commitment, when feasible, to offering multiyear grants.

The Double the Numbers coalition was catalyzed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. It brings together government, education, business and community leaders in the District working to raise high school graduation, college readiness and college success rates among D.C. public and charter school students. The Double the Numbers coalition is working to significantly increase the number of local students who successfully complete college within five years. For the high school class of 2010, the goal is to double the college completion rate from the current 9 percent to 18 percent. For the class of 2014, the goal is to triple the current rate to 27 percent.

“In order for reforms to be long lasting, the people who are affected have to own them.”

– CEO steering committee co-chair
Angela Jones Hackley

CEO's commitment to community organizing arose out of the funders' desire to *build the public will for change*, led by parents, youth, advocacy nonprofit organizations, faith-based agencies and educators committed to doubling college-ready graduation rates. "In order for reforms to be long lasting, the people who are affected have to own them," says Jones Hackley.

Given the series of D.C. public school superintendents who have come and gone and the number of experts who have failed to come up with answers for the troubled school system in recent decades, says Viki Betancourt, a co-chair of CEO's steering committee and community outreach manager at The World Bank, it has seemed that "everybody knows better than the residents what is good for their kids." That's not true, she argues. "Thinking outside the box and really coming up with ideas ... has to come from the people who are affected." In addition, she says, given the high turnover among D.C. public school experts and administrators, CEO's commitment to community organizing will build a strong societal network in which "the residents provide continuity."

Offering multiyear grants was important to the funders because they wanted to signal "a sustained commitment to the effort," says steering committee member Joe Scantlebury of the Gates Foundation. "This is long-term work." Multiyear grants provide fiscal stability to grantees and allow grantees to devote time to CEO work rather than to fundraising. They also enable CEO to more fully assess the impact of the grants and the progress of the grantees' systemic reform efforts.

Having developed those three core principles, the CEO steering committee, in the fall of 2007, released a request for proposals (RFP) to support local nonprofits working for school reform. The RFP further refined CEO's mission and scope.

The RFP sought projects and grantees that focus on wide-ranging reform, not direct services or model programs. This, says Parker, is because "education organizing is very organic and cannot be described as a model to be replicated ... You can't just take a program from one place and replicate it, A to Z, someplace else. It's sensitive to the context" of the community, the politics and the culture.

The RFP sought organizations committed to "strengthening the relationship between schools to community." Systemic parental involvement and parental coordination are crucial to CEO's mission, says Parker. The voices of parents must be heard not only by teachers and an individual school's principal but also by D.C. public school administrators and decision-makers at the system's central office on North Capitol Street.

The RFP also made clear that CEO was seeking organizations "identifying and working toward implementation of needed changes in educational policies and practices that will improve learning and achievement for all children" regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic class.

Seventeen nonprofits responded to the RFP. Eventually, five were selected. In June 2008, CEO announced their names and the initial grants they received: \$200,000 to the D.C. Language Access Coalition (a project of the Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center); \$200,000 to the D.C. Alliance of Youth Advocates; \$100,000 to DC VOICE; \$25,000 to Tellin' Stories (a project of Teaching for Change); and \$200,000 to the Youth Education Alliance.

Taken as a whole, the \$725,000 in CEO grants are the largest dedicated to supporting parent/youth education organizing in the District of Columbia.

The CEO Way

To understand the Collaborative for Education Organizing and the power it has to make enduring change in D.C. public and charter schools, it is vital to understand the concept of community organizing.

Eric Zachary, a principal associate with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, describes community organizing as the collective effort of local individuals to pool their resources to create social change. It is a distinctly American concept that dates to the late 19th century and continued with the grass-roots labor-organizing work of Saul Alinsky in Chicago in the 1930s. In recent decades, community organizing has been used to bring about change in the laws and practices involving affordable housing, environmental protection, banking and other areas. Community organizing, Zachary says, is a particularly useful strategy in poor or working-class communities that do not have a lot of income, accumulated wealth or political connections.

One goal and precept of community organizing, Zachary says, is “to build the capacity of indigenous leaders.” In other words, all community organizing employs a bottom-up philosophy, and successful community organizing means that “the people who live in the community drive the change and are accountable to their community.”

Genuine community organizing differs from more traditional and more common advocacy in two important ways.

First, community organizing is based on the notion that the people most impacted by a given situation are best equipped to address the issues and solve the problems at hand. “In contrast,” says Zachary, “advocacy is driven by the staff” of nonprofit organizations. Or as CEO steering committee member Nat Chioke Williams of the Hill-Snowdon Foundation puts it: In advocacy, professionals represent people in a community; in organizing, the leaders ultimately are people in the community.

Second, successful community organizing is always about a large group of people collectively pushing for lasting systemic change on behalf of the entire community. Advocacy, on the other hand, often involves an individual or small group pushing for relatively narrow change on the individual’s own behalf largely for the individual’s benefit. For example, many a parent is an advocate for his or her own child. A community organizer is an advocate for all children in a community.

Community organizing specifically for school reform is barely a decade old. But a report released by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform in March 2008 indicated that the practice can be a powerful force for change in education. The report, based on a six-year study of education organizing efforts in seven American cities – Bronx, N.Y.; Austin, Tex.; Oakland, Calif.; Miami; Chicago; Los Angeles; and Philadelphia – concluded that community organizing “helps expand the capacity of urban public schools to support student success by building support for reform alternatives, increasing equity in the distribution of resources, and generating meaningful parent, youth, and community engagement focused on improved student learning.”

“Parents absolutely should be demanding better schools.”

– Peggy O’Brien, the D.C. Public School chief of family and public engagement

Specifically, the study, titled “Organized Communities, Stronger Schools¹,” said:

Successful organizing strategies contributed to increased student attendance, improved standardized-test-score performance, and higher graduation rates and college-going aspirations in several cities.

Officials, school administrators, and teachers in every [city] reported that community organizing influenced policy and resource decisions to increase equity and build capacity, particularly in historically low-performing schools.

Participation in organizing efforts is increasing civic engagement, as well as knowledge and investment in education issues, among adult and youth community members. Young people reported that their involvement in organizing increased their motivation to succeed in school.

Continuous and consistent parent, youth, and community engagement produced through community organizing both generates and sustains these improvements.

CEO will bring a new level of community organizing to the District on behalf the city’s students, which is important because both public school and charter school officials recognize the vital role of parents and students.

“You always need to be engaged civically in any things that matter to you,” says Ramona Edelin, executive director of the D.C. Association of Chartered Public Schools. “Parents can make sure if a school is being true to its vision or not.”

“Parents absolutely should be demanding better schools,” says Peggy O’Brien, the D.C. Public Schools Chief of family and public engagement. “It’s a wonderfully expansive thing for a parent to be involved in their kid’s school.”

O’Brien points out that the D.C. public school chancellor is constantly seeking a “student’s-eye view” of education, that the chancellor encourages and replies to e-mails from students and parents, that the chancellor has a “youth cabinet” of about 20 high school students with whom she meets regularly, and that the chancellor plans to create a similar “parents cabinet” soon. The youth cabinet is an advisory board whose agenda is determined by the students and whose feedback weighed heavily the chancellor, O’Brien says.

A report co-written by Zachary earlier this decade identified the three R’s of community organizing as the concept pertains to improving education: roots, relationships and resources – “Roots in a particular neighborhood and a sustained commitment to serve and develop it; Relationships with parents and residents, the constituencies critical to community-based school improvement efforts; and Resources, including trained staff and an administrative infrastructure, necessary for the labor-intensive and skilled work of community outreach.”

One of CEO’s goals is to invoke all three R’s as its grantees empower parents and students to improve the academic atmosphere and Double the Number of graduates in D.C. schools.

1 Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister “Organize Communities, Stronger Schools” Annenberg Institute for School Reform, at Brown University: March 2008.

The CEO Funders

CEO is a collaborative. It's right there in its name. The Collaborative for Education Organizing.

CEO is a collaborative of funders.

To date - they include The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, an Anonymous funder, the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Fannie Mae, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Hill-Snowdon Foundation, the Horning Family Fund, the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, the Woodbury Fund and The World Bank. Using the influence and resources of all of those philanthropic institutions to pair the Double the Numbers objective with CEO's community organizing framework is "a perfect partnership," says steering committee co-chair Angela Jones Hackley.

"We hope that [community] organizers and advocates who are close to the ground will be able to tell us exactly what needs to be done" to meet the Double the Numbers goals, says steering committee member Joe Scantlebury of the Gates Foundation. CEO and the Double the Numbers campaign "brings people together across race and class lines in this city in a way that doesn't often happen."

CEO creates a "real foundation for resident-led decision-making," says steering committee member Nat Chioke Williams. "It's the only formalized venue where funders come together to discuss community organizing."

CEO is a collaborative of grantees.

One important element of CEO's mission is to connect the five grantees to allow them to learn from one another, to share information and expertise, and, collectively, to achieve lasting systemic improvements. CEO's Lee Christian Parker envisions the grantees as "leaders in education organizing in this city."

Ultimately, CEO is a collaborative of D.C. public and charter school administrators, principals, teachers, students, parents and community members.

"CEO is about building power at the neighborhood level to make change in D.C. public schools real and lasting," says steering committee member, Carmen James Lane, "We all must be invested in change – parents, youth, neighbors, business leaders, school officials, and policy makers."

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– CEO steering committee member
Carmen James Lane

CEO in the City

Each of the five grantees brings its own personality, expertise and strengths to the Collaborative for Education Organizing. Each grantee is undertaking a project designed specifically to advance the collaborative’s goal of doubling the number of D.C. public and charter school graduates through the use of community organizing. Here, in alphabetical order, is a glance at the CEO grantees:

D.C. Alliance of Youth Advocates / Critical Exposure

DCAYA is a citywide consortium of youth-engaged organizations, youth and concerned residents formed to ensure that young people in Washington have access to high-quality and affordable developmental opportunities. It works to establish structured opportunities for adolescents and young adults to become safe, healthy, resilient and confident community members.

The three main components of DCAYA’s work – youth employment, youth homelessness and out-of-school time – are only indirectly related to CEO’s objective of doubling the number of graduates. But a major part of DCAYA’s effort is to focus on disconnected youth age 16 to 24 who are transitioning from foster care, are unemployed, have dropped out of school or are in juvenile or adult detention facilities. DCAYA’s executive director, Eshauna Smith, estimates that there are 12,000 disconnected youth in Washington, many of them D.C. public school dropouts.

Dropouts, by definition, decrease the graduation rate and, thus, jeopardize the goals of the Double the Numbers campaign. DCAYA has teamed up with a fellow nonprofit, Critical Exposure, to address the alarming dropout rate.

Critical Exposure, whose motto is “Picture Equality,” teaches young people about the power of photography as an agent for social change. Since 2006, Critical Exposure has provided more than 150 young people in the District with cameras, workshops in documentary photography, and the opportunity

to record what they thought was important for the public to know about issues impacting their lives, including youth homelessness, affordable housing, gentrification, teen pregnancy, school nutrition and deteriorating public school buildings. Critical Exposure will now be working with D.C. students to focus their collective lens on the human toll the D.C. public school dropout rate takes on the lives of students, and on the fabric of the city.

DCAYA and Critical Exposure – with the support of CEO – have created S.T.E.P. Up DC (S.T.E.P. stands for Success Through Educational Progress), a network of youth and youth-serving organizations seeking to identify the root causes that lead students to drop out.

S.T.E.P. Up DC is largely a youth-led endeavor, DCAYA’s Smith says: “The young people are the experts because it’s their lives.” Students and adults on the S.T.E.P. Up D.C. steering committee will dictate the direction the project will take. As one of its first actions, S.T.E.P. Up DC will conduct a survey of District youth, *by District youth*, to determine the reasons schoolchildren drop out in Washington. The survey will be drawn up, to a great degree, by young people. It will identify the sources of the dropout problem and inform the steering committee on the next steps to take regarding policy recommendations.

While the direction of the project ultimately will be up to the youth, Smith can imagine a situation in which the project explores whether D.C. public school practices and policies “push out” students, in other words induce them to drop out.

Related questions that might be asked, Smith says, are: How do D.C. public school suspension and expulsion policies affect the dropout rate? Are suspension and expulsion policies uniform across the D.C. public school system? How does D.C. public school truancy policy affect the dropout rate? Do safety issues affect the dropout rate? Are some students afraid for their safety to attend D.C. public schools? What does the D.C. government do, proactively, to prevent dropouts and reconnect with students who have dropped out? What early indicators should the D.C. public school system develop to identify potential dropouts based on their behavior in elementary and middle school?

“Hearing directly from youth, those impacted most by the problem, is essential to identifying practical, experienced-based solutions,” says Critical Exposures co-director Adam Levner. “To increase the academic achievement of all students and to help engage those who have traditionally found themselves outside of the education system, we must develop policies that are based on an understanding from the youths themselves about what keeps them in school and what causes them to leave.”

Under Critical Exposure’s tutelage, D.C. students will use their cameras to illustrate the causes and effects, the pain and the emotion of dropping out. Shooting pictures to bring such an abstract issue to life is a tall order for any photographer. But, says co-director Heather Rieman, the process “empowers youth to tell their stories, and they end up learning that they have the power to make change.”

The Critical Exposure photographs and the youth-devised survey should shed important light on the dropout issue. The survey results will enable S.T.E.P. Up DC to identify school system dropout policy changes that need to be made, and the results “will inform our action agenda,” Smith says. S.T.E.P. Up DC will empower the community to pressure school and District authorities to address the dropout

issue in a consequential way. All of which gets to the heart of DCAYA’s work, Smith says. “We are able to bring the voices of the people who are experiencing the problems to the table to help them influence the decisions.”

D.C. Language Access Coalition

The overarching goal of the D.C. Language Access Coalition is to ensure that District residents and workers who are limited-English proficient or non-English proficient have equal access to the most essential government benefits and services, including food stamps, Medicaid, health care, unemployment benefits, job training programs, public education, fire and emergency services, the police department and mental health services.

The coalition, whose motto is “Many languages – one voice – so all can participate,” is a project of the Asian Pacific American Legal Resource Center. The coalition comprises 26 organizations that collect language access data in all quadrants of District among speakers of at least 15 languages. The coalition is “a proven commodity with the work it did to get the D.C. Language Access Act [of 2004] passed,” says CEO steering committee co-chair Viki Betancourt. The coalition, she says, knows how to transform community thought into community action into policy and into legislation. The D.C. Language Access Coalition is written, by name, into the 2004 law as a consulting body about language access questions and Language Access Act implementation in the District.

For practical reasons, says the coalition’s director, Jennifer Deng-Pickett, the group focuses on three important violators of that law: the D.C. Department of Health, the D.C. Department of Human Services, and D.C. public schools.

In terms of education, the coalition’s primary objective is to activate immigrant parents.

“It’s not a Latino problem. It’s not an African problem. It’s not an Asian problem. It’s an everybody problem.”

– Jennifer Deng-Pickett, director of the D.C. Language Access Coalition, a CEO grantee, on language issues in public schools

In 2007-08, 7.8 percent of D.C. public school students and 5.7 percent of D.C. charter school students were limited-English proficient or non-English proficient, according to the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

For immigrant children, Deng-Pickett says, there are three major hindrances to a quality education – a lack of parental involvement, a lack of parental understanding of the American system, and language inaccessibility. Not only are immigrant parents facing an unfamiliar language, they usually are facing a new culture and system. “What, for instance, is a guidance counselor,” an immigrant parent might ask, Deng-Pickett says. Or what is the difference between expulsion and suspension? If a parent doesn’t know the answers to those questions, their child’s odds of graduating and moving on to college certainly decrease.

To examine how language inaccessibility impacts the graduation rate at D.C. public and charter schools, the D.C. Language Access Coalition, with CEO’s support and guidance, is creating Student Multiethnic Action Research Teams (SMART).

Here is how SMART will work, according to Deng-Pickett. In January 2009, a minimum of 12 District public or charter school students will become SMART fellows. Each fellow will receive a stipend of \$1,000. Each fellow will be currently enrolled in an English as a second language (ESL) program, recently out of an ESL program or in a limited-English proficiency situation.

SMART will split its work into two segments. During the first segment, the fellows will be trained in data collection. Once training is complete, the fellows will collect information from other students on what the major language access problems in D.C. public and charter schools are and how those problems hinder academic success and on-time

graduation. The fellows will hear what the issues are “right out of the horse’s mouth,” Deng-Pickett says. “We want the youth to determine from their own life what the problems are.” During the second segment of the project, the SMART fellows will use data they have collected to create a campaign to improve the language access situation in D.C. public and charter schools and to influence public and governmental opinion and awareness.

“In many ways, we’d like to invisibilize ourselves,” says Deng-Pickett, and let the end users (students, parents and schools) take control of the SMART project.

Deng-Pickett is excited about the project because, as a woman who was born in Taiwan, raised in Silver Spring and attended public schools in Montgomery and Prince George’s counties, she knows the difficulties immigrant children often face. She knows that limited-English proficiency can sometimes be misinterpreted as a lack of overall intelligence and that, for ESL students, “the public school system can be 13 years of feeling stupid and unworthy.”

She also knows that limited-English proficiency has an adverse effect on the D.C. public school graduation rate and that “it’s not a Latino problem. It’s not an African problem. It’s not an Asian problem. It’s an everybody problem.”

DC VOICE

District Community Voices Organized and Informed for Change in Education (DC VOICE) is a citywide collaborative of teachers, principals, parents/guardians, youth, schools and school system personnel, community-based organizations, policymakers and powerbrokers committed to strengthening the public voice in public education.

DC VOICE’s forte is community-action research, which involves hundreds of ordinary citizens in



“Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government.”

– Thomas Jefferson, third President of the United States of America.

“We believe that if people are involved in collecting the data, they become invested in the outcome.”

– Jeff Smith, executive director of DC VOICE, a CEO grantee

collecting and acting on school data. In recent years, the organization has shown an unrivaled capacity to marshal ordinary citizens to gather qualitative and quantitative data about D.C. schools and to disseminate that information to interested parties and the public at large.

“We believe that if people are involved in collecting the data, they become invested in the outcome,” says DC VOICE’s executive director, Jeff Smith.

A centerpiece of DC VOICE’s research has been the Ready Schools Project (RSP). The RSP is a community action research endeavor in which volunteer teams of two to five interested community members, under the direction of DC VOICE staff members, survey D.C. public elementary, middle and high school principals in person each September. In an interview that typically lasts 45 minutes, the volunteer team asks the principal a variety of questions about the readiness of the school as the new year opens and about the level of support he or she is receiving from the D.C. public school administration on a wide range of subjects. Subjects include teacher recruitment and hiring, staffing levels, presence of a librarian and art, music and physical education teachers in each school, training and professional development among principals, teaching and learning conditions, facilities, maintenance and security, on-time arrival of textbooks and, this year, how the closing of 23 schools impacted principals. To ensure that the principals are frank with the RSP teams, DC VOICE maintains complete confidentiality. It does not divulge a given principal’s individual responses to anyone. However, it does tabulate and analyze the collective results of this “community audit” survey and releases the findings to the public, the mayor, the D.C. Council and the D.C. public school chancellor. In the fall of 2007, 191 community members representing every political ward in the District interviewed 137 D.C. public school principals. Numbers for fall

2008 are pending, and the results of the survey will be announced later this school year.

“I wanted to see the improvements the schools are making and why they’re having the problems they are” firsthand, says Tonya Riley, the mother of two D.C. public school students, explaining why she was a volunteer interviewer this year. “Maybe this report can make a difference.”

“The Ready Schools Project is a great indicator of DC VOICE’s ability to do great organizing work moving forward,” says CEO steering committee co-chair Viki Betancourt.

In coming months, with the support of CEO, DC VOICE will organize a similar community audit that interviews teachers rather than principals and focuses on individual classroom academic instruction rather than on schools as a whole. In this survey, called the Ready Classroom Project, DC VOICE plans to have community members interview at least two teachers in each D.C. public or charter school, Smith says. Teachers will be asked about their instructional practices, the relationship and level of respect between teachers and students/parents, the overall of climate of the school and how conducive it is to learning. The individual teachers will be anonymous, but their schools will be identified so that responses from teachers at high-performing schools can be compared with responses of teachers at low-performing schools and so that ward-by-ward teacher responses can be compared. The Ready Classroom Project will augment the Ready Schools Project under one research umbrella, and DC VOICE will be able to compare what principals and teachers each say, from their own distinct perspectives, about what schools need to do to succeed.

With CEO’s backing, DC VOICE will use data from the two projects to inform other education organizing campaigns and to build

Tellin' Stories "helps me learn how to help the children...not only my children but other children, too."

– Sandra Cruz, a Salvadoran American mother of four D.C. public or charter school students

a consensus among community members about what steps should be taken to encourage specific D.C. school policy changes.

Such community action research – in which “ordinary citizens collect information they act upon” – is vital, says Smith, in an era where a new chancellor and mayor are acting decisively to reform the D.C. public schools and there is resulting tension, angst and confusion among many parents, students and community members. “It’s important to be able to funnel that [anxiety] into action.”

Tellin' Stories

The Tellin' Stories Project of Teaching for Change builds multi-racial parent power in the District public schools. At the heart of Tellin' Stories' efforts to engage families is the power of story, which is used to connect parents from diverse backgrounds, to build community, and to organize collective action.

Tellin' Stories, so far, has done most of its work in elementary schools and in select neighborhoods. It received a \$25,000 planning grant from CEO to explore the possibility of expanding its concept into middle and high schools to have a District-wide impact. Tellin' Stories intends to make that move into middle schools next year.

Here is how the program has typically worked on the elementary level.

Tellin' Stories, usually with the help of parent coordinators in D.C. public schools, convenes interested parents, often Latino and African American parents, whose children attend the school. Over a period of weeks, the parents meet to construct a quilt in which each participant shares a story from his or her history and culture on a felt square. “As the squares are sewn together,” says the Tellin' Stories Web site, “so too are the lives of those who made them.” Then, the parents present the

quilt to the school at an elaborate ceremony, and the quilt is usually displayed prominently in the school.

By this point, the parents feel connected to one another and the school, and, together with advisers from Tellin' Stories, they decide what's next. Sometimes the parents attend workshops on how to help their children with homework. Sometimes the workshops address matters of academic discipline. Sometimes the Tellin' Stories parents meet en masse with principals to address concerns about the school and make suggestions about how to improve it. Sometimes parents take part in the Roving Readers program (Lectores Ambulantes in Spanish), where one English-speaking parent and one Spanish-speaking parent read aloud, side-by-side, one after the other, to students in classrooms. The students often respond to the English speaker in English and to the Spanish speaker in Spanish, as they did one recent day when parent Sandra Cruz and a partner read “El Pez Arco Iris” (“The Rainbow Fish”) to a first-grade class at Brightwood Elementary School.

Tellin' Stories “helps me learn how to help the children,” Cruz, a Salvadoran American mother of four D.C. public or charter school students, says through a translator. “I can also learn my English to help my children, not only my children but other children, too.”

Lonnell Taylor, an African American single father of two D.C. public school students who was reading at Brightwood that day, says: “All my friends are Spanish. We bond a lot. We look out for each other. All of us live in the same community, so we have to get along.”

Eventually, as the trust grows, Tellin' Stories identifies leaders among the parents, and these leaders are trained in public speaking and other community organizing skills. These leaders sometimes testify before school or D.C. government bodies. On occasion, the resolve of a Tellin' Stories parents community has been

formidable enough to persuade the D.C. public school administration to add a crossing guard at a dangerous intersection or not to close a school.

But Tellin' Stories doesn't do the advocacy. It equips the parents, collectively and cross-culturally, to do the advocacy. "We work with the parents and accompany them until they take ownership of the project, and they work with it," says program manager America Calderon.

The challenge, everyone associated with CEO agrees, will be for Tellin' Stories to expand its multicultural community organizing approach from a few elementary schools to secondary schools across the city. "It'll be interesting to see how much they can tweak their model," says CEO steering committee co-chair Angela Jones Hackley. "Innovative requires risk ... It'll be exciting to watch ... We'll learn a lot from them about parent engagement."

Youth Education Alliance

YEA is a student-led organization that, as its Web site says, seeks "to identify the problems in our schools and solve them collectively. Through direct action and community education, we hold city leaders and school officials accountable to young people in our nation's capital."

YEA has three levels of membership: general, active and core. General members, the Web site explains, are "students who are down with YEA but can't give a lot of time to meetings and events." Active members "participate in training, meetings and important actions, but don't turn out every week because they have other commitments (like child care, jobs or night school)." Core members are "the heart of YEA – the leaders who show up and show out at weekly meetings, actions, rallies and outreach. They recruit new members, run

meetings and rep student concerns to city officials. Core members must complete RISE [Revolution in Secondary Education], a 6-week leadership development program."

In recent years, YEA members have turned their attention to what they have found to be horrendous guidance counseling in D.C. public high schools. YEA students have identified numerous problems – insufficient guidance from counselors regarding class selection; student transcripts and records that are incomplete or out of date; lack of information from counselors about important deadlines; counselors who fail to properly explain college application procedures and financial aid requirements; counselors who are inaccessible to students at crucial times.

In the fall of 2006, YEA members videotaped all of the mayoral candidates, including the current mayor, promising to do something about the guidance counselor inadequacies. This year, with the help of CEO, YEA plans to "organize 1,000 students to increase the quality and quantity of guidance counseling supports." It will compile a school-by-school count of guidance counselors to learn definitively whether or not the D.C. public schools meet the American School Counselor Association recommendation of one counselor for every 250 students. Then YEA plans to "pressure key decision-makers to revise or adopt new guidance counseling standards that promote increased graduation rates, while working in five high schools in the Southeast and Northeast areas of the city to create an ASCA-based model counseling program that incorporates the priorities, feedback and direction of students."

“It’s cool. I can complain and help change things.”

Back in the YEA office in Southeast Washington, two weeks after organizers Jonathan Stith and Ericke Lowery grimaced and sighed over the spotty summer repairs in D.C. public schools, Ayana Sutton is sitting at the same wood-veneer card table amid the motivational posters on the walls.

Ayana, a senior at Dunbar Senior High School and a member of YEA for the past two years, is sharing her thoughts on the beginning of this school year.

“It’s way better than last year,” she says. “They’re feeding us healthier lunches. The bathrooms are fixed. And in my U.S. government class we had brand-new books. That really surprised me.”

Ayana believes that pressure exerted on city and school officials by YEA students over the years helped bring about some of those improvements.

But she knows there is a long way to go. She knows first hand the chaos the guidance counselor problems and the resultant schedule snafus can have on an achievement-oriented student. Her original class schedule, as presented to her during the first week of school, did not have the courses on it that she needs to graduate. So, she says, “I went after school and had to stay until 5 or 6 o’clock to get it fixed ... If I hadn’t gone to [the guidance counselors], I wouldn’t have been able to graduate this spring. Seventy-five percent of what was on my [original] schedule wouldn’t help me graduate. I’d have been out of luck.”

One reason she enjoys being a YEA member is that it gives her the opportunity to speak up about problems such as the guidance



counselor issue. “It’s cool. I can complain and help change things,” she says. “I like going to meetings with Chancellor [Michelle] Rhee and expressing my ideas.”

Another reason Ayana belongs to YEA is that “I don’t want my younger siblings and other people younger than me to see things and to have to deal with things that I had to deal with in school.” When she started high school, she says, “I didn’t feel safe, and I didn’t have books. I don’t want my little sister to go through that.”

If CEO – along with its committed community organizers, its involved parents and its generous funders – reaches its goal of Doubling the Numbers of successful graduates, D.C. public and charter schools will be better places in the future not only for Ayana’s sister but for all students at all levels across the city.



“Never doubt that a small, group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

– cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead

How You Can Help

Building a movement for success in our schools can only happen with your help! Here's how you can help if you are a...

PARENT: Know that your role is to ask questions about your child's education! Find out about the school's academic performance record, discuss problems with your child's teachers and principal, and press schools for better programs and higher achievement. Talk to other parents who feel as you do, find a support network in nonprofits working to improve schools and help students graduate!

STUDENT: Know that your voice is critical to making schools a better place to learn! You know more about the problems in your class than many adults do – talk with each other about the issues you face and work together to change them. Learn more about groups working to empower students like Youth Education Alliance and D.C. Alliance of Youth Advocates.

EDUCATOR: Know that parents, students, and nonprofits can be your ally in ensuring that schools have the essential supports – high-quality facilities, leadership and staffing, programs – to improve achievement. Talk to nonprofits working in your schools and learn more about how you can help each other to help students excel.

COMMUNITY MEMBER: Know that education continues well beyond graduation! Be informed about what's happening in the schools in your neighborhood, and get involved with efforts to make your community school into a stellar academic institution.



FUNDER: Know that your support will help improve children's lives! Learn more from your colleagues about the importance of parents and students having a strong voice in shaping policies that affect their public schools. Align funding to support efforts that will improve educational opportunities and help students graduate.

NONPROFIT: Know that your work is critical to the movement to help youth succeed! Nonprofits build relationships, skills and power among parents, young people, and community residents to transform local conditions and create new opportunities. Get connected to your colleagues to share ideas, resources, and help build a community of stakeholders working toward a common goal.

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*“Power concedes nothing
without demand. It never
has and never will.”*

– Frederick Douglass



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