Unleashing the Power of Parents
To fix their kids' schools

A ***Making Connections Denver*** partner has found ways to engage parents in their children's schools and make them articulate leaders in a district-wide school reform movement.

–BY TORY READ

Parent leader Erlinda Moreno speaks at a press conference outside Cole Middle School, the first school to be forced to become a charter school after three years of failing test scores. Moreno became a member of the state committee evaluating potential managers for the schools.

"I learned…how blind we had been in matters of education. We didn't know how bad our schools were."

–COLE MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENT JOSÉ ARTEAGA

"When we dug deeper into the data, we started to see how some inner-city public schools get less money than the schools in more affluent neighborhoods. That got under my skin. I thought, 'This just can't be.'"

—Susan Molina

Nearly everyone in education reform agrees that many if not most schools in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods are failing their students. The disagreement is over how to fix the problem.

There are many models, ranging from charter school approaches like Edison and KIPP to system change approaches like that of the Edmonton School District in Canada, which attaches dollars to students instead of teachers, allocates more money to children with the greatest needs, and gives schools more autonomy to improve student achievement.

What are missing are models for how to get parents deeply engaged in efforts to improve their children's public education. Many experts talk about the need for more parent involvement: no one cares more than parents about improving their kids' schools. But few have figured out how to make it happen.

It's happening in Denver. As many as 800 parents, including many Spanish speakers, have organized and participated in successful public meetings with school officials. They've increased family participation in parent night events — attendance at one school's parent night increased from four to 130. And dozens of these parents have become experts about their own school system as well as education reform.

Most important, these parents have become firmly committed to bringing about change in their children's schools. They are living, breathing examples of what the Annie E. Casey Foundation Vice President Ralph Smith calls "authentic demand." They have learned that not all schools are performing as poorly as their children's schools, and they want that to change.

"When we dug deeper into the data, we started to see how some inner-city public schools get less money than the schools in more affluent neighborhoods," said MOP parent leader Susan Molina. "That got under my skin. I thought, 'This just can't be.'"

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INSIDE:

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These parents didn't come to these insights overnight. It took much more than one public meeting. Indeed, the story of how these parents came to this point of understanding and commitment is both interesting and instructive. This story illustrates that:

- Organizing can play a critical role in engaging and educating parents, especially when the organizers are open to using diverse tactics and when public agencies and private funders are open to seeing organizing as a critical strategy rather than a threat.
- Data and other information can play a significant role in educating and activating parents as well as students.
- Building a base of committed parents and having an impact on policies and practices of a school system is a long and sometimes winding road, though many observers have been surprised by how quickly things have coalesced in Denver.
- Organized parents can impact systems, influence policies and leverage resources.

It's too early to see dramatic hard evidence like improved test scores and higher graduation rates across the district, though there is already such evidence in particular schools. For example, fifth-grade reading scores at Fairview Elementary School in Sun Valley (a Making Connections target neighborhood) rose from 10% proficient in 2001 to 41% proficient in 2005. But there is concrete evidence that parents can bring about significant changes in policies and practices of individual schools and of the school system as a whole.

The story starts with an effort to reform specific schools in a *Making Connections Denver* neighborhood. It expands from this to a system-wide reform effort that involves the school district, the state board of education, the state legislature and the governor.

For more than two years, former *Making Connections Denver* diarist Tory Read recorded the story in both words and images. This publication pulls together her observations, interviews, photos and research. In addition to telling the story of school organizing in Denver, this publication:

- Tells the stories of four parents who have become school reform activists, stories told through their own words (pages 35, 38, 41, 42).
- Highlights the results that have come from this parent-organizing work (pages 29 and 32).
- Tells the story of the first school in Colorado forced to be converted into a charter school as a result of the federal No Child Left Behind law combined with a recent state law that mandates conversion for failing schools (page 24).
- Describes how students themselves have become successful activists at a Denver high school (page 14).
- Summarizes some of the lessons that come from these intersecting stories (page 47).

Recent state reading test scores showed a 42.5% gap between white and Latino fourth graders in Denver. Of students who start the ninth grade, the graduation rates of Latino students are 30% lower than those of white students.

—Urban Institute/Harvard Civic Rights Project

Finding Ways to Get More Parents "To the Table"

One evening in late 2005, a multi-ethnic, all-ages crowd of 800 filled the pews at an old church in Denver to talk about the future of the city's children. Through testimonies, songs, data, skits, speeches and a photo slide show, the audience learned about inequalities in public education and bore witness as public officials committed to work with parents, students, teachers and residents to solve the city's education problems.

Metro Organizations for People (MOP), a *Making Connections Denver* partner, organized this large pubic meeting to support Denver families demanding action on unequal public education.

Data supports their claims. Recent state aptitude reading test scores showed a 42.5% gap between white and Latino fourth graders in Denver.

In addition, of students who start the ninth grade, the graduation rates of Latino students are 30% lower than those of white students. The rate for African-American students is 22% lower, according to data released by the Urban Institute and the Harvard Civic Rights Project.

At the public meeting, community leader Phuonglan Nguyen asked new DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet, "Will you affirm today, in front of this crowd, your commitment to work with Metro Organizations for People on the following issues: parent-friendly report cards, state legislation changes in 2006 to ad-

MOP leaders present data about the achievement gap at a public meeting in October 2005 on issues that affect Denver's children, including school reform, as DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet and other public officials listen. More than 800 people attended the public meeting at Montview Presbyterian Church.

"The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Public officials, in turn, are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the least affluent."

—American Political Science Association

dress our failing schools, college access for all, principal leadership, teacher quality, and the alarming funding inequities that exist across our district?"

When Bennet took the microphone and said, "I will," applause thundered through Montview Presbyterian Church.

Other public officials joining the new superintendent that night to speak in support of MOP's efforts included Colorado Speaker of the House Andrew Romanoff (D), House Minority Leader Norma Anderson (R), State Representative Terrance Carroll (D) and Colorado Board of Education Representative Rico Munn.

Four years ago, none of these officials had ever heard of MOP, none had made a public commitment to deal with educational inequities in front of 800 parents and students, and few people would have ever used the term "community organizing" in the same sentence as "Denver." With the support of *Making Connections Denver* and The Annie E. Casey Foundation, all this has changed.

Hundreds of families are now engaged in school reform work at neighborhood, district and state levels, and public officials are making room for them at decision-making tables. In many tangible ways these parents are influencing the decisions being made at those tables.

What's happening in Denver flies in the face of national trends, where disparities in political participation are the norm. "The voices of American citizens are raised and heard unequally," according to a report released in 2004 by the American Political Science Association.

"The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government," the report found. "Public officials, in turn, are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the least affluent."

Social science research shows that wealth and higher education are key factors influencing the degree to which people participate in American civic life. Low-income people who have not completed college are less likely to participate than wealthier people with college degrees.

The lack of participation by low-income parents in their children's schools is a key reason that poorly performing schools in low-income neighborhoods seldom experience dramatic improvements, many education experts believe.

This lack of participation was certainly true in Denver public schools. "When I started on the school board six years ago, many board members didn't trust community," said Denver Public Schools Board member Lucia Guzman. "They didn't want the community voice. A lot of times, system people give lip service to community, and they think, 'They're going to go away soon because they'll get tired.'"

"Many middle class families left and went to the suburbs because they were not going to have their kids bussed or go to a school where there were black and Hispanic kids. We now have a district where close to 90 percent of its student body is poor and racially ethnic." —Lucia Guzman

50 Years After Brown: Education Remains Unequal

The 1954 landmark court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine that had prevailed in the United States for more than half a century. In declaring that educating black and white children separately was unconstitutional, the ruling sent shock waves across the country.

Legal segregation ended, and states attempted to integrate public schools through busing and magnet schools. "Especially in big cities, white flight and re-segregation accelerated," according to Julian Barnes in *U.S. News and World Report*.

"The core of Denver's urban school district is Hispanic, black, Native American, Asian and poor," said Denver Public School Board member Lucia Guzman. "For 40 years, the government tried to make education equal through integration, but today we still have an unequal system."

After integration efforts began, "Many middle class families left and went to the suburbs because they were not going to have their kids bussed, or they were not going to have their kids go to a school where there were black and Hispanic kids," said Guzman. "We now have a district where close to 90 percent of its student body is poor and racially ethnic."

It's 2006, and America has still not figured out how to educate all of its children equally. According to Barnes, "African-Americans, on average, start kindergarten behind whites academically, and the gap grows during elementary school. The ripple effect carries into high school – and beyond."

"Although blacks and whites enter college at similar rates, 36 percent of whites graduate with a four-year degree, compared with only 18 percent of blacks," Barnes continues. "Black jobless rates are higher than whites', and black income is lower."

Data shows that the achievement gap isn't going away. On a national level, 60% of black fourth graders who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test in 2003 had not even partially mastered grade-level skills, compared to only 25 percent of white fourth graders. In high schools, black and Hispanic seniors on average read and do math only as well as white eighth graders.

Systems in Denver are behind the curve in facilitating input from an increasingly diverse city. None of the three political bodies that MOP parents interacted with over the past two years (the DPS Board, the Colorado Board of Education and the Colorado State Legislature) had interpreters or translation equipment, despite the fact that 27% of their constituents in Denver do not speak English.

In addition, Denver residents didn't often take advantage of the few opportunities provided them to participate in district or state policy conversations. "Citizen input and engagement in state board of education work is nowhere near what I would like," said Colorado State Board of Education Representative Munn. "We don't hear a lot of testimony from citizens. At the open testimony period at every meeting, sometimes we have three people, sometimes we have none."

"Community organizing is a way to get community members active and saying, 'Here's what we need. Here's what we've been missing.' They're the ones on the ground who have to live the day-to-day experience."

—Rico Munn

All of this is changing in Denver as a result of a concerted effort by *Making Connections Denver* to engage and involve low-income parents. The strategy Denver has used to involve these parents is community organizing.

"Community organizing is essential for people who are tired of having things done to them," said Munn. "It's a way to get community members active and saying, 'Here's what we need. Here's what we've been missing.' They're the ones on the ground who have to live the day-to-day experience."

"The bottom line is that resident voices ought to be at the table," said Smith of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "They have a right to demand what they want."

Smith calls this "authentic demand" and he believes it is essential to transform any system. Authentic demand happens when a group of parents or residents care about achieving changes, they have enough information to know which changes make sense, they can visualize what they want and what it will mean for themselves and their children, and their desire for change develops an energy of its own.

When parents know what they want for their kids' schools, Smith says, "This changes the dynamic. When they talk about better schools, they know what they want. They develop a passion for change. That's authentic demand. You are not just organizing about a concept."

The problem has long been how to get these resident voices at the table over time, not just at an occasional "public input" meeting. This is where organizing is playing a key role in Denver.

"Many people—especially people in public agencies and funding sources—are uneasy with community organizing," reflects Garland Yates, who was *Making Connections Denver*'s Site Team Leader for many years.

"But the reality is that organizing is a proven way to engage large numbers of people around issues they care about. Organizers have been doing this for generations now. They have a wealth of knowledge about how to engage low-income people, knowledge that is extremely valuable."

This knowledge is being tapped in Denver, mostly through Metro Organizations for People. By getting people from the city as well as funding sources to work with mostly MOP organizers on specific projects such as "summits" in the *Making Connections Denver* neighborhoods, Denver MC built relationships and trust among these diverse people. The "system people" began to see what organizers could accomplish.

A concerted effort to educate people about organizing helped counter some of what Yates calls the "myths" about organizing, such as the myth that all organizers just want to agitate and complain.

Over time more and more people not only began to tolerate organizing, they began to see how useful it could be in their work, and they even began to support it through grants (see page 33). They began to accept a point made by MOP's director, Mike Kromley: "To be a

"To get from early childhood to a job with a livable wage, you have to get a decent education. There is no way around that."

—Susan Motika

healthy system, you have to have real dialogue and that requires tension. Without it, you have a vacuum in democracy."

One reason *Making Connections Denver* has invested so much in organizing parents and trying to reform Denver's school system is that they see this as critical for families to become economically successful over time, a key objective of *Making Connections* nationally.

A report on racial equity and employment opportunities released by the Harvard Civil Rights Project confirms this connection:

> *"Unequal educational opportunities and high drop-out rates handicap minorities in [an economy] where the gap between [the income] of those with education and skills and those without is widening. High school graduates have lower unemployment rates for all racial groups, and a diploma is essential as a gateway to higher education.... As the economy increasingly rewards workers with higher skills, college is even more crucial to earning a livable income."*

"We are looking at the continuum of education and workforce development," said *Making Connections Denver* Local Site Coordinator Susan Motika. "To get from early childhood to a job with a livable wage, you have to get a decent education. There is no way around that.

"Organizing is a strategy that is working for us, putting community voices at the center to make improvements in our public education system, which is the key link between early childhood education and jobs." (Getting children prepared for school is another emphasis of *Making Connections* across the country.)

Getting resident voices to the table where public education decisions are made in Denver has not been easy. Systems were initially unreceptive. In the face of these resistant systems, MOP parent leaders have set the bar high and made significant gains. (See "results" sidebar on page 32.)

The stories you are about to read don't all end in conventional "wins," but they do end with systems opening up, interacting with community members and, however reluctantly, giving families a seat at the table.

"Residents will win some and they will lose some," said Smith of the Casey Foundation. "Our goal is to build their competence, their capacity, their confidence and their resilience, so that they are able to take a loss as well as a win and keep on participating."

MOP is building knowledge and skills among hundreds of residents. It is also developing the resilience that resident leaders need as they face complex problems and systems. At the same time, MOP is making headway in changing decision-making and policy-setting cultures in *Making Connections* neighborhood schools, the city and the state.

"From the beginning, it was clear that* Making Connections *was going to be a journey that would require a lot of time and energy, and there was no guarantee that it was going to lead to anything concrete for us."

—Mike Kromrey

Parent Organizing in Denver's Public Schools: Starting Small, Learning Lessons

Community organizing on a city-wide scale is a relatively new approach to civic engagement in Denver. Back in 2001, when MOP started organizing parents in the public schools, other community organizing groups were also at work in Denver, but MOP was the only one that was willing and able to stay involved with the unfolding collaborative effort that eventually became *Making Connections Denver*.

"From the beginning, it was clear that *Making Connections* was going to be a journey that would require a lot of time and energy, and there was no guarantee that it was going to lead to anything concrete for us," said Kromrey.

"Working with a national foundation, a local foundation, the city and other nonprofits carried a risk," said Kromrey. "Would our mission be compromised? Would MOP change in ways that ran counter to our values as organizers?"

In 2001, Cole resident Patty Lawless was working part time as parent liaison at Manual High School in northeast Denver. Cec Ortiz, then local site coordinator for *Making Connections Denver*, approached Lawless, and together with Kromrey they decided to do community organizing in the schools.

They discussed the difference between traditional parent involvement and parent

Community organizer Gabriela Jacobo and student leader Kayla Limon canvas the neighborhood around Manual High School to invite community members to a meeting at the school.

"The principals told us that we were getting too deep into the issues. We were investigating a lot, and we showed that there were some flaws in the school system. Suddenly, the principals were not willing to work with us."

—José Arteaga

organizing. "Parent involvement is getting parents coming to meetings, volunteering, doing fund raising," said Lawless. "Parent organizing is developing leaders who are capable of influencing policies and systems and creating systemic change," she said.

They decided that it made sense to do community organizing within the Manual High School feeder pattern, which includes all of the elementary and middle schools that feed into Manual.

Moving into school organizing was a big step for MOP, which had previously focused on church-based organizing. "There were hours of conversations with PICO, our national network, trying to figure out, is this an opportunity or a threat?" said Kromrey.

DPS had just divided Manual High into three schools, each with its own principal, as part of the district's experiment with using the small schools model to improve student achievement. Manual students' test scores were among the lowest in the city. All three principals agreed to give it a go with MOP and *Making Connections Denver*. Principals at elementary and middle schools that fed into Manual also agreed to come on board.

In the fall of 2001, Northeast Denver Parents Organizing in Education (NEDPOE) launched, with MOP in charge of the community organizing work. MOP hired Lawless and two other community organizers to work at Manual's three schools.

"In the first year, we did one-to-one visits with 450 families, about half of the families at Manual," said Lawless. "Then we went through the organizing cycle: choosing an issue, doing research and identifying solutions, developing proposals, doing the action and then following up." (An action is a public meeting where citizens present issues, data and proposals to public officials and ask them to commit to taking action to solve the problem.)

The parent organizing committees initially focused on safety, which is a common focus of first-year school-based organizing groups. In the second year, they focused on how to make the small schools model work. At the second-year action, Manual's three principals committed to work with parents to improve teacher training on communication between the school and families.

"In the follow up, two of the three Manual principals suddenly wanted out," said Lawless. "We didn't get too far after that."

"They told us that we were getting too deep into the issues," said Manual parent leader José Arteaga.

"We were investigating a lot, and we showed that there were some flaws in the school system. Suddenly, the principals were not willing to work with us. They even closed the doors on us."

"As it turned out, the new principal was not a small schools person at all. Because of the change in leadership, we lost all of the movement we had made on this. It was very hard."

—Patty Lawless

Sharon Bridgeforth is one of MOP's first organizers at Manual High School.

Nevertheless, MOP parents had a productive year with the third Manual principal. Together, they increased parent participation in back-to-school night from four people to 130. They also held other well-attended events.

Then in July 2003, the principal decided to take another job. "The whole thing got put on hold while we waited to see who the new principal was," said Lawless. "As it turned out, the new principal was not a small schools person at all. Because of the change in leadership, we lost all of the movement we had made on this. It was very hard."

"When it comes to principal leadership, DPS makes that decision," said Manual parent Tonya Hope. "We've been working on how to be part of that decision."

Meanwhile, MOP parent organizing committees at elementary schools in the Manual

"Parents and staff saw that without relationships with school board members, without the skills to be able to raise an issue at a school board meeting, without the knowledge of how to hold the powers-that-be accountable, we could spin our wheels forever at the local level." —Patty Lawless

MOP organizer Patty Lawless leads a Teacher Home Visit training for teachers at Mitchell Elementary School, which feeds into Manual.

feeder pattern took on smaller, discreet safety issues and had a lot of wins.

At Manual, parents had decided to move beyond safety issues to address student achievement problems. This proved to be more complex. MOP staff and parent leaders learned that establishing a good working relationship with a principal is not enough to ensure positive change in education. They began to realize that they needed to engage the system beyond the individual school.

Achievement Gap Data Moves Parents from Local To City-Wide Education Reform

The organizing work at Manual had come to a standstill, so organizers steered Manual leaders into the nascent city-wide education committee that was forming at MOP. Manual parents joined with families from other MOP organizing committees, and leaders and staff named their work the Transforming Schools Initiative.

"Parents and staff saw that without relationships with school board members, without the skills to be able to go to a school board meeting and raise an issue, without the knowledge of how to hold the powers-that-be accountable to what they commit to, we could spin our wheels forever at the local level and not get the kind of change that we needed to improve the quality of education for our children," said Lawless.

MOP brought leaders from all the MOP schools together in late 2003 for a presenta-

"I see children who are being pushed through the system who can't read or write. I see students who are not exposed to art and culture. I see students who do not know anything but their little existence. I see students who are not challenged."

—Tonya Hope

tion about the achievement gap based on research done by the Colorado Small Schools Initiative. The data showed that Latino and African American children were not achieving at the same levels as other kids.

In Colorado, the 2003 CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program) fourth grade reading test showed white students on average scoring 31-34% higher than Latino and African American students and high middle income students scoring 33% higher than low-income students.

"There is no equality in education," said Cole Middle School parent Erlinda Moreno.

"Parents were angry," said Lawless. "It was emotionally intense to see all that in black and white. They said, 'We don't want to stop doing our local stuff, but we need to do something at a broader level that's going to start to address this.'"

"It was really scary," said MOP parent leader Susan Molina. "Here I am a mom [involved] with the collaborative decision-making team at my kids' school for two years, and I didn't even know about the achievement gap. We have a big problem."

"I see children who are being pushed through the system who can't read or write," said Manual parent Tonya Hope. "I see students who are not exposed to art and culture. I see students who do not know anything but their little existence. I see students who don't have mentors. I see students who are not chal-

Teachers have trouble getting students' attention in large classes in the inner city public schools in *Making Connections'* neighborhoods.

"It gave me a feeling of accomplishment. Even though we're kids, we have the ability to make changes in the community."

—Nathan Earnest

West High School Students Organize to Meet Their Needs

"***Our experience shows that given enough commitment, given enough ambition, given enough people, you can actually get something done***."

–Casey Asimus

MOP has been organizing students at West High School on Denver's Westside since 2002. In the first year, students formed the Voices Heard Committee and did one-on-one interviews with hundreds of students at the school.

At a school-wide action in September 2003, the Voices Heard Committee presented testimony and data to more than 1200 students and school and district administrators in two back-to-back actions. Student proposals included continuing Advanced Placement and accelerated classes at the school, repairing and supplying school bathrooms, and providing more parking for students.

School and district administrators pledged to address the first two proposals, but the parking shortage was not as easy to solve.

"We have a lot of parking places right in front of our school," said student Samnang Son. "They belong to the city. Anyone can park there anytime they want for however long they want. We thought that was kind of unfair since we have limited parking spaces."

"We did a survey at the beginning of the school year," said student Casey Asimus. "We found that about 300 students drive to school. We only have 60 spots plus the 90 in front."

Voices Heard met with their city council person in January 2004. "She wanted more concrete information, more facts," said Son. "We did research on a high school in Santa Cruz, California. The school

Domenic Hope and other Cole Middle School student leaders have been active in MOP's school organizing efforts since 2003.

"We learned that we're supposed to be getting our child's reading score every year. I tracked down this information and it was a shock to me to learn that my son was reading two years below his grade level and I didn't know it."

—Susan Molina

there is in an urban setting, like West. The parking spaces around their school all belong to the city, and they got the parking spaces. We used our research to show our city council representative that this had happened before."

"They did their homework," said MOP Executive Director Mike Kromrey. "Instead of giving up, the students went online and did their research. They found other cities that have done exactly what they wanted to do."

"Parking Management came to meet with us, and we showed them our research," said Asimus. "They were very impressed that we had reasons and research behind wanting the parking spots. They realized we knew what we were doing."

"They saw that we weren't giving up and that we were going to keep with it, because we'd already been working on it for two years," said student Dave Adu.

Voices Heard won the parking spots for West High students.

"It gave me a feeling of accomplishment," said Nathan Earnest. "Even though we're kids, we have the ability to make changes in the community."

"Our experience shows that given enough commitment, given enough ambition, given enough people, you can actually get something done," said Asimus.

Currently, the Voices Heard Committee is focusing its efforts on making college equally accessible to all students. Youth have conducted more than 40 research interviews with experts and public officials, and the committee has become a partner in a collaborative of state-wide education reform stakeholders working on legislation to ensure college access for all students.

lenged. I take issue with a system that has allowed things to compromise the education of a child, which sets that child up to hit a glass ceiling of low annual income so they're always going to be stuck in a cycle of poverty."

At the MOP meeting on the achievement gap, "We were asked if we knew what our child's reading score was, and only one person raised her hand," said Molina. "Reading score—what is that? We learned that we're supposed to be getting our child's reading score every year. I tracked down this information, and it was a shock to me to learn that my son was reading two years below his grade level, and I didn't know it.

"Not only are children not reading at grade level, not only do parents not know about that, but look at the high school dropout rate," said Molina. Of 2,786 Latinos who started eighth grade in 1999 in DPS, only 27% graduated from high school.

MOP parents also discovered that schools across the district are not funded at an equal level. "When we dug deeper into the data, we started to see the funding and how some inner city public schools get less money than the schools in more affluent neighborhoods," said Molina. "That got under my skin. I thought, 'This just can't be.'"

According to University of Washington researchers Marguerite Rosa and Paul Hill, federal funds intended for all students disproportionately go to schools with wealthier families, because districts place more expensive teachers in schools that serve children of higher-income parents.

"In Denver, the school district spends $365 more per student in the more upscale schools than on those who attend the schools serving families with the highest poverty levels. That adds up to a difference of nearly $200,000 for a school enrolling 500 students."

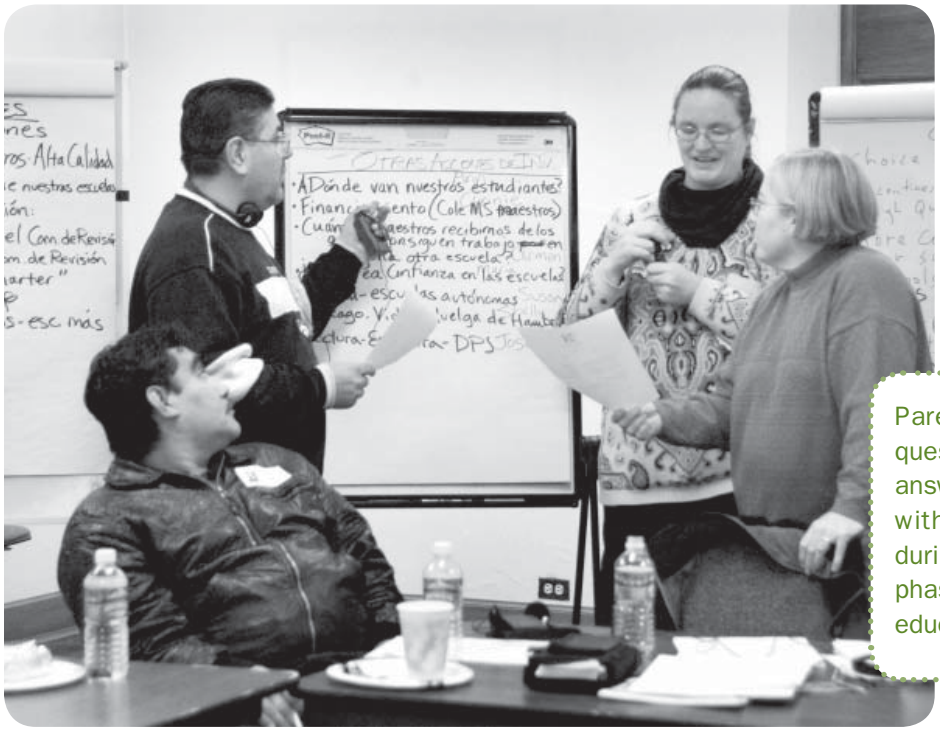
—Marguerite Rosa and Paul Hill

"In Denver, the school district spends $365 more per student in the more upscale schools than on those who attend the schools serving families with the highest poverty levels. That adds up to a difference of nearly $200,000 for a school enrolling 500 students," wrote Rosa and Hill.

"Our children are capable of competing with kids from other schools with a higher income," said Cole parent José Arteaga. "They have the same capability, but the education that they are receiving is not the same. That's where the problem is."

Over the next six months, more than 30 parents met regularly with organizers to research problems in DPS that contribute to the achievement gap. Here's what they found:

- Public libraries in low-income neighborhoods were open fewer hours than public libraries in wealthier neighborhoods.
- Denver's costly Literacy Program, in place for more than a year at the time the parents did their research, had yet to be systematically tracked or evaluated by DPS.
- Technically, all children in Denver Public Schools have the option to "choice out" of their designated school if they are dissatisfied with the quality of the education there. Functionally, low-income kids have fewer options than wealthier kids do. Barriers include transportation costs and student and parent perceptions of some schools being off-limits.
- Report card formats vary from school to school, and the presentation of information



Parent leaders list questions they want answered in meetings with public officials during the research phase of MOP's city-wide education reform work.

"There were so many residents there. I was struck by the resident leadership. I could see people who were having the freedom to go after the issues that they felt were important. It wasn't a top-down model."

—Linda Wurst

is confusing, particularly for parents who do not speak English.

At the same time, MOP leaders and staff were researching and developing a broad set of school reform proposals. In early 2004, MOP staff had come upon a book called *Making Schools Work*, by William Ouchi.

Ouchi outlined a reform plan based on case study research he had done in four school districts in North America. The elements of this school reform model focused on strong principal leadership and training, a weighted student budgeting formula in which money follows the students and kids with greater needs get more dollars, and school autonomy, including local control of the budget. These ideas made a lot of sense to MOP parents.

Parent leaders combined all of their research and honed in on a set of proposals that they felt DPS and the city could respond to:

- Equalize public library hours throughout Denver.
- Evaluate the DPS Literacy Program.
- Hold more choice fairs throughout the city.
- Create a bilingual, parent-friendly report card.
- Implement a weighted student formula.
- Improve principal and teacher training.
- Give schools more autonomy over budget and curriculum.

Parent leader Tony Limon speaks at MOP's first city-wide action on public education issues, held at Cole Middle School in May 2004.

"But these are just parents who care about their kids, and they are asking valid questions. We should hear them out, answer their questions, and respond in a way that is respectful and helps them understand what is going on."

—Kevin Patterson

Parent leader Susan Molina speaks to an audience of 600 at MOP's first action on school reform. According to one school board member, it was the largest assembly of parents in Denver Public Schools' history.

In late spring, MOP leaders held a district-wide public action in the Cole Middle School auditorium. Their goals were to present their data to the community and to DPS and to press DPS to respond to their proposals. More than 600 community members attended.

"My first contact with MOP's education work was at the federated action at Cole Middle School in May 2004," said DPS high school teacher Linda Wurst. "There were so many residents there. I was struck by the resident leadership. I could see people who were having the freedom to go after the issues that they felt were important. It wasn't a top-down model."

DPS Superintendent Dr. Jerry Wartgow and five of seven DPS board members attended the action. "I think there was a little nervous tension with some people within the district about what was going on with this group," said DPS Board member Kevin Patterson. "But these are just parents who care about their kids, and they are asking valid questions. We should be in a position to hear them out, answer their questions, and respond to them in a way that is respectful and helps them understand what is going on."

Wurst joined MOP shortly after the federated action. "When I joined MOP I was a teacher at a specific school, but I was interested in a more global picture and in taking more global action than just *my* school and *my* students and *my* grandkids."

"We have principals and teachers on the committees now, and they shed a different light on what we do, which is really good," said

"Building those relationships and understanding how the teachers feel, how the principals feel, is important. We have to learn to be able to understand each other."

—Susan Molina

Families packed the auditorium at Cole Middle School for MOP's action on school reform in May 2004. Issues discussed included the achievement gap and the alarming high school drop-out rate in Denver

parent leader Molina. "Building those relationships and understanding how the teachers feel, how the principals feel, is important. We have to learn to be able to understand each other. It has brought a lot of dimension to the work."

Just before the meeting about the achievement gap data, "MOP staff had projected that parents would be working on policy at the district and state levels in a four-to-six-year time range," said Lawless. "Well, within two years, we were doing both. No one expected it, but it progressed organically out of the local work."

Galvanized by the achievement gap data and taking advantage of resources made available through *Making Connections Denver*, MOP leaders and staff had moved quickly from neighborhood-based to district-level school reform work.

MOP Leaders Try State-Wide Reform

Through the summer of 2004, parent leaders held meetings with DPS board members and continued to explore broad reform proposals that they thought were relevant to the state as well as the district. A team of leaders also began to interact with the city library system to push for equal library hours across Denver neighborhoods.

In the fall of 2004, Republicans controlled the state legislature. In fact, there hadn't been a Democratic majority since 1974. MOP organizers and parent leaders struck upon a bold plan to work with Republican Representative Keith King of Lakewood to produce a school reform bill based on William Ouchi's research. MOP leaders wanted to win, and Republicans had the power.

"MOP staff had projected that parents would be working on policy at the district and state levels in a four-to-six-year time range. Well, within two years, we were doing both. No one expected it, but it progressed organically out of the local work."

—Patty Lawless

Erlinda Moreno served as time-keeper at MOP's city-wide action.

Around the same time, MOP brought Ouchi to Denver to discuss his research. Denver's Chamber of Commerce invited Ouchi back to speak to an even larger audience the following month.

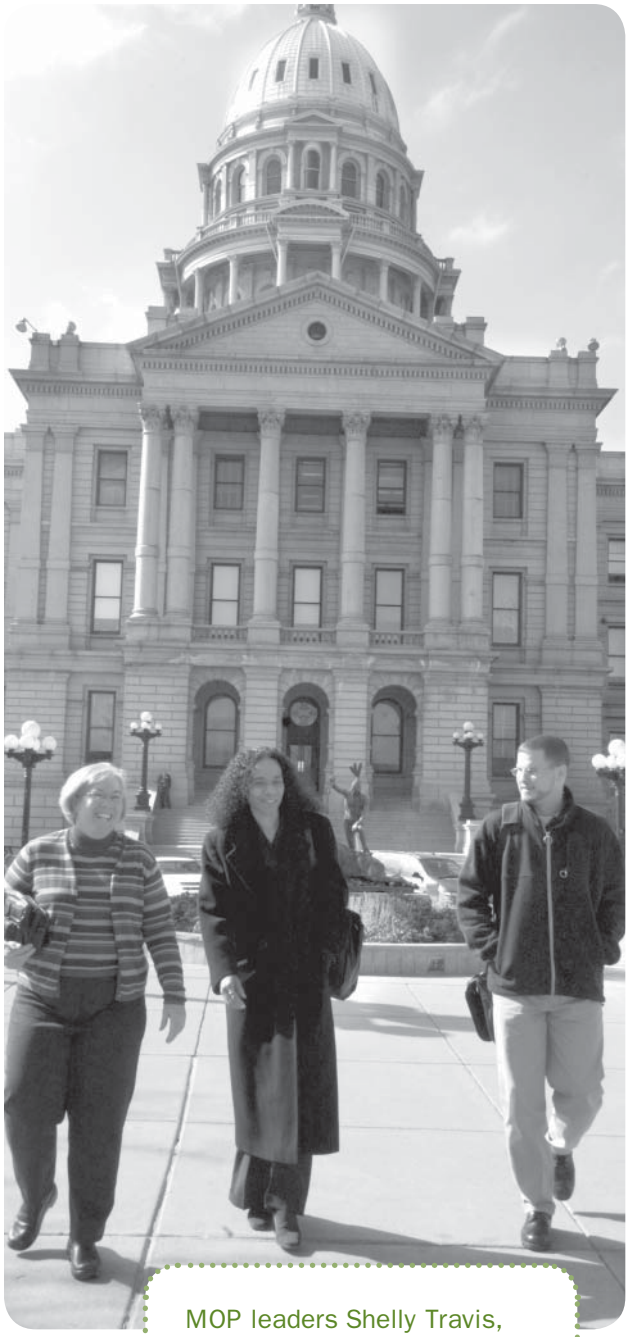
Rep. King crafted a bill with input from MOP staff, parents and Ouchi. Then the legislature took a surprising turn in the November 2004 elections. For the first time in 30 years, Democrats took control of both the House and the Senate, and King lost his political power overnight.

MOP had already invested a lot of time and energy in the King bill, so they decided to run with it in spite of the political change. Leaders felt they were entering uncharted terrain, so they decided they needed some technical assistance. MOP contracted with

Parent leader Susan Molina talks with DPS Board member Kevin Patterson, who represents northeast Denver on the school board, after the action in May 2004.

"I was shocked that bureaucrats who went in to testify were given real respect and community members were not given as much respect."

—Linda Wurst



MOP leaders Shelly Travis, Sanis Young and Jeremy Simons leave the state capitol after testifying before the legislature.

political consultant Nolbert Chavez to coach MOP staff and leaders through the complex process of introducing a bill in the state legislature and guiding it through committee to a vote on the floor. MOP used unrestricted private funds to finance this advocacy and technical assistance effort.

"Are we outgunned in a great way?" asked Kromrey. "Are we dealing with a high level of professional's inside baseball? Absolutely."

At a demanding and fascinating day-long training at MOP's offices in East Denver, MOP leaders and staff learned about the power structure of DPS and the Colorado Board of Education. They also heard about the leadership, constituencies and positions of myriad education interest groups in Denver and across the state, and they gamely worked with Chavez to understand the formal culture of the Colorado State Legislature.

Rep. King introduced his bill later that month, and MOP leaders went to the legislature to testify on the bill's behalf when it came before the House Education Committee. "We usually find out a day-and-a-half, two days before the legislature is going to hear a bill," said Kromrey. "That makes it hard for parents to get there on such short notice."

In spite of the short notice, five MOP leaders attended the hearing. It was a bumpy ride. The schedule for the day fell behind, and it was well into the lunch hour when the King bill came up for discussion. Most of King's Republican allies on the committee had left the room.

"It was tough, because we had never done it before. We didn't know the players, the power or the ropes. The power dynamics at that level are intense. We gave it our best shot, and we are proud of ourselves."

—Phuonglan Nguyen

Some Democrats on the committee aggressively questioned MOP leaders. "I understand that it was a partisan issue, that the bill was being introduced by a Republican, and the ones who now have power are the Democrats," said teacher Wurst. "But I was shocked that bureaucrats who went in to testify were given real respect, and community members were not given as much respect."

Wurst proceeded to tell the committee what she thought. "I challenged them and pointed my finger at them. The committee chairman raised his gavel and I was told later that if he'd brought it down, I would have been asked to leave. I had no idea."

Although the bill did not make it out of committee, MOP leaders emerged with some valuable lessons. "I learned a lot about the legislative process," said Wurst. "I don't think we had done all the preparation that we could have, but our experience at the capitol helped us to look at whether this was really a state issue or a local issue. I think at this point, it is more a local issue, but it got us introduced to working at the state level. If we were to do it again, I'd want to get a Democratic co-sponsor for the bill."

"It was tough, because we had never done it before," said MOP leader Phuonglan Nguyen. "We didn't know the players, the power or the ropes. The power dynamics at that level are intense. We gave it our best shot, and we are proud of ourselves."

In hindsight, Kromrey says that emphasizing a person (Ouchi) over a set of ideas (weighted student formula, principal leader-

MOP leader and high school teacher Linda Wurst speaks her mind during a hearing on the King bill.

"Working on the King bill was an incredible opportunity to learn about the legislative process. This is where we need to be if we are going to change policy. It opened an intriguing door for us."

—Phuonglan Nguyen

Rep. Jared Polis (D) of Boulder questions MOP parent leaders during the hearing of the King bill in the House Education Committee.

ship and school autonomy) probably didn't help MOP leaders working on the King bill. Some of Ouchi's research has been called into question, and his name became a flash point in MOP's conversations with education professionals and public officials. It was easier for people to undermine MOP's reform suggestions by discrediting Ouchi than it would have been had MOP focused more on the proposals, as MOP leaders and staff are doing now.

Furthermore, public officials were confused by MOP's alignment with a conservative Republican. "MOP was pushing the district to make some necessary changes, but it was confusing to us on the board to see them go with a conservative Republican," said DPS Board member Lucia Guzman. "It leaves the perception that now they're going to get in bed with the conservative Republicans and try to force the district into making these changes, and that didn't help the board or the superintendent at the time understand MOP."

"I think they learned a great deal out of the King bill, and they're much better informed citizens as a result of it," said DPS Board member Patterson. "How can you say it was a mistake when it was people trying to understand what was going on in the system?"

MOP leaders may not have won in the strict definition of the word, but they learned a lot, and they showed tremendous resilience. "Working on the King bill was an incredible opportunity to learn about the legislative process," said Nguyen. "This is where we need to be if we are going to change policy. It opened

"It was a stressful process. I read all of the proposals. I didn't sleep. I did a summary and I took notes."

—Erlinda Moreno

A Crisis at a Neighborhood School Has National Implications

While parents, teachers and principals were working together at the city and state level in MOP's education committee, another group of parents and teachers were responding to an unfolding community crisis at Cole Middle School. The crisis and its aftermath have state and national implications.

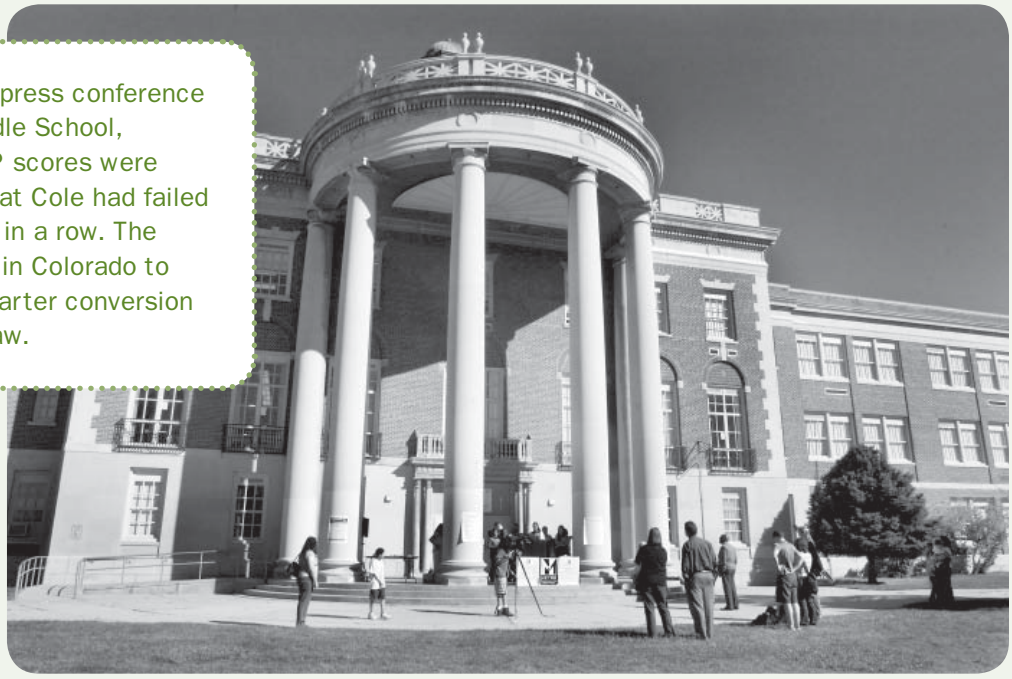
In the wake of the national 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, which demands achievement from every child in every school as measured via standardized tests, Colorado Governor Bill Owens signed into state law a statute that required any public school in Colorado that fails CSAP (Colorado Student Assessment Program) three years in a row to convert to an independent charter school.

When Cole's failing CSAP scores were announced in early August 2004, it became the first school in the state to be converted under the new law. Families were confused and upset.

Parent and community leaders met and decided to seize the moment. Within days, MOP leaders held a press conference in front of the school. "There has to be a community voice in this process," said Cole resident Sandy Douglas at the press conference.

Under the law, the Colorado Board of Education was required to put together an official committee to evaluate applicants and make a recommendation to the state board. Two MOP parent leaders from Cole, Eddie Simon and Erlinda Moreno, were selected by the community-led Cole Conversion Committee to serve on the state committee.

The state committee, which had one month to do its job, started the review process by attending a large community meeting at Cole Middle School.



MOP leaders hold a press conference outside of Cole Middle School, two days after CSAP scores were released showing that Cole had failed the test three years in a row. The school was the first in Colorado to undergo a forced charter conversion under a new state law.

"The work that the Cole parents' group did was much more comprehensive and worthwhile than the work that our formal committee did."

—Rico Munn

More than 70 students, teachers and community people gave input to the state committee and urged them to collaborate with the community-led Cole Conversion Committee.

At the end of the meeting, the state committee chair called a huddle at the back of the stage to map out the committee's game plan for the rest of the process. The chair talked fast and Cole parent Moreno, a Spanish speaker, interrupted to say she couldn't follow him. There was no interpreter on hand.

Neither the law nor the Colorado Board of Education had anticipated that one of the parents appointed to the committee might not speak English, even though DPS and other school districts across the state serve large numbers of Spanish-speaking families. A Cole teacher stepped in to assist.

By the third meeting of the state committee, a reliable interpreter was in place. "Even though we were a little behind the ball, we were able to eventually get up to speed with getting translation done," said Colorado Board of Education Representative Rico Munn.

Moreno and Simon attended all of the meetings of both the state and the community committees. "It was a stressful process," said Moreno. "I read all of the proposals. I didn't sleep. I did a summary, and I took notes."

Along with the stress came excitement. The community-led committee held two well-attended community input meetings in the lunchroom at Cole Middle School. Charter applicants made presentations and answered questions from a wide range of community members, who then evaluated applicants using a simple rubric created by MOP organizer Lawless, based on research funded by Making Connections Denver and The Piton Foundation.

MOP leaders and staff tabulated this data and used it as they formulated their recommendation to the state board. Cole parents and students also did site visits to schools in and around Denver that were operated by the four charter applicants.

During a meeting at the Colorado Board of Education, MOP leader Sandy Douglas reacts to the news that KIPP will be the charter company that runs Cole Middle School.

"It was exciting to see a core group of community people who were very involved, who were committed to helping to facilitate a community input process," said Colorado Board of Education Representative Munn, who attended every

(*continued on next page*)

"The difficult conversion process at Cole gave the community a chance to rally around a common cause and to get to know one another. We got to see other school models and learn what does and doesn't work for kids like ours."

—Sandy Douglas

(*from previous page*)

community input meeting. "It provided for a lot of useful information."

"The work that the Cole parents' group did was much more comprehensive and worthwhile than the work that our formal committee did," said Munn. "The formal committee had limited resources, and I hope that in the future we can get the resources to do the kind of expanded work that the parents did."

In November, the state board held two meetings to discuss community and state committee recommendations and select a charter applicant to run Cole. Community members settled on Edison Schools as their top choice. Edison already ran a charter elementary school in the neighborhood and had successfully integrated an early childhood education program there, with support from The Piton Foundation.

On the morning of the Board of Education announcement, Munn pulled MOP parent and student leaders aside in the marble-floored foyer to brief them on the board's decision. Five minutes later, he formally announced that KIPP would get the contract to run Cole Middle School. He explained that Edison had proposed a 6–12 school for Cole, and authorizing that was outside the board's mandate as defined by the charter conversion law.

Then the board did something unusual. Munn said that KIPP would only get the contract of it agreed to abide by a long list of conditions the board had developed based on the community's carefully researched input.

"We went through every single page of every single document that the community groups generated," said Munn. "We said, 'How can we meet the legal criteria and also respond to what the community is saying they need and want?' That's where the conditions came in. The conditions came directly out of what community members said was important to them."

"Many of the proposals that we had made to the state board got passed on as conditions to KIPP," said Cole parent José Arteaga.

"The difficult conversion process at Cole gave the community a chance to rally around a common cause and to get to know one another," said MOP leader Sandy Douglas. "We met and we strategized, and we got to see other school models and learn what does and doesn't work for kids like ours."

"We learned about the whole system of education, including how it is run and who makes decisions," said Douglas. "It was a good learning process."

Some of the leaders involved in the Cole conversion process decided to help KIPP get off to the best start possible. "We've done the recruitment of the parents and families, and we've gotten the word out," said Hope. "I made sure that KIPP's information was passed on to the community."

José Arteaga and Erlinda Moreno went on to meet with the Governor of Colorado to discuss problems with the charter conversion law, and Hope and Moreno testified at the state legislature for changes in the law that had wreaked havoc at Cole.

"We want to change the law," said Moreno. "We testified at the legislature, and people started to think about what we said. We made them think."

Currently, Douglas and other leaders are working together to hold KIPP accountable to the conditions set forth by the Colorado Board of Education.

"Because of all of the work we had done on school reform, we felt comfortable going to DPS board members to talk about our priorities in a new superintendent. They returned our phone calls and they made time to meet with us."

—Phuonglan Nguyen

an intriguing door for us. I'm looking forward to the next time."

Nguyen should get her chance later in 2006 when MOP is back at the legislature supporting a bill that would ensure college access for all students.

A New Superintendent

Shortly after their rich learning experience with the state legislature in early 2005, opportunity knocked for MOP leaders, and they were ready. DPS Superintendent Dr. Jerry Wartgow announced that he would step down, and the district began a national search for his replacement.

"During the superintendent search, MOP parents had one-to-ones with every board member," said DPS Board member Guzman. "They gave us their advice on what they would like to see in a leader and where they saw the major challenges for the district."

"Because of all of the work we had done on school reform in the previous two years, we felt comfortable going to DPS board members to talk about our priorities in a new superintendent," said MOP leader Nguyen. "They returned our phone calls and they made time to meet with us. I felt authentic desire to communicate with MOP leaders about this big decision."

MOP leaders attended candidate forums for all three finalists for the superintendent position.

"I asked candidate Michael Bennet if he was going to run things as status quo or if he was willing to look at change and to be a change agent," said parent leader Molina. "I said that business as usual isn't working for our kids. I also asked him if he was aware of the weighted student budgeting formula, the money following the students versus the money following the teachers. He said that it would be something he'd be willing to research. I said that MOP had done a lot of research and we'd be willing to share it with him."

DPS hired Bennet, a lawyer with business savvy who served as chief of staff to Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper. "We have somebody now as superintendent who is very open to community, who will give an ear to community," said Guzman.

Bennet has met with MOP leaders and staff several times since he came on board as the new superintendent in summer 2005. "There was something that I liked about him," said MOP leader Moreno. "He admitted that there was a problem with the education system. That shows that he really sees what is happening. He seems honest."

The effort that parents have put into researching and understanding education data, becoming well-versed in school reform ideas and learning to interact with education systems has paid off in these conversations with Bennet. His top three education priorities align with MOP's: a safe school environment, quality teachers and quality principals.

"We started on little safety issues at our school, and here we are years later sitting at a very big table. We're able to say to the superintendent, 'This is what we want. This is what we expect for our children.'"

—Susan Molina

MOP leader Phuonglan Nguyen asks a question during MOP's second meeting with new DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet.

Furthermore, DPS' new strategic plan, called The Denver Plan, supports in detail three of MOP's school reform priorities: a new principals' institute, professional development for teachers and a uniform parent-friendly report card. The report card, designed with input from MOP leaders, was piloted in February and revised and put into general use in March 2006.

DPS has even invited MOP leaders to participate in discussions the district is holding to explore solutions to continued academic decline at Manual High School, where MOP leaders first began their work to improve achievement for all children.

With Bennet's participation in MOP's recent city-wide action, the inclusion of three of MOP's reform positions in The Denver Plan, and deepening relationships between MOP leaders and DPS board members and administrative staff, the future for collaboration between MOP and DPS looks bright.

"We started on little safety issues at our school, and here we are years later sitting at a very big table," said Susan Molina, who helped run the large public actions. "We're able to say to the superintendent, 'This is what we want. This is what we expect for our children.' We've come a long way."

"I have achieved change in myself. Look at me. I can talk. I can say what I feel and think, which is really difficult for me. We shouldn't just remain silent or feel little when we are in front of people who have a lot of power."

—Erlinda Moreno

Parent leader Maria Martinez meets DPS Chief Academic Officer Jaime Aquino after his first meeting with MOP.

A Broad Range of Results

MOP leaders' tenacity has paid off. Since MOP first started organizing in *Making Connections Denver* neighborhood schools in 2001, they've had dozens of significant, measurable wins. (See "results" sidebar on page 32.)

In addition, MOP's work has yielded results in other important ways.

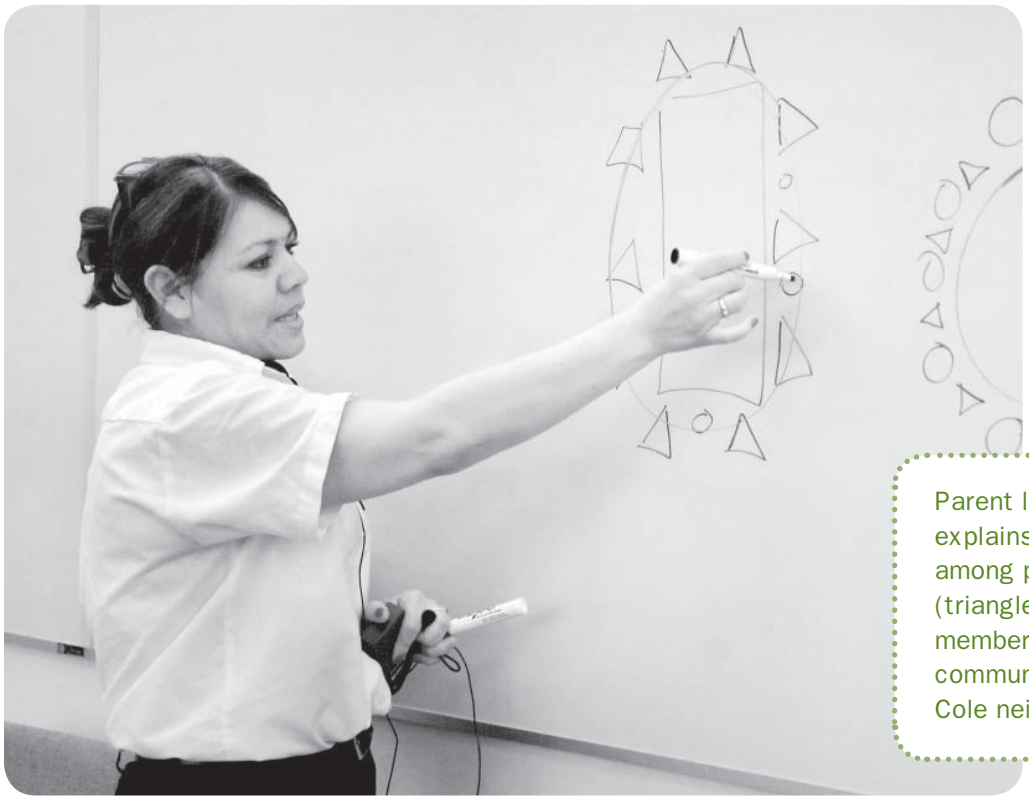
Residents have new capacity and power.

MOP has supported leadership development among hundreds of neighborhood residents. More than 40 MOP leaders have developed the capacity to use data to testify at the state legislature, the state board of education and

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet jokes with parents and community leaders during his second meeting with MOP. The meeting was held at MOP's offices.

"United, we have a lot of power, more than we can even think of, to lose the fear of public speech and to talk to people from very different levels from us."

—José Arteaga



Parent leader Erlinda Moreno explains power dynamics among public officials (triangles) and community members (circles), at a community meeting in the Cole neighborhood.

DPS Board meetings. Many more can interact articulately and effectively with their child's school. "MOP is empowering these parents," said DPS Board member Guzman.

MOP leaders have found and learned to use their voices. "I have achieved change in myself," said parent leader Erlinda Moreno.

"Look at me. I can talk. I can say what I feel and think, which is really difficult for me. I can talk to a lot of different kinds of people now. We shouldn't just remain silent or feel little when we are in front of people who have a lot of power."

"I've gotten the opportunity to voice my opinion in the education of my children," said Manual parent Tonya Hope. "I have made sure that whoever is in control of the schools knows that we are a force to be reckoned with. I am not going to disappear and sit down on my hands and not say anything. I'm not willing to have the children in my community receive a substandard education. I will continue to shout from the rafters that this is not right."

"I learned about all the needs we have in our community, including how blind we had been in matters of education," said Cole parent Arteaga. "We didn't know how bad our schools were."

"When people say that brown people can't work with black people, that white people can't work with brown people, that young people can't work with old people, I invite them to come and see MOP."

—Michael Bennet

Parents and community members have also deepened their understanding of systems and how they work. "I've gotten a better picture of the infrastructure of DPS, which was very difficult to understand, and I've gotten a hands-on experience of how you can impact a power system," said Hope.

"We already knew that something was wrong. We could see that our children weren't learning, that they were behind, that they were suffering," said MOP leader Sandy Douglas. "Before this work with MOP, I always looked for the problem within myself, or within the individual school. Now, I know that some of the problems have to do with the district, some have to do with the Colorado Department of Education, and some have to do with federal laws. It goes so deep. It is not just about the school, it's a whole system."

"MOP is building their grassroots support in a way that helps parents understand what's going on and to have them engage the system in sophisticated ways," said Patterson of the DPS Board.

In addition, MOP leaders have learned that there is power in numbers. "If we know what we want, we *can* make change," said Moreno. "Our work has showed us that we can even influence laws, which I never before thought we could do. I've learned that we are powerful when we join together."

"United, we have a lot of power, more than we can even think of, to lose the fear of public speech and to talk to people from very different levels from us," said Arteaga.

MOP engages diverse races, classes and ages.

MOP has successfully developed a school-organizing model that brings people together across race, class, gender and age lines to solve common problems. "When people say that brown people can't work with black people, that white people can't work with brown people, that young people can't work with old people, I invite them to come and see MOP," said DPS Superintendent Bennet.

"I see MOP as pluralistically concerned about a system that has to address all kinds of folks," said Guzman.

"One of the great things about MOP's education work is the diversity," said MOP leader and teacher Wurst. "I love the fact that there are native Spanish speakers and that when they speak, *we* have to put on the headphones to listen. I see people from all different parts of the community—African Americans, Asians, whites, Hispanics, old people, young people, the middle aged—coming together to achieve a common goal."

"Working with people from other cultures is kind of new," said parent leader Hope. "I've got neighbors who are mono-lingual Spanish speakers. Most times in our communities, we are separated by our differences. When my Spanish-speaking neighbor saw me speak out at one of the MOP meetings, she realized that I valued quality education for all children."

"Culturally, we are different, but as far as the problems we face? I think blacks face the

"I have made sure that whoever is in control of the schools knows that we are a force to be reckoned with. I am not going to disappear and sit down on my hands and not say anything."

—Tonya Hope

Results

Parent organizing is still relatively new in Denver. In terms of the number of parents who have gotten deeply involved in this work, the amount these parents have learned about their children's schools, and the number of parents and other community residents that have come to public meetings about the schools, this organizing work had been very successful. But how has all this organizing paid off?

Impact

- DPS works with MOP leaders to create a uniform, parent-friendly, bilingual report card for use throughout the district.
- DPS offers annual choice fairs throughout the four DPS quadrants, with promotional materials distributed before-hand in Spanish and English.
- DPS is formally evaluating the efficacy of the DPS Literacy Program, which has been inadequately tracked since its inception in 2003.
- Denver's 2006 budget allocates funding to create more equitable library hours, significantly increasing hours of operation in *Making Connections* neighborhood libraries.
- Three DPS schools in *Making Connections* neighborhoods adopt the teacher home visit program piloted by MOP at Fairview Elementary in the Sun Valley neighborhood in 2002 to improve communication with families and improve student performance.
- Fifth grade reading scores at Fairview Elementary School in Sun Valley rise from 10% proficient in 2001 to 41% proficient in 2005.
- Parent participation in reading nights and back-to-school nights doubles at four MCD neighborhood schools: West High School, Manual High School, Fairview Elementary School and Whittier Elementary School.

Influence

- DPS Superintendent Bennet's top three education priorities align with MOP education campaign priorities: safe school environment, quality teachers and quality principals.
- DPS's 2006 strategic plan supports in detail three of MOP's priorities: a uniform, parent-friendly report card, a principals' training institute, and professional development for teachers.
- The teachers' union (DCTA) and MOP jointly sponsor Public Service Announcements and a press conference to encourage parents to participate in parent teacher conferences.
- DCTA, Denver Labor Federation and MOP hold joint "issues briefing" for school board candidates in fall 2005.
- Rep. Keith King writes state legislation to support MOP parents' school reform proposals.
- MOP parents influence Colorado's charter conversion law for failing schools when Cole Middle School is the first school subject to forced charter conversion under the law. They request and get Spanish interpretation, and they create a model for community participation in the charter conversion process.
- Parents at Cole Middle School develop and use a rubric that helps their community effectively evaluate charter school candidates, and The Annie E. Casey Foundation funds publication of the rubric for national distribution.

"Now I know that some of the problems have to do with the district, some have to do with the Colorado Department of Education, and some have to do with federal laws. It goes so deep. It is not just about the school, it's a whole system."

—Sandy Douglas

- Cole leaders successfully lobby the Governor to veto new charter conversion legislation that fails to meet their standards.
- Voices Heard Committee at West High School secures city and school commitments to increase student parking at the school.
- Voices Heard Committee conducts over 40 research and strategy meetings to lead the College Access for All Students effort in Colorado. Voices Heard becomes a strategic partner in a collaborative of statewide education reform stakeholders that supports college access for all.
- MOP leaders support passage of Pro-Comp, the nation's first performance-based teacher compensation plan. Pro-Comp is approved by voters in November 2005.

Leverage

- Ford Foundation makes a three-year, $1 million investment in community organizing in Colorado's Front Range. MCD is a key partner.
- The City of Denver invests more than $400,000 over five years in community organizing in schools and communities working with MOP and MCD.
- MOP leaders help raise $121,000 in foundation support for the new Cole KIPP School.
- MOP leaders help raise $50,000 in support of a new teacher/parent-led model for academic excellence at Harrington Elementary School.

same problems we face as Hispanics," said parent leader Arteaga. "There is a lot of similarity."

MOP gets a seat at school reform tables.

"At a state level, our leaders and members created a presence that they never had before," said MOP's Kromrey. "They've leveraged themselves to have a real voice. They're being listened to now and starting to have influence."

"People know who we are now," said parent leader Molina. "All we have to say is, 'We're with MOP,' and people say, 'Oh, I know who you are.'

"Not only are we a voice, but a strong voice, a voice that people recognize, from the mayor to school board members to principals to other parents to our new superintendent."

"I've learned to be a better listener, because when MOP parents come into the room, they have something to say," said DPS Board member Guzman. "The best thing to do is to listen. It's from a voice that represents the people we are trying to work for."

"MOP has credentialed itself to be a key player in education in DPS and will have a voice with this superintendent," said Wurst. "I believe in the issues that we are bringing forth, and I think I can be part of a change in the success of our children and grandchildren and DPS."

"I've learned to be a better listener because when MOP parents come into the room, they have something to say. The best thing to do is to listen. It's from a voice that represents the people we are trying to work for."

—Lucia Guzman

Cole parent leader Tonya Hope leads a community meeting at Cole Middle School during the forced charter conversion process in winter 2004. Hope explains to parents what their children's school choices are.

MOP leaders have also become regular sources for Denver's news media. "I got a call from another MOP parent leader after Bennet was hired," said parent leader Molina. "She had just got off the phone with the *Denver Post*, and she said, 'Can you believe we are getting calls from the media to find out what our take is on this?'"

MOP and The Piton Foundation are transformed.

With support from *Making Connections Denver* and The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Denver institutions have been transformed, including a local foundation, several nonprofits and some city departments.

MOP has changed significantly since Kromrey came to his first meeting with *Making Connections Denver*. "MOP was exclusively a church-based organizing outfit," said Kromrey. "Organizing people within school systems was not on our radar screen. No doubt about it, *Making Connections* leveraged us into the school work."

"Our engagement in the schools got us into an important issue, which is education," said Kromrey. "Education is undeniably one of the major, critical systems that needs fundamental change if we are to deal with entrenched poverty."

Since 2001, MOP has quadrupled in size and gone from organizing eight groups of citizens in churches to more than 30 groups of citizens in churches, schools and neighborhoods.

"The action at Cole Middle School made a big impression on me, to see so many people and to know that I was involved in all that. I know that it's not just for my kids, it's for the future of all kids and parents."

—Erlinda Moreno

In Their Own Words:

Erlinda Moreno

(*Translated from Spanish*)

I arrived here two and a half years ago, fleeing from domestic abuse. My husband would have found us anywhere in my home country, so we came here. The long journey by bus with my children was difficult. Some of them were crying and the bus was crowded. I wasn't sure what I was going to do when I got to Denver.

I knew when I got here that I had to do everything I could so that my kids would be okay. I started to look for work. I got my first job at Arby's, then I worked as a waitress in a dance hall, and then McDonald's. I also worked cleaning houses. At McDonald's, I have been promoted to running the cash register.

A few months after I arrived, my cousin was going to go to a meeting, and I went with her. It was in the library at Cole Middle School. People at the meeting said that not many parents were going to meetings at the school, so they wanted to create some flyers to take to the houses to get the parents more involved. I said, "I want to be involved," and I offered to take the flyers to the houses.

I like people to be informed. Before I started working with MOP, I was one of those people who didn't know things. I was embarrassed to ask questions, but I wanted to know. Many parents let things go by because they are so overwhelmed with multiple jobs, or because they are afraid. It's not that it isn't important to them.

The action at Cole Middle School in May 2004 made a big impression on me, to see so many people and to know that I was involved in all that. I know that it's not just for *my* kids, it's for the future of all kids and parents.

Today, I don't even recognize myself. I've been talking to parents and making a lot of phone calls to keep them informed. When you think of how I got here, then two years later, I'm at the schools, and I'm going to the state legislature and I'm talking to the Governor.

I love my children. I want them to have a good future. I say, "I don't want you to be working at McDonald's for low pay." It is not just the money; it's also that I want them to have a full life. For myself, I want to get my GED. Someday, I'm going to be working at school with kids, because that is what I love to do.

MOP parent leader Erlinda Moreno has three children in Denver Public Schools.

"In all of our work, we now recognize that we're only going to be successful if we build an enormous level of community and resident involvement."

—Mary Gittings Cronin

Parent leader Librada Cervantes does an interview with a newspaper reporter after MOP leaders hold a joint press conference with the Denver Classroom Teachers' Association to encourage parents to turn out for parent-teacher conferences.

"*Making Connections* put us into partnership relationships with other entities, like the city, in ways that we wouldn't have even thought of otherwise," said Kromrey. "The experience has opened up our thinking. We took risks, we tried new things, and it propelled us into relationships and situations that expanded our work."

"MOP is so much stronger than we ever dreamed it could be, because of *Making Connections*," said Peg Logan, executive director of the Chinook Fund, a *Making Connections Denver* partner.

The Piton Foundation has also gone through a significant transformation. "When Garland Yates came to town… we weren't opposed to organizing, but we didn't know anything about it," said Terri Bailey, senior research officer at The Piton Foundation.

Five years later, community organizing has become a central strategy for Piton. "In school reform, we know that parental engagement is critical, and the community organizing we do through *Making Connections* enables us to build that parent engagement in school reform," said Mary Gittings Cronin, executive director of Piton.

"When the Cole conversion issue came up [see page 24], the relationships we had built in that community through *Making Connections* allowed The Piton Foundation to quickly jump in with MOP to determine how to enhance the community voice in the conversion process," said Gittings Cronin. "There was no dis-

"The experience has opened up our thinking. We took risks, we tried new things, and it propelled us into relationships and situations that expanded our work."

—Mike Kromrey

cussion of should we or should we not. It had become so accepted by the staff that there was no question that we would work with MOP on Cole."

"Now, a lot of foundations would have sat back and said, 'How will this affect our relationship with the superintendent?' And the program officer might have said, 'If I'm out there working at Cole, I'm going to lose a lot of influence with the school board or with my foundation colleagues.' That discussion never happened. We just knew what we needed to do."

"In all of our work, we now recognize that we're only going to be successful if we build an enormous level of community and resident involvement," said Gittings Cronin. "What we as a foundation can do is provide access to data, to other sources of information, to the power structure and to resources. And we can help people get a seat at the table."

"Piton is now embracing community organizing as a critical strategy in its efforts to transform low-income neighborhoods," said Kromrey. "And it isn't just one person carrying the flag. It's deep in the organization."

DPS and the City of Denver are influenced.

Slowly, people with authority in different city systems are reconsidering the potential role of community members in decision making. "It made me think about how we define the term 'parent engagement,'" said DPS Board member Patterson. "I think that's a big problem

MOP Executive Director Mike Kromrey speaks at MOP's annual celebration in February 2005.

"I want to see something that is going to impact the achievement gap. My children's education is substandard. I want to make sure that they can make the grade and go to college without remedial courses."

—Tonya Hope

In Their Own Words:

Tonya Hope

I was lost for about ten years in addiction. I was disassociated with things that were going on, even though I had four children.

Eventually, I got tired of going to jail. I wanted to come home and be with my children. I knew that my children were missing out on a lot of key things because I wasn't in their lives. Three years ago, I started my quest for sobriety.

I never want my children to go through what I went through, and I'm doing everything in my power to make sure that the doors that are now closed to me never have to be closed to them.

I got involved with MOP because my mother was already involved in the work at Manual High School, and my son was involved at Cole Middle School. I joined the organizing work in 2004, after Cole Middle School students failed the CSAP for the third year in a row. State law required that the school be converted into a charter school.

I was concerned about what was going to be coming into my neighborhood and into the school that I went to and that my parents went to. I wanted to make sure that we had a positive entity going in there that was going to have the community at heart. I'm tired of having programs and projects and test pilots dropped in on us that come around for a while and disappear.

I want to see something that is going to impact the achievement gap. My children's education is substandard. I want to make sure that they can make the grade and go to college without remedial courses.

Working on the Cole Middle School conversion encouraged me to go ahead and further my college career. I see kids who are able to do college and who for one reason or another don't. A lot of it, they say, is because nobody they know goes to college. I want them to be able to say, "Well, I know her, and she's going to college. She's not young anymore. She's got a whole family of kids." If it's important enough for me to be there, then it's important enough for them to be there

MOP parent leader Tonya Hope has four children in Denver Public Schools.

"It made me think about how we define the term 'parent engagement.' I think that's a big problem. We think parent engagement means that the parents come and volunteer. I don't think that is necessarily all we can have in terms of parent engagement."

—Kevin Patterson

Mary Gittings Cronin, executive director of The Piton Foundation, makes a point during a meeting with Cole Middle School parents.

that we have here. We think parent engagement means that the parents come and volunteer at the school. They do something there and then they leave. Well, I don't think that is necessarily all we can have in terms of parent engagement."

Making Connections' support of community organizing has also had an impact on the City of Denver as a whole. "Denver is a different place today because of *Making Connections*," said Chinook's Logan. "Denver was not an organizing town. People never really thought about what it would mean to have a developed, powerful voice from the community. They never thought about organizing."

"Now, organizing is a word that most people understand in Denver," said Logan. " Not only that, it's cachet and people use it."

As a result, *Making Connections*' support has leveraged other local support for organizing. The City of Denver is one of the first in the United States to formally support community organizing.

"My first experience with community organizing was when I was invited to a neighborhood meeting in Sun Valley on a Saturday morning, and there were at least 100 people there," said Myrna Hipp, then Denver's Director of Housing and Neighborhood Development. "As a city official, I had tried to have neighborhood meetings in Sun Valley and

"Denver is a different place today because of* Making Connections*. Denver was not an organizing town. People never really thought about what it would mean to have a developed, powerful voice from the community…. They never thought about organizing."

—Peg Logan

Cole Middle School parents have a seat at the table in making decisions for the new KIPP charter school at Cole. Cole parent leaders met with the leader of The Piton Foundation to seek funding to support the new charter school.

gotten three people. That they got that many people out on a Saturday morning, all representative of the neighborhood—it just blew me off my feet."

"The city had thought about doing various things in Sun Valley, but after the meeting we were finally able to do capital projects that the neighborhood wanted," said Hipp. "For example, we made the street crossing near the school safer for kids. If neighborhood residents hadn't brought that forward, that wouldn't have gotten done."

Over the past five years, the City of Denver has contributed more than $400,000 to MOP's organizing efforts.

■ MOP's work leverages funding from another national foundation.

As a result of *Making Connections*, Denver is developing a national reputation as a place where community organizing leads to results. In 2005, The Ford Foundation came to town and said, "We want to fund in Denver because we think you've got some really exciting organizing going on," according to Chinook's Logan.

Ford has invested $1 million over three years to support a new organizing collaborative in Denver that includes seven organizing groups working together on regional policy issues.

"I felt like my life was never going to change. I thought that because of the bad choices I'd made in my life, I didn't have a right to do anything else. With MOP, I started to learn that you don't have to be stuck. You can better yourself and change."

—Susan Molina

In Their Own Words:

Susan Molina

Four years ago, I got a call from a MOP organizer who wanted to do a one-on-one. I was skeptical.

He asked me about Harrington Elementary School, where my kids go. At the time I was trying to be engaged with my kids at school. I was the only parent on their collaborative decision-making team for two years.

After I was done telling the organizer all that was wrong in my world, I said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" He said, "I'd like to invite you to a meeting with other neighbors and parents who share the same concerns." I remember thinking, "Yah, right. No one in this community cares. No one has time, or they just don't want to get involved."

I went to the meeting, and at least 40 people were there, which surprised me.

Over time, we had different trainings and picked our issue, which for us at the time was safety. We didn't have a crossing guard. The pedestrian light was broken. We wanted more police patrolling.

We started to do research. One of our first research meetings was with our city council representative. We were all scared to death. Most of the other parents were Spanish-speakers, and, as a bilingual person, I was the chair of the meeting. I was so nervous.

I asked our council person, "Who put you here?" She looked at me, and she said, "Well, you did. You are my boss." When she said that, we all sat up a little taller. We thought, "Well, all right!"

We learned we do have a right to go in and ask questions and not just take answers that make us feel defeated. When someone says, "No," we say, "Let's go above that person." That's exactly what happened with the engineering department. They told us "no" a couple of times, but in the end, they fixed everything at Harrington that we asked them to.

When I first started with MOP, I had just become a single mom. I was stuck in a rut. I had had my daughter when I was 17 and dropped out of high school. With no education, I didn't have a lot of options. I ended up cleaning for ten years. You don't grow up saying, "I want to be a cleaning lady."

I felt like my life was never going to change. I thought that because of the bad choices I'd made in my life, I didn't have a right to do anything else. With MOP, I started to learn that you don't have to be stuck. You can better yourself and change.

I was the most hopeless person ever, and look at me now. When I say that I am the Chair of MOP's Board of Directors, I can't believe it. Four years ago, I didn't even want to be noticed by anyone.

MOP leader Susan Molina has two children in Denver Public Schools.

"At that first meeting, I got very nervous. It wasn't easy for me to speak. Little by little, with the meetings and the training, it became more familiar. Now, I look at people and don't panic anymore. I can talk. I'm able to speak in public, to many people at many levels."

—José Arteaga

In Their Own Words

José Arteaga

(*Original in Spanish*)

I've been in Denver for about 11 years. I migrated here for the same reason that many people do, for better opportunities. The economic situation in my home country is very difficult.

When I got here, I had to look for any job I could get, jobs that are difficult and not well paid. I worked for a jacket manufacturing company for about seven years. I have worked in restaurants and also cleaning offices downtown. I worked at a warehouse packing food.

At this last job, I had a job accident, and I had to stop working. It's been over three years since I was able to work, and it is hard on my family in terms of the money.

A few years ago, I started working with the parents at Manual High School. I got invited to a meeting, and the topic was low student performance in academics. At that first meeting, I got very nervous. It wasn't easy for me to speak. Little by little, with the meetings and the training, it became more familiar. Now, I look at people and don't panic anymore. I can talk. I'm able to speak in public, to many people at many levels.

Hearing that my kids were getting a bad quality education hurt. The data that I was looking at showed me that the test scores in our schools are much lower than in schools in wealthier neighborhoods. I realized the system wasn't giving to our schools the same as other schools were receiving.

When we move to this country as Hispanics, we come to work. We look for better opportunities, but the work here absorbs our time. We think that by providing quality clothing and good food, we are fulfilling our responsibilities as parents. When something wrong happens at school, like there's a complaint about behavior, that's when we realize there is a problem.

A good education is a good future, especially if our children can be bilingual. I wish for my oldest son to have an opportunity to have a career. For my daughter, I want her to go to college.

MOP leader José Arteaga has two children in Denver Public Schools.

"We want to get parents thinking about a new way to be engaged in their children's schools from the very beginning."

—Mike Kromrey

The Ford money has attracted an array of local foundations that are contributing money to match the Ford grant and that meet regularly in their own collaborative to discuss lessons learned and progress in their organizing investment.

What's Next?

Tie in to early childhood education.

"In 2006, *Making Connections Denver* will build an intentional bridge between Piton's early childhood education work and the parent engagement work spearheaded by MOP in the elementary schools," said *Making Connections* Local Site Coordinator Susan Motika. "This includes funding parent liaisons at three elementary schools in *Making Connections*' neighborhoods."

"In our schools, different people have jobs that involve working with families, but typically they work in silos," said Kromery. "They don't think about coordinating their work.

"Our goal is to create a relational culture in the schools, with the parent liaisons connecting families in Piton's Early Excellence [an early childhood education program] with the MOP organizing work and other parent engagement efforts. We want to get parents thinking about a new way to be engaged in their children's schools from the very beginning."

"We are also using the MOP education work to build a continuum that starts with early childhood education, continues through high school and higher education, and ends with people getting good jobs with a living wage," said Motika.

One of the tenets of early childhood education is to read to young children early and often.

Grow the organization.

- **Expand the core leadership base.** In the two years that MOP has branched out from school-based organizing work to

"If there is not constant, vigilant work doing new outreach, any organization like ours risks becoming an organization of the few, speaking for the many."

—Mike Kromrey

A three-year-old works on developing gross motor skills at an early childhood education program in Cole.

district-level and state-level systems work, leaders and staff are feeling a tension between increasing broad-based participation and achieving big picture change.

"The core team of 40 leaders can clearly articulate the data and the proposals," said Kromrey. "The task for us is to create venues and opportunities to expand that level of participation to the broader group of community residents who participate in MOP's work. Public meetings are one way to do that. The larger actions we do are in some ways an education forum for a lot of our members. They're not just to get commitments from public officials, although that is a critical piece."

"As MOP grows in capacity to impact policy, power and relationships, leaders and staff can readily spend increasing amounts of time on issues and policy," said Kromrey. "The constant tension of our work is that we are only as strong as our local membership organizations and volunteer leadership capacity. If there is not constant, vigilant work doing new outreach, listening campaigns and new leader development, any organization like ours risks becoming an organization of the few, speaking for the many."

- **Build relationships among leaders**. MOP has learned from *Making Connections Denver* and its partners, as well as from the research of Dr. Paul Speer of Vanderbilt University, that strong relationships among leaders results in more effective work and increased civic engagement. "We need to continue to build our relationships," said parent leader and MOP board chairperson Molina.

- **Integrate an anti-oppression analysis**. MOP has also realized that, as it begins to discuss potentially divisive issues like immigration and health care within a group of leaders that includes people from different races and classes, the organization needs to formally integrate an anti-oppression analysis into its work.

"We've started to have difficult conversations on immigration and race issues," said Molina. "I'm fluent in English and was

"We've started to have difficult conversations on immigration and race issues. It's only going to be okay if we can all sit down in a room and openly talk about things. We all need to know who is sitting next to us."

—Susan Molina

MOP parent leader Carmen Rivera and others show their support for Edison Schools during a community input meeting held in the Cole Middle School lunch room.

born in the United States. A lot of people don't see me as Mexican, but my mom and my siblings were born in Mexico. I just happened to be born on this side. There have been comments from some MOP members like, 'You're not like them.'"

"It's only going to be okay if we can all sit down in a room and openly talk about things," said Molina. "We all need to know who we are talking to, who is sitting next to us. All of our stories can meet together, but not if we aren't aware of what those stories are.

"There's a saying in Spanish that translates to something like, 'Faces we see, hearts we don't know,'" said Molina. "We will never get to know each other's hearts if we don't take the time to do it."

To work through these difficult conversations, MOP will collaborate with the Chinook Fund's Social Justice Institute (SJI). Developed over the past three years with support from *Making Connections Denver*, SJI is a training program that focuses on the intersection of multiple oppressions, particularly emphasizing race, class and gender.

The training enables participants to tell their life stories, hear about one another's struggles, and develop the tools they need to work together to analyze systems and issues and eradicate oppression in their communities.

■ Pursue new policy work.

In 2006 and beyond, MOP will continue to work at the district and state level to stimulate

"There's a saying in Spanish that translates to something like, 'Faces we see, hearts we don't know.' We will never get to know each other's hearts if we don't take the time to do it."

—Susan Molina

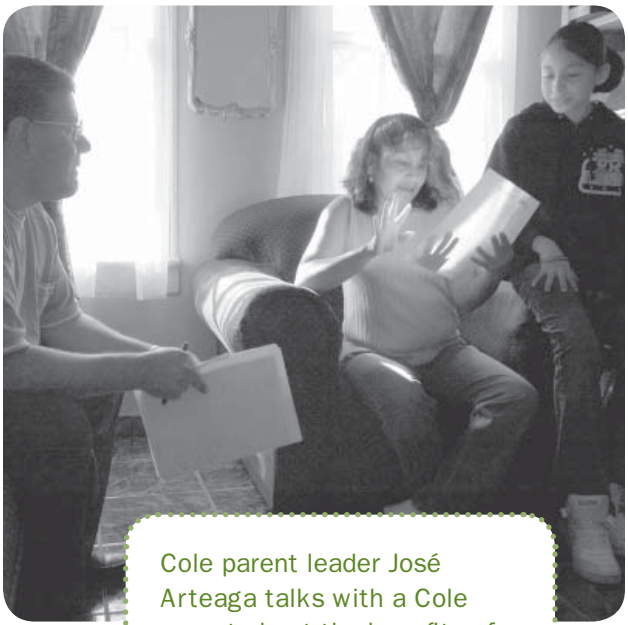
MOP leaders and staff are making their voices heard in local, city and state decisions that will affect the future well-being of Denver's children.

research and discussion around specific school reform proposals it endorses, including weighted student formula, more school autonomy, and city and state investment in early childhood education.

The DPS Task Force on Early Childhood Education recently issued a report that urges new funding for early childhood education across the state. "MOP leaders will support any sound ballot initiative that supports early childhood education," said Kromrey.

MOP leaders are also busy researching and supporting state legislation that calls for education that starts before kindergarten and gives students access to college courses and an associate's degree while still in high school. This proposed legislation seeks to make college accessible to all Colorado students.

After four years of hard work and numerous lessons learned, MOP leaders are poised to participate in and influence neighborhood, city and state education policy and practice. They have the know-how, the relationships and the credibility to move education issues, and many local and state public officials are ready and willing to have MOP leaders at the table as Denver and Colorado face challenging issues in public education for all children.



Cole parent leader José Arteaga talks with a Cole parent about the benefits of the new KIPP school at Cole.

"The big lesson in this story for me is that, with the right supports, parents and community people can do it. They can build relationships. Leverage partnerships. Develop and use data. They can make big changes in systems that affect their lives." —Garland Yates

Learning from Denver's work to improve schools

The many people involved in the effort to improve Denver's schools have been learning a lot.

- **Organized, knowledgeable parents can become a potent force for change in under-performing schools.**

The ability of many Denver parents — often Spanish speakers — to articulate the inequities and other problems in their children's schools is impressive. Many people assume that parents don't have the time or interest to get involved in a long-term effort to reform poorly-performing schools. Denver's experience suggests that this is not true.

"The big lesson in this story for me," says Denver *Making Connections'* long-time site team leader Garland Yates, "is that, with the right supports, parents and community people can do it. They can build relationships. Leverage partnerships. Develop and use data. They can make big changes in systems that affect their lives."

- **Data can be critical in engaging parents, and parents without much formal education can learn to find, understand and use data about education issues.**

One big motivator of parents in Denver was the information that came from an effort to research schools in low-income neighborhoods. This effort involved *Making Connections'* Community Learning Network. This new data made it very clear to parents that their kids' schools were not performing as well as other Denver schools, and that part of the reason for this is unequal resources. "We didn't know how bad our schools were," stated Cole parent José Arteaga.

When parents learn how bad their schools are in relation to other schools, many become activists. The fact that schools in more affluent Denver neighborhoods got more money "got under my skin," says parent Susan Molina. "I thought, 'This just can't be.'"

- **Information can also be critical in helping parents see the broader issues that often underlie the struggles of their own schools and their own children.**

What bring parents out to meetings for the first time are specific concerns about their children and their schools. "We started on little safety issues at our school," recalls Molina. At another school it was repairs to the school building. For the students at West High School, it was parking.

By working on these issues, these parents and students began to build relationships with each other and with teachers and principals. And they began to understand that specific issues like the neglect of their school building reflected larger issues like the inequities in resources between schools in different neighborhoods.

The key was not simply getting parents involved. Molina says that she was involved in her school's collaborative decision-making team at her child's school for two years, but this involvement hadn't taught her about her school's "achievement gap."

"Before this work with MOP, I was always looking for the problem within myself or within the individual school. Now I know that some of the problems have to do with the district, some [with the state], some with federal laws. It goes so deep."

—Sandy Douglas

The key was a process that allowed these parents to learn more about their schools and the larger education issues that affect their schools.

"We learned about the whole system of education, including how it is run and who makes decisions," explains Cole resident Sandy Douglas. "It was a good learning process."

What the Denver experience shows is how an initial focus on specific issues can be broadened into an understanding of issues common to many schools in lower-income communities.

"Before this work with MOP," explains Douglas, "I was always looking for the problem within myself or within the individual school. Now I know that some of the problems have to do with the district, some have to do with the Colorado Department of Education, and some have to do with federal laws. It goes so deep. It is not just about the school, it's a whole system."

- **Understanding broader issues is the first step. The second step is understanding how to have an impact on these issues.**

Denver's first foray into the policy arena was not successful in relation to the policy it wanted to achieve. But it was very successful in educating and activating both parents and teachers.

"Working on the King bill was an incredible opportunity to learn about the legislative process," explains Phuonglan Nguyen. "This is where we need to be if we are going to change policy. It opened an intriguing door for us. I'm looking forward to the next time."

- **Motivated parents who understand the underlying issues are critical because education reform is not easy and it will inevitably take more time than you initially anticipate.**

Education systems are complex and reforming them requires a high degree of political sophistication, allies, partners, data, media savvy, good research and vigilance. Inevitably, roadblocks will appear.

"When *Making Connections* began in Denver, we talked a lot about the things that are beyond our control," explains Yates. "We can't control the economy. There could be a recession. We can't control politics. What happens if you develop momentum on an issue and suddenly there is a new mayor or a new city council?

"We had to acknowledge that there were forces at work in these communities that we had very little control over no matter how many people we got involved in this work." In Denver's parent organizing work, the effort to pass state legislation failed largely because the state legislature suddenly had new leaders for the first time in decades.

The key, Yates continues, is to "build enough momentum, a broad movement with broad ownership, so that you can survive setbacks. This parent organizing work demonstrates the importance of this. They had a couple of setbacks, but that didn't stop the work. They continued to work with the schools and the principals and ultimately the new superintendent. And these schools are changing. Several are no longer on the list of failing schools.

"if you build a broad enough movement, if it goes deep with people understanding not just a specific issue but the underlying issues, then you can survive setbacks."

—Garland Yates

"The lesson for me is that, if you build a broad enough movement, if it goes deep with people understanding not just a specific issue but the underlying issues, then you can survive setbacks."

- **Given that system reform requires resilience and a long view, effective organizing over a long period of time is critical.**

Organizing can build capacity among people of diverse backgrounds and allow them to work together, recover quickly from setbacks, modify their strategies as needed and go on to re-engage the system until they win. Organizing can also continue to bring new parents and other community people into the reform effort.

The deep engagement of parents in Denver didn't just happen. It was the result of a sizable investment by *Making Connections* in organizing and a long-term commitment by Metro Organizations for People to work with parents to improve the performance of struggling schools. The effort has involved several organizers who worked to engage and help educate parents.

- **Unlike some other systems, the education system has been set up with multiple mechanisms that enable parents to access decision-makers.**

These mechanisms require decision-makers to respond to community input. They include parent events at schools, parent/teacher conferences, open school board and state board of education meetings with testimony periods, and legislative hearings. Plus, elected officials are expected to take phone calls from their constituents.

- **Organizing enables parents to use the existing dialogue mechanisms effectively.**

Many parents aren't aware of their rights as parents within the school system or the ways they can access the school system's decision-makers. Most must learn how to give testimony and present data.

One striking thing about the parents who tell their stories in this publication is how many say that they had never spoken at public meetings before. Indeed, several said that they hadn't even conceived of themselves doing such a thing. "I was one of those people who didn't know things," says Erlinda Moreno. "I was embarrassed to ask questions.... Today I don't even recognize myself."

Organizing has a long history of engaging people and helping them find abilities within themselves that they didn't know they had. It also enables parents and others to engage public officials via one-on-ones, public meetings, demonstrations, press conferences and ongoing relationships with the media.

- **For parents to have influence on education policy, they have to overcome the idea of what citizen input is supposed to look like.**

Many officials expect parents and students to offer personal stories and suggestions for small changes at individual schools. They typically don't expect overarching reform proposals, comparative research on charter school applicants, comprehensive data-based presentations about issues and potential solutions to complex problems, or demands for seats at decision-making tables.

Making Connections *did a lot of work in its early days overcoming a negative image of organizing by both educating people and showing people how organizing could help connect them to many more residents or parents.*

Working in Multi-Lingual Communities

Many residents in Denver's *Making Connections* neighborhoods only speak Spanish. Integrating Spanish-speaking parents into an English-speaking system is not easy, but Denver has done it so well that several parent leaders are Spanish speakers.

The key is both pushing systems to accommodate Spanish-speaking parents and making sure that the meetings of parents integrate Spanish speakers. Many of MOP's organizers speak Spanish. But MOP and *Making Connections* have also made a big investment in translators and translation equipment. MOP spends roughly $30,000 a year on interpretation. It has learned a lot as a result of this commitment:

- High quality interpreters conducting simultaneous translation with everyone wearing headsets is the most effective method, according to MOP. It provides for fairly seamless meetings that take the same amount of time as a mono-lingual meeting.
- Having a mix of Spanish and English speakers lead meetings allows all participants to wear headsets equally. Meetings conducted primarily in English and interpreted in Spanish through headsets result in less involvement by Spanish-speaking leaders.
- Breaking up meetings up into smaller mono-lingual group conversations allows leaders to be free of the headsets.
- Stopping and asking leaders periodically if they have comments or questions makes sure that all people are participating.

It takes time and repeated effort to change these preconceived ideas and attitudes. But it can happen. "It made me think about how we define the term 'parent engagement,'" said Denver Public Schools Board member Kevin Patterson. "I think that's a big problem. We think parent engagement means that the parents come and volunteer. I don't that that is necessarily all we can have…."

- **Some people also have a negative image of organizing and organizers, an image that can be overcome over time.**

Denver was "not an organizing town," stated Peg Logan of the Chinook Fund. "People never really thought about what it would mean to have a developed, powerful voice from the community…. They never thought about organizing."

Making Connections did a lot of work in its early days overcoming this negative image by both educating people about organizing and showing people how organizing could help them. In the education organizing work, parents and organizers showed the potential of organizing by greatly increasing turnout at school events such as back-to-school nights.

Now many people in Denver do think about and better understand organizing. "In all our work, we now recognize that we're only going to be successful if we build an enormous level of community and resident involvement," states Piton Foundation head Mary Gittings Cronin.

- **Change is a two-way street.**

One of the most interesting aspects of the Denver education organizing story is that it

"Parents made connections with teachers, principals, board members, the state legislature, ultimately even the superintendent. Over time they have been able to build these relationships into a broad commitment to improving the performance of these schools." —Garland Yates

doesn't just involve funders and city people becoming more comfortable with organizing. It also involves the key organizing group making some significant changes in an attempt to increase its impact.

"The experience has opened up our thinking," says MOP's director Mike Kromrey. "We took risks, we tried new things, and it propelled us into relationships and situations that expanded our work." Among other changes, MOP expanded from its church-based organizing model into school-based organizing, something that Kromrey says wasn't even on its "radar screen" before *Making Connections*.

- **Long-term, system-wide change can't just be about building power and winning campaigns around specific issues. It also needs to be about building relationships.**

Kromrey, MOP and its organizers stretched in another way. One aspect of some organizing that has alienated people is its focus on specific issue campaigns and its use of confrontational tactics. MOP certainly hasn't abandoned the tactic of confronting officials in public meetings on critical issues. It has helped organize "actions" that have pulled together hundreds of parents who have presented lists of demands.

But MOP encouraged its parent leaders to work directly with teachers, principals and even administrators. "Building those relationships and understanding how the teachers feel, how the principals feel, is important," says Molina. "We have to learn to be able to understand each other.

The Denver work suggests that one key in getting improvements at individual schools is getting strong buy-in from the principal. One way to do this has been to integrate organizing tactics into school functions such as reading nights, back-to-school nights and math nights. The big increase in parent involvement helps the principal and teachers see the usefulness of the organizing work.

Indeed, the relationships built between parents and teachers seem to have had a very direct, relatively short-term impact on student performance in several schools.

"All kinds of relationships evolved in this work," says Yates. "Parents made connections with teachers, principals, board members, the state legislature, ultimately even the superintendent. Over time they have been able to build these relationships into a broad commitment to improving the performance of these schools."

- **All organizing is re-organizing.**

One of the challenges of many organizing campaigns is to maintain the energy over time. Inevitably, people drop out of a campaign for a wide variety of reasons. The key is to constantly reach out to new people. But it isn't easy.

"If there is not constant, vigilant work doing new outreach, any organization like ours risks becoming an organization of the few, speaking for the many," observes MOP's Kromrey.

One key is that an organization like MOP gets support over time so it can hire organizers, something it has gotten through *Making Connections* and its partners.

"I never want my children to go through what I went through, and I'm doing everything in my power to make sure that the doors that are now closed to me never have to be closed to them."

—Tonya Hope

The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of publications about the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections Initiative put together by The Diarist Project. The project is a new approach the foundation is using to learn from its efforts to strengthen families and transform struggling neighborhoods.

Diarists work to capture strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. In Making Connections, the diarist works closely with the staff people who lead the work in each city, the Site Team Leader and Local Site Coordinator.

Cole parent leader Tonya Hope.

This article was written by Tory Read, former *Making Connections Denver* diarist. It was edited by Tim Saasta. The lessons learned section was written by Saasta and Read. Photos copyright by Tory Read, except page 4 (© Alejandra Morales) and page 41 (© Suzanne Gruba). Published July 2006.

Making Connections is a Casey Foundation initiative to support work that demonstrates the simple premise that kids thrive when their families are strong and their communities supportive. What began in 1999 as a demonstration project in selected neighborhoods in 22 cities is now an intricate network of people and groups committed to making strong families and neighborhoods their highest priorities.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

For more information about **The Diarist Project** or to receive copies of its publications, contact: Tim Saasta, The Diarist Project, c/o Charitable Choices, 4 Park Avenue, Suite 200, Gaithersburg, MD 20877 (240-683-7100; Tim@CharityChoices.com), www.DiaristProject.org.

Making Connections Denver is an initiative to improve life for families living in four lower-income Denver neighborhoods—Baker, La Alma/Lincoln Park, Sun Valley and Cole. Its philosophy is that children succeed when their families are strong and families get stronger when they live in supportive neighborhoods.

For more information, contact Gloria Marrujo, 720-891-4911. www.MakingConnectionsDenver.org