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When Parents United: A Historical Case Study Examining the Changing Civic Landscape of American Urban Education Reform

In this article we explore recent history to uncover the role that public engagement has played in the effort to reform America's urban schools. In the place of narratives that focus on elite actors (foundations, unions, corporations, etc.), we focus on the role of local stakeholders. Specifically, we look to how the changing political context (policy agendas and governance structures) of urban school systems has shifted possibilities for communities to participate in determining the direction of reform efforts in urban school systems. Through interviews and archival research, we examine the case of a single parent-led advocacy organization, Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools. Established in 1980 and remaining active until the late 1990s, Parents United developed a broad-based vision of educational equity and had a significant impact on the local public school system during that time. We show that in the current political and social context of education reform, communities may derive important lessons from Parents United while also devising new strategies for public engagement.

1 Introduction

The direction of urban education reform in the United States is characterized by highly contentious debates and conflicts typically pitting policymakers, philanthropists and corporate executives against teachers unions and their allies (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Bulkley & Burch, 2009; Hannaway & Rotherham, 2006). These battles are playing out in major cities across the country and have contributed to a climate where compromise and pursuit of common interests have been difficult to achieve (Brill 2011). At the heart of this struggle lie deep divisions over the role that various forms of market-based measures (i.e. choice, charter schools, etc.) should play in shaking up a system where failure has been chronic and pervasive for many years (Hill 2010, Ravitch 2010). The conflict pits market reform advocates against those who regard traditional forms of democratic governance (i.e. locally elected school boards, collective bargaining, etc.) as essential to the viability of public schools (Goldstein 2014, Lipman 2011).

Less visible in the conflict between these competing constituencies are the interests and voices of parents and concerned community members who are frequently spoken about, but who rarely have the ability to articulate their independent concerns. These grassroots actors typically do not enjoy the same level of influence as more powerful actors unless, of course, they are sufficiently organized to force other constituencies to take them seriously (Warren & Mapp, 2011; Shirley, 1997).

In this article we explore recent history of parent organizing in Washington D.C. (henceforth referred to as the District) to uncover and examine the role that public engagement has played in the effort to reform America's urban schools. Several education historians have pointed out that throughout the twentieth century successive waves of urban reformers have risen up to take on recalcitrant urban school systems only to find their attempts at improving educational outcomes thwarted (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Ravitch, 2010; Mehta, 2013). A careful reading of these experiments in urban education reform reveals that at different stages of history powerful elites in politics and business have been able to influence the character of education policy at the state and federal levels, while at other times teacher unions and their allies have had the upper hand (Tyack, 1974; Hannaway & Rotherham, 2006). In this paper we will show that at certain moments in history, grassroots community-based organizations have been able to effectively insert themselves into the debate over the direction of education policy at the local level. Through an analysis of parent organizing in the District we show that there are several dimensions to public engagement in education that have been important to the development of policy. Building on the work of other scholars who have studied civic engagement and education policy (Orr & Rogers, 2011; Oakes et al. 2009), we define public engagement as the means by which local stakeholders

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are able to act collectively to influence policy-making processes that impact their schools and communities. In the forthcoming analysis we look at how the dynamics of public engagement interact with the powerful interests that have historically dominated governance in urban school systems.

For the purposes of this article, we use a single community group based in the District - Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools. Parents United existed before No Child Left Behind and its federal mandates initiated dramatic changes to the civic landscape of U.S. education reform in 2002. Long before the introduction of high stakes tests and expanded school choice policies, public school parents formed Parents United as a city-wide advocacy group that would have an impact on the direction of education in the District in the 1980's and 1990's. We revisit this history to explore how changes in the political and social context of schooling have shaped opportunities for public engagement in a city that has long experienced conflict over what is euphemistically described as "home rule"[1], and suffered the deep frustration over the dysfunction that has characterized its public education system. As we will show, Parents United, a community organization that is barely known outside of the District, found a way to wield significant influence over education policymaking by developing a multi-faceted advocacy organization with a city-wide presence. We also show that in the current political context of education reform, in order for communities to develop similar levels of community-based and parent-led advocacy, they must address a series of new challenges that require new forms of public engagement.

The present research comes at a crucial time in the ongoing debate over urban school reform. Several researchers and policymakers are revisiting the role of parents and communities in education reform and re-conceptualizing what role, if any, public engagement should play. Mehta (2013) has recently called into question the effectiveness of top-down reforms that are fashioned by policymakers whose understanding of the implementation context is remote and less informed. As these debates over policy play themselves out, major U.S. cities like New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, New Orleans and Los Angeles continue to be mired in polarizing conflicts over the direction of education reform (Hernandez, 2013; Whitmire, 2011; Star-Ledger Editorial Board, 2014; Fernández & Williams, 2014; Miner 2013). In the face of turbulent conflict, several researchers have asserted that local community-based organizations can serve as a stabilizing force that can bring about sustained reforms in this highly contentious environment (Stone et al., 2001; Hill et al., 2000). Though it has consistently been shown that parents who are involved in their children's education tend to perform better academically (Epstein, 2001; Noguera, 2003; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), policy makers and elected officials have been reluctant to recognize the potential importance of including parental and community voice in decision making. In the pages ahead we show how

parent and community engagement in public education was able to influence the direction of policy in the District in ways that benefited the children served.

The focus on high-level political battles has at times ignored the challenges parents and communities must overcome to participate in shaping the future of their schools. Numerous studies have documented the institutional and social obstacles that low-income and minority communities—who historically make up the majority of urban school students—must contend with to advocate for the health and well-being of their children. These parents must often contend with schools that are not responsive to their styles of interaction, district administrators that are indifferent to their needs, complicated bureaucratic processes that require technical expertise, and racial discrimination in more direct forms (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Chambers, 2006; Noguera, 2001; Rothstein, 2004). In this article, we take these contextual factors into account as we follow the suggestion of Orr and Rogers (2011) who have encouraged researchers to examine how public policies and social contexts may facilitate or hinder opportunities for communities to take part in education reform processes.

2 Framing the civic landscape of public education

Drawing upon lessons learned from attempts to reform urban schools in cities throughout the U.S. over the last decade, a number of researchers and policymakers have engaged in a reinvigorated discussion related to the role of public engagement in school improvement efforts today. This discussion is characterized by two confounding trends. On the one hand, scholars have been attentive to new forms of engagement elicited by large, private foundations and how these powerful interests are limiting, and in some cases actively undermining, the role of unions and other civic organizations in influencing the direction of change (Fabricant & Fine 2012; Bulkley, Burch, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). On the other hand, another growing body of research is drawing attention to the expanding role of community groups in mobilizing urban residents to collective action to improve their schools at the grassroots level (Lopez, 2003; Mediratta et al. 2009). These studies have often provided detailed accounts of how community groups' function and the strategies they use to achieve results (Shirley, 1997; Su, 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011). A cursory reading of these two bodies of literature suggests that the current conflict over education reform is about much more than the prominent personalities of reformers themselves or the particular issues they debate over, like teacher evaluations or charter schools. Lurking beneath the surface of these debates are fundamental conflicts over the role of public institutions (e.g. who should lead them and who they should be accountable to) and the future of democratic decision-making at the local level. The present study places the strategic advocacy work of Parents United within its unique historical context to better understand how community-based groups have influenced local education policy, and why at certain times their influence

has waned. The central question guiding this research is: How did the political and social context shape opportunities for Parents United to influence education decision-making in the District? The answer to this question should prove useful to those who are interested in exploring possibilities for parents and communities to organize and shape the character of education in the present.

To guide the research, we introduce the concept of a civic landscape to frame this analysis. The civic landscape consists of features of both the *political context,* particularly with respect to governance and policy agendas, as well as features of a community group's *strategic choices* that have bearing on how issues are framed, alliances are formed (particularly across race and class differences), and the tactics that are utilized to pursue collective goals. As we examine the relationship between the two, we extend the metaphor of a civic landscape by building on Henig's (2011) discussion of a "political grid" that arranges key education actors according to how they relate to governance structures and policy agendas. As we show in the pages ahead, changing political configurations open up some possibilities for public engagement in public education while restricting others. A leading scholar of collective action, Meyer (2004) points out that particular political contexts provide an advantage to certain mobilization strategies, thus making some appear more legitimate and effective than others. As a result, some groups are positioned to develop credibility and are able to acquire powerful allies while others are not. Advocating a more dynamic view of political contexts, social movement scholars like Jasper (2004) have proposed that researchers examine the strategic choices of groups or organizations engaging in collective action. Finding other social movement frameworks overly reliant on structure, Jasper suggests that "[w]ithout examining the act of selecting and applying tactics, we cannot adequately explain the psychological, organizational, cultural, and structural factors that help explain these choices (2)." For this reason, in this study the strategic choices of Parents United are doubly relevant and important to empirical analyses of collective action in that they not only offer a sense of what is possible or effective in public engagement, but also help us to understand the contours of the broader political and social context as well. Although studies that focus on both the impact of political contexts and groups strategies are rare (Amenta et al., 1999), this study will uniquely unite both to understand how Parents United navigated political institutions and social realities during particular period of education reform.

While a multitude of factors may contribute to the political context of public engagement, we focus on critical developments in two areas that appear to be particularly influential in studies of public education's civic landscape: governance structures and policy agendas (Gold et al., 2007; Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Henig, 2011). Policy experts have long sparred on the issue of

school governance, questioning how broadly decision-making powers and accountability structures should engage non-elite stakeholders like parents or students (Conley, 2003). Movements for both community control and centralized authority have repeatedly pushed the governance of school systems in America's urban centers back and forth (Lewis, 2013; Goldstein, 2014). Policy agendas, on the other hand, are important markers of what decision-makers think about particular policy issues and how they choose to address them. Education policy agendas targeting low-performing, unwieldy urban school systems have long been marked by a perceived need for increased scientific management, rigorous accountability structures, and greater uniformity and standardization in instruction (Tyack, 1974; Mehta, 2013).

Within the wide array of strategic choices made in collective action, three key areas emerge consistently in the literature as central to all groups: issue framing, relationship-building, and tactics for direct action. First, community groups must determine how they communicate their position to garner broader support through deliberate signifying work known as issue framing (Benford, 1997). These frames articulate a diagnosis of the issue that groups seek to address, but also offer a sense of what they believe must be done to remedy their concerns (Gamson, 1992). Second, community groups must consider from among diverse and well-documented repertoires of actions, what kinds of tactics they will use to achieve their objectives. Tactics may range from disruptive protests, to more conventional approaches like direct and persuasive appeals to political leaders and letter writing (Tarrow, 1998). Finally, community groups must also determine which constituencies to cooperate and cultivate relationships with. From an organizing perspective, relationship-building is one of the most fundamental blocks of building political influence and power (Ganz, 2010). In addition to cultivating a membership base and coalitions, community groups also work to exert influence upon political actors who hold decision-making power (Amenta et al. 1996). The strategic choices made by civic groups may also reflect the particular sentiments and outlooks that are related to racial, class, and or political identities of group members (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Jasper, 1997; Bob, 2012). Taken together, close analysis of the set of strategic actions taken by community groups helps us to generate a more holistic sense of what collective action in public education looks like and allows us to better map out the topography of the civic landscape along demographic lines as well.

3 Research approach

In order to situate ourselves in the period in which Parents United was most active in the civic landscape of the District, we first accessed the group's archives housed in the Special Collections at George Washington University to analyze how it carried out its work from 1980 - 1998. Poring over hundreds of pages of internal

documents, newsletters, grant applications, meeting minutes, and member diaries, we were able to piece together a comprehensive portrait of the group's activeties, identity, and guiding principles. Newspaper clippings helped fill out the contextual elements surrounding Parents United's activities, and at times offer critical viewpoints on their work. To supplement the documentary analysis, we were able to contact five former members of Parents United who all had held important leadership positions in the group. In addition to their intimate knowledge of Parents United, the interviewees also brought a wealth of other relevant experiences. Among them, most had served as presidents of the Parent Teacher Associations in their individual children's schools, two had served as School Board members, and all continue to be engaged in schools in various capacities at the present. Interview questions focused on understanding Parents United's position within the political context of the time, the various strategic actions the group undertook, and group members' reflections on critical changes in the educational landscape. While this article confirms some aspects of earlier studies of Parents United (Speicher, 1992; Henig et al., 1999), we have also developed unique insights that can help inform public engagement practices in the current reform context.

4 Context: The District's evolving civic landscape

The District is an intriguing setting in which to study education politics. As a federal city, the District's local government is influenced, and often dominated, in instrumental ways by the national government. In certain critical areas, national-level politicians have made incursions into the governance of the District, which they have looked upon as a proving ground for their social ideals. For example, the U.S. Congress has supported a variety of school choice and voucher programs to reform what many regarded as a troubled system (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Ford, 2005). As the home to the national government, the District has often been at the forefront of many controversies and trends in education politics before they have become manifest in other large, urban school systems throughout the United States.

Governance of the District's schools has long been associated with both democratic promise and political conflict. In 1969, voters were given the opportunity to elect members of the School Board; a concession that constituted the first local political representation the otherwise disenfranchised federal city had in generations (Levy 2004). With representatives from across the District, the School Board was given the charge of setting education policy for the city's schools as an independent body with a degree of autonomy from other branches of local government. While the Mayor allocated funds and the D.C. Council (the city's legislative body) approved the school budget, the elected School Board exercised line item authority on how money was spent. Many former Parents United members recall the School Board as an important point of access for parents and communities

seeking to voice concerns about public education. As one interviewee said, the School Board provided parents with a vital "pipeline" that provided a platform for representing parent and community interests. However, the fondness expressed for the democratic ideals of the School Board is tempered by what many officials and residents saw as a widespread lack of efficiency and accountability in the school system's operations. In fact, studies and articles from that period show that the School Board was one of the most widely criticized agencies in city government (Diner, 1990; Figueroa, 1992). Aside from charges of ineffectiveness and finger-pointing related to mismanagement, the machinations of the School Board and its members at times attained tabloid-like status with splashy headlines about its raucous hearings and personality politics (Witt, 2007). During the city's 1996 fiscal crisis, the U.S. Congress wasted no time in stepping in and appointing a Control Board to oversee various government operations, including public education. In their report, the Control Board called for changes to governance of the school system, citing the "deplorable record of the District's public schools by every important educational and management measure" and further targeting the "deeply divided" School Board for upheaval (Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority 1996). These episodes indicate that education governance has long been a contested issue in American society with implications for public engagement.

Although contemporary reformers often claim that the problems confronting urban schools are the outcome of neglect, the District's schools actually underwent a series of tumultuous changes in policy during the 1980's and 1990's, the period when Parents United was most active. During these years, several prominent reformers brought in new sets of administrative and instructional tools that they promised would reform the moribund system. Inconsistency in leadership and shifting policy agendas posed a major challenge to parents who sought to influence education in the District. With 12 different superintendents serving from 1980 to 2007—an average of just over two years for each leader—the school system appeared almost ungovernable (Turque, 2010). The transience in leadership, and the intense conflicts over the direction of education politics during this period reflected widespread anxieties about the state of American public education. These concerns were later outlined in the seminal report, *A Nation at Risk*, released by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). The alarming report decried the "rising tide of mediocrity" in U.S. schools, and gave new life to the movement for standardization and accountability that continues to dominate policy discussions today.

Throughout the period that we examine – 1980 - 1998, the District's public schools were constantly referred to as "broken" or beset by "crisis" (Witt, 2007; Lartigue, 2004). Problems facing the schools were compounded by sweeping demographic changes. With the exodus of middle class white families from the city and its schools

following efforts to desegregate the schools in the 1960s and '70s following the Supreme Court's mandates, the city's public school population became largely African American and low income. From 1980 until the early 2000's, African American students comprised well over 80% of the public school population, with white student enrollment hovered at around 5% (Parents United, 2005). Students designated as socioeconomically disadvantaged have made up the majority of the school population for generations (21st Century Schools Fund, 2013b). The District's schools also faced a number of difficulties during this period due to a series of financial and political dilemmas. Chronicling the grave condition of America's ghetto schools in his classic work, *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol (1991) visited with Parents United members when he came to the District. His account of his visit to the District was a harrowing one, likening the city to a war zone in a distant corner of the world and overcome by prostitution, drugs, and crime. He cites studies of District students that are described as experiencing "shell-shock" and "battle fatigue," while "they live surrounded by the vivid symbols of their undesirable status: drugs and death, decay and destitution" (Kozol, 1991, p. 185-6). Throughout the time period of this study, the city was consistently held up as a symbol of urban decay (Jaffe & Sherwood, 1994), and its schools were often characterized as epitomizing the failure of public institutions.

5 The rise of Parents United

Along the rocky terrain formed by shifting school governance and policy agendas, Parents United struck a strategic path they believed would improve the District's schools. In the following sections we document the rise of Parents United, focusing particularly on important organizational aspects of the group, the strategic choices they deployed, and the outcomes that resulted from them.

Parents United emerged when a prominent civil rights organization began partnering with schools in Anacostia, one of the District's lower-income and predominately African American neighborhoods. Confounded by failed attempts to desegregate the city's starkly unequal schools, the group began to explore ways of enhancing educational opportunities for the area's students. The director of the Washington Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights, Roderic Boggs, set about creating the partnership in 1978. His organization provided pro bono legal services to parent groups at local schools that had become the victims of the system's intransigence. In an interview, a parent at the time recalls an incident that demonstrated the effectiveness of the partnership with the legal advocacy group. After sending several letters alerting the administration to remove a precarious structure from the playground of her children's schools led nowhere, she contacted one of the attorneys and asked for help. To her amazement, the young lawyer "wrote a letter on his stationery and you cannot believe how quickly those folk moved" to rectify the situation.

Beyond addressing particular demands, the project sought to shift school authority away from an often unresponsive central administration, by empowering parents to play a role in school decision-making. The legal partnership grew into a project calling for "mixes of strategies" that included not just conventional legal tools, but also community education and coalition-building. It was the belief of the Lawyers' Committee, that if parents could take an active role in decision-making processes around schools, then they "could succeed where litigation had failed to ensure a minimally adequate education" (Gaffney et al. 1981, p. 13). Some members of the Lawyers' Committee, themselves public school parents in the District, began to forge relationships with parent groups living in communities that were a world apart from their own.

Soon after, in the summer of 1980, long simmering political battles over the District schools reached a fever pitch and a broader coalition of parents was formed. On the last day of school, Mayor Marion Barry announced that the District was undergoing a fiscal crisis and he targeted education for deep cuts in funding. The already underfunded school system was forced to fire over 700 teachers. The reverberations of the blow were felt in nearly every school across the city. As is true in most school districts when layoffs are undertaken, less senior teachers were the first to be dismissed. One group member recalled that the new teachers "went down like dominoes," and their departure resulted in a wave of teacher transfers as the remaining teachers were assigned to new schools. As it turned out, the crisis proved an important catalyst. A cadre of parent groups, many of whom who had watched the deterioration of public education from the sidelines, were compelled to work together by a school system that failed to meet the basic expectations of a broad swathe of the District's families.

Having worked with parent groups across the city, and himself a public school parent, Boggs and his associates were able to build a formidable alliance from the swelling outrage. Over the next few months following the mass firing, they formed Parents United, opened an office, and began to organize behind their demand to restore funding to the schools. In the fall, Parents United announced its arrival by holding its first public action during a D.C. Council hearing on the budget cuts. Five hundred chanting and sign-waving parents, students, and teachers, backed by a high school marching band and choir, rallied outside the District government offices (Richburg, 1980). Inside, members of Parents United painted a gloomy picture in their testimonies about conditions in the school district. One mother gravely warned that the city "will certainly die without decent public education", and she predicted that middle class parents would leave in search of better funded schools in the suburbs (Young, 1980). An African American parent stated that the cuts had eliminated extracurricular programs, and she described the impact as "genocidal" to the future of the city's largely minority student

population (Mercer, 1980). Though it turned out that it was too late for them to reverse the cuts, the nascent group that emerged from the financial crisis – Parents United--would go on to become the most visible and effective education advocacy group in the District for nearly two decades. Over that time period, the group found ways to play a critical role in pursuing a variety of improvements, including: introducing a full day pre-kindergarten program, extending the teacher work day, reducing class sizes, creating a regular schedule of budget hearings, increasing public education funding allocations by tens of millions of dollars, and initiating an ambitious facility improvement plan (Ogilve, 1989; Speicher, 1992; Henig et al., 1999).

Although the way Parents United articulated its mission changed over time, a few guiding principles stand out in our interviews and the organizational materials we reviewed. Central to the group's vision was the belief in working on city-wide issues that could unite the largest number of families to support improvements in public schools. This vision manifested itself in big and small ways. The group always had two co-chairs, interviewees pointed out, one African American and one white. On a protest song sheet, the group made sure to refer to the names of schools located on disparate sides of the city in their chants calling for increased education funding (Parents United, 1983-84). Their focus on creating a city-wide presence also led Parents United to become self-conscious about the privileged status of its leadership. Acknowledging that pressure for high quality education comes from the most savvy and educated residents, who are generally more privileged and white, the long-time director of Parents United posed a pointed question: "[B]ut what difference does it make?" In her opinion, "[w]hen it comes to education in the District, all of us are on the Titanic. Some of us are on the upper decks and some of us are on the lower decks, but we are all on the same sinking ship. (Havill, 1997)" As the group became stronger and more savvy it would go on to experience success in getting more money to schools and improving school facilities—two fundamental issues ostensibly with the broadest appeal. Despite these accomplishments it still faced persistent criticisms that it was too white, affluent, and removed to fairly represent the interests of an overwhelmingly African American and lower-income student population. Closer inspection of the group's activities and internal documents reveal that the leadership went to great lengths to battle this perception, through a concerted, though not entirely successful, effort to expand its reach into the communities of greatest need.

From the scattered confederation of parents that came together in 1980, Parents United developed a more formalized, though still relatively loose, city-wide organization over the following years. At its height, the group recruited parent groups as members from approximately 140 schools in all wards of the city. Though fewer members came from the lowest income neighborhoods (Boo 1990), Parents United maintained a small but diverse leadership core that directed most of the group's decisions. Beyond the core, the leadership could call on a network of parent volunteers to show up for events, testify at hearings, help with mailings, or participate in other advocacy events when needed. The group was financed by donations from parent groups at some more affluent schools and private foundations, which provided them a degree of autonomy from the school system. Organizational budgets reveal that for the entire period when the group was at its height it operated with only one, mostly part-time, paid employee on its payroll. Yet, despite what the group lacked in funds and resources, the unique set of skills possessed by its leadership made it possible for the group to deploy powerful networks whose social and political capital was used to open doors and exert influence for the group. Although officially dissolved in 2008, members suggest that Parents United's influence had begun to fade by the start of the new millennium as funding sources began to dry up and the group experienced a transition in leadership.

6 The strategic choices of Parents United

Over the two decades following its emergence, Parents United would adapt its activities and focus to align with the evolving political context. Along the way, the group made important strategic choices around how to most effectively shape the discourse on education reform, cultivate powerful alliances, and take direct action to change education policy. Here, we highlight some of the group's most distinctive choices, and the outcomes—both good and bad—that followed from them.

6.1 Framing educational reform

Faced with dwindling funds available to schools, Parents United decided that it would have to take on the task of putting educational improvement at the top of the city government's policy agenda. The group's approach to shaping the debate on public education began with the fundamental choice of what they would call themselves. Members originally elected to call themselves "Citizens United." Upon further reflection, the group strategically re-framed themselves as "Parents United." The new name not only accurately described their membership, as group leaders pointed out, but also proclaimed that they had a personal stake in the future of pubic education and were not merely "do gooders." In the coming years, the newly formed Parents United would evolve into not only a darling of the media, but also the premier source for high quality research on local schools. In order to most effectively frame the need for educational reform, Parents United's targeted their efforts at reaching not only city officials responsible for public education, but also the general public.

Having been incubated within a civil rights organization, Parents United benefitted from a membership with extensive research and analytical skills. Mary Levy, a lawyer and public school parent who remains an established authority on the District's public education budget even today, was recruited as a core member of

the group early on because she had developed expertise in school finance. She authored the group's very first report in 1981 comparing education spending between the District and other neighboring school systems outside of the city. The report revealed serious disparities in per pupil funding and teacher salaries, and challenged the conventional wisdom that the District spent more on education than its neighbors. In the 1990's, the group's research would send the system reeling into crisis when school facilities surveys revealed an alarming number of fire code violations that had gone neglected for decades. It was precisely Parents United's capacity to produce expert analysis that members often highlighted as the basis for its credibility. On the occasion of the group's first 10 years of advocacy, the director of the group reflected that while indeed "[p]arents have power," it was employing the use of facts that "makes our positions unassailable (Rice-Thurston, 1990)." While much of the research reflected the high level of analytical expertise within its leadership, Parents United's data collection efforts reflected their ability to enlist extensive networks to increase transparency on critical school information. Parents, educators, and others volunteered to complete surveys disseminated by the group in order to document the quality of staffing, facilities, resources and programming at over 100 schools across the city.

An independent evaluation of the group revealed that key education stakeholders in the District--including some of Parents United's staunchest critics--all acknowledged that the group produced research far more rigorous than anything the school district itself could produce (Ogilve, 1989). In the evaluator's report, a former superintendent of the District's schools admitted that he even replaced his own budget director because his department's analysis was so lacking in comparison to the reports published by Parents United. The notorious lack of transparency in central administration consistently left them open to the critical analyses that the research conducted by Parents United generated. School leaders were publicly embarrassed in education hearings on numerous occasions when they were unable to cite basic information on how many employees were on the system's payroll or how many students were enrolled (Sutner, 1992; Strauss & Loeb, 1998). Because the political establishment was unwilling or unable to produce research of equal caliber to Parents United, the role for an independent, citizen and parent-led research and data gathering effort became all the more vital in shaping education decision-making.

Although the research reports produced by Parents United gained credibility with authorities for their analytical expertise, they were often inaccessible to those outside the policy realm. Because school-level data was often inaccessible to the general public, the group also attempted to empower parents with research they could use to advocate for their particular school's needs as well. But to draw broader media attention to the state of the public schools as well enthusiasm from

concerned parents, one member recalls regularly devising new "gimmicks" to find ways to draw media attention to the state of the public schools as well enthusiasm from concerned parents. Inviting news crews in to film the conditions in dilapidated schools always made for "great TV," one member recalled. Images of leaky roofs and filthy bathrooms served to shame officials responsible for such school blight. The group regularly appeared in news articles of the time, and when not directly quoted, Parents United members contributed numerous opinion articles to local papers to share their perspective on schools. Like any reputable advocacy group of the day, they also published a newsletter, which was mailed out to at least 3,000 people (Speicher, 1992), though others estimated much more. Their aggressive media and outreach strategy positioned Parents United to become a vital voice in discussions about public education.

Underlying their attempts to shape the discourse on education reform in the District, Parents United was committed to reversing the common narrative that schools failed because of the deficiencies of students served. A good illustration of this can be found in the group's issuance of semi-annual annual "report cards." Designed to mirror those that students receive, Parents United's report cards were released to much fanfare and graded the mayor's progress based on school surveys detailing a wide array of personnel, resource, and facilities criteria. In 1987, for example, the mayor's report card was littered with failing grades and in place of a teacher's signature, it was symbolically signed by "John and Mary D.C. Public" (Parents United, 1987a). Such framing activities positioned public officials as those failing the schools, not students or their families, and reminded the city's leaders that they were being held accountable.

Because of its ability to carry out research, and its ability to make its findings accessible to the broader public, Parents United became a major player in shaping education discourse in the District. Ultimately, however, group members also cautioned the limits of what its framing activities could achieve. As one member pointed out, reports and data were only good as "backup," and that the hard work of organizing and advocacy would have to provide the true impetus for driving systemic change to the city's schools.

6.2 Building relationships for educational change

In a 1997 newspaper profile of Parents United's long-time director, Delabian Rice-Thurston, the author notes that in a city with quaking racial and class fault lines, she could "go anywhere and talk to anybody." An African American woman married to a white public school teacher, the author suggests that Rice-Thruston's appeal was "ambiracial." She could have a "great deal of impact" in the city's wealthiest wards, and in the city's poorest, could appear as "the local black icon" who made the school system "backpedal and the *Washington Post* kiss her butt in search of another good quote" (Havill

1997). Other group members recall Rice-Thurston's frequent trips to community meetings at schools scattered across the city with sign-in sheets in hand, and the long hours she logged on telephone calls attempting to recruit members to testify at hearings. Flipping through the pages of the numerous black leather-bound diaries she filled during her time as director, one can get a sense of the network she helped build in the pursuit of educational equity. Entries in the diaries detail school visits, meetings with parents, conversations with educators, interactions with public officials, and phone numbers for journalists and business people she came in contact with. These aspects of Rice-Thurston's work as director reflect the unique art of relationship-building at the heart of community organizing. In its nearly two decade reign, Parents United would always struggle with this component of their work. But the group's attempts at relationship-building in a divided city offer important lessons for those concerned with promoting educational equity.

According to notes from an internal focus group, Parents United was well aware that it often represented "the voice of a relatively small number of particularly well-educated or concerned parents" and that the vast majority of parents were uninvolved even in their own schools, let alone city-wide advocacy groups (Parents United, 1993-1994). While the group did at times characterize lower-income public school parents as "apathetic" or "hopeless" in some documents, Parents United leadership were deeply conscious of the institutional barriers that systemic poverty posed to many of the District's residents (Parents United, 1987b). In a city where the public school population was largely lower-income and African American, building a base of support was both important in principle and for strategic purposes. In order to bridge the gaps between parents of diverse backgrounds, the group engaged the business community to meet the immediate needs of lower-income students and their schools. As a result, founders of Parents United formed a sister organization, the Washington Parent Group Fund, which was designed to bring resources into the city's poorest schools to fund enrichment programs. Through corporate and foundation support, the Fund offered thousands of dollars in matching grants to projects at over 30 high-need schools. The creators of the Fund knew that while affluent parents supplemented funds in their own schools, lower-income communities could not contribute similar amounts (White, 1993). The relationship between the groups was envisioned as "symbiotic" and synergistic; the Fund would bring in constituencies from some of the poorest schools in the District and Parents United would then be able to learn about their concerns and potentially enlist them as advocates (Parents United 1987b). Members recall that whereas Parents United may have at times been seen as a nuisance to entrenched public officials, the Fund enjoyed universal acceptance and praise. Through their involvement, parents in lower income areas claimed that they were able to shed the "stigma" that they were inactive or apathetic (Valente 1982). High-level recognition and support for the Fund streamed in from major newspapers, the school system's superintendent, the then-Vice President's wife, Barbara Bush, and the Ford Foundation, which identified the group as an exemplar for corporate involvement in public education (Robinson 1981, Parents United 1984).

Aside from writing checks, the Fund, along with Parents United, established a series of free workshops under their Parent Training Institute. The programming was designed not only to train parents to support students academically, but also to become advocates for them through workshops devoted to leadership, civic responsibility, and public engagement (Parents United, 1994). Additionally, the group would hold town hall meetings and other public forums where community members could discuss educational issues of the day. Beyond providing training, Parents United also rewarded their most active members. In their annual "Parent Advocacy Awards" ceremony, the group presented awards to individuals and to schools that had taken an active role at public hearings, attended public forums, or participated in other community events (Parents United 1996-1997). Based on the lists of awardees, those with the highest accolades, unsurprisingly, came from some of the most affluent neighborhoods in the District. Nonetheless, the group's activities reflect an intentional focus on building parent networks and leadership, rather than just mobilizing parents to merely show up at rallies or hearings.

What emerged from these various efforts, an interviewee reflected, was the marriage of the resources and political capital of privileged parents with the "common sense" of those lower-income families whose children experienced the most challenging schooling conditions. But as the years wore on, Parents United grew ever more aware of the difficulties in maintaining such an alliance. The group initiated its Enrichment/ Accountability Project to help build capacity of parent groups in several low-income areas. But according to organizational documents, the group made only meager progress towards their goal of training a new batch of parent leaders, citing issues with school leadership and lapses in communication. To address the unique needs of lower-income communities, Parents United applied for funding to add an organizer to their staff who could spend the extra time required to build capacity there (Parents United, 1987b). However, such a position was never added, and over time, group members reported being hesitant to plan large public events because they feared that their credibility might be damaged if they "called a demonstration and nobody came" (Henig et. al 1999). An evaluation of the organization suggested that in order for it to become more viable and shed the gloss of being an "elite" group, Parents United would need to get more single, low-income, and African American parents involved (Ogilve, 1989). Years later, one member reevaluated her role as a leader in the group and found that

"the biggest limitation was getting parents organized to be active, politically active." However, these goals remain elusive for both much more well resourced government agencies as well as grassroots activists that attempt to engage the broader public in deliberations and input processes in education policy (Orr & Rogers, 2011). Despite their consciousness of the educational experiences of marginalized communities, Parents United did at times lack the organizational capacity to continue building a city-wide movement.

In terms of relationships with key education decision-makers, Parents United leaders decided early on that they would adopt a stance towards the school system that one member described as being "critical friends," as opposed to "friendly critics." In that role, they would not position themselves as an outsider group, but rather as insiders with a stake in supporting improvements in the school system. In the beginning, group members recall that much of city government was unsympathetic to their efforts. Over time, the group would cultivate stronger relationships with some high-level school officials, including superintendents and School Board members. Parents United often invited these officials as guests to their events, and the school system in turn invited Parents United as a key stakeholder to participate in its various task-forces or to assist in conducting parent trainings.

Of the various arms of government that exercised responsibility over public education, it was the elected School Board that proved to be most open to the advocacy of Parents United and the body on which they relied most. Parents United was a ubiquitous presence at the community meetings the School Board held several times a year, and helped turn out larger crowds to testify as well. Additionally, the School Board often found itself on the side of Parents United when taking on other branches of government. When the group brought suit against the mayor for slashing the school budget in 1983, they did so with the School Board accompanying them as plaintiffs in the case (White, 1983). The group's access to the School Board proved to have important advantages. Over the years, Parents United was successful in propelling four of their former leaders into elected seats on the School Board, deepening the group's reach further into the educational establishment. But as mentioned above, the School Board was also an embattled institution, often viewed by others in the establishment as incompetent or intransigent. In the 1990's, the D.C. Council and other District leaders regularly called to dissolve or drastically reduce the power of the School Board (Figueroa, 1992; Koklanaris, 1995). Parents United stood by the Board through these attacks, despite the fact they often publicly criticized its many failures and proclivity to finger-pointing. During one such episode, the group's newsletter clearly pronounced that "parental pressure on the School Board is the best motivator for achieving good schools" (Rice-Thurston, 1994, p. 3).

The group also experienced considerable friction with the political establishment. Some School Board members reported that they found Parents United members were too pushy and combative (O'Hanlon, 1994), with one former representative bitterly observing that the group didn't "just want to suggest policy, they want to make it" (Boo, 1990, p.17). Also, due to the group's almost singular focus on increasing school budgets meant they were at times perceived as being less critical of the system's inefficiencies, and may have lost credibility in the eyes of some government officials (Ogilve, 1989). Depending on how well they served the group's interests, Parents United at different times openly defended some superintendents and tried to prevent them from being terminated, while quietly supporting the removal of others (Henig et al., 1999). One system leader stands out for his particularly hostile stance towards Parents United, and public engagement more generally. When Congress took control of the city and its schools in 1996, they signaled that they were declaring war on the intransigent system by placing a retired army general named Julius Becton at the helm. Becton, whom interviewees referred to as an uncompromising and aggressive educational administrator, regularly clashed with Parents United over school facilities issues. His uncompromising approach turned out to be his undoing. Just 16 months after being appointed, he resigned citing fractious politics and lamenting the combative stance to public engagement that characterized his tenure. "If I had one silver bullet," the general reflected at a news conference announcing his departure, "it would be greater parental and community involvement" (Strauss & Loeb, 1998). Whether friend or foe, the group was generally regarded by decision-makers as a force to be reckoned with in the District's education politics.

Fashioning a vast web of relationships in spite of various setbacks and shortcomings, Parents United managed to link business leaders, public officials, legal advocates, and a wide base of public school parents. The broad alliance was critical in supporting Parents United's aims of organizing and advocacy, and was based on the group's focus on issues of city-wide significance. How the group mobilized these networks into action would end up having a significant impact upon schools for years to come.

6.3 Taking action for educational change

Although it gained recognition as an erudite and savvy citizen lobby that carefully examined school budgets and data, Parents United was also known to take direct action through demonstrations, advocacy, and litigation to support its aim of improving schools for all students. During its periods of most intense activity, the group would exert public pressure by amassing sizable and clamorous public demonstrations and rallies when the need arose. For example, at a 1986 rally, 3,000 supporters gathered at District offices and released hundreds of green balloons meant to symbolize their demand to increase public education funding (Sargent,

LaFraniere, 1986). When the Mayor cut school funding by $45 million three years later, the group brought together parents, educators, and students from 71 schools to hold a 25-day vigil outside his office calling for the return of the funds (Sanchez, 1989; Parents United, 1990). At the conclusion of the vigil, when the mayor's staff handed out fliers disputing Parents United's claims, demon-strators defiantly tore them up and chanted, "No more lies!" (Sherwood 1989). While these demon-strations were an important indication of their mobi-lization capacity, and the extent of confrontational tactics they were willing to utilize, it was Parents United's advocacy and litigation work that truly made their presence felt throughout the system.

Parents United utilized nearly all opportunities to influence schools through formal channels. The group regularly testified at public hearings on education and publicized such opportunities to their membership. One member claimed that in their early days, parents maintained either a rare or timid presence at School Board meetings and other hearings. However, as the strength and influence of Parents United grew, the concerns of parents were less easily dismissed. For many years, the group provided members with handbooks containing advice on how to frame their testimony for maximum impact, contact information for authorities in the school system who could address their particular issues, and even phone numbers of media outlets listed under the heading, "When all else fails" (Parents United, 1993).

While most of its advocacy efforts surrounded defending school budgets against pervasive cuts, Parents United also managed to set an important precedent to the school budget approval process itself. According to former members, the chaotic and shadowy process often forced parents to show up to last minute budget hearings that ran late into the night. In the hopes of achieving greater transparency and broader public participation, Parents United developed a petition that declared public education funding a matter of highest priority, and also outlined a budget approval process that included a regular schedule for community input and a system of accountability across branches of the government (Boggs & Toyer, 1987). After gathering more than 21,000 petition signatures and gaining backing from nearly all local elected officials, Parents United managed to pass a school support ballot initiative in 1987 with overwhelming support from the District's general electorate (Parents United, 1990; Fisher, 1987). The grassroots campaign serves as a clear display of the group's political muscle and ability to present issues in a manner that garnered broad appeal.

As a public school advocacy group hatched out of a civil rights organization, Parents United ultimately returned to its roots and played to its strength of using the courts to force change through a recalcitrant system. Though they saw legal action as a method of last resort for improving schools in the District, litigation also proved a more effective strategy than holding rallies or demon-strations, one member explained. But the wider reaching--and unintended--impact of some of their legal efforts also provided fodder for their staunchest critics. The complications of legal advocacy were dramatically displayed through the group's school facilities campaign. After spending years exhaustively documenting leaking roofs and rotting windows, Parents United obtained a government report citing over 11,000 fire code violations in schools across the city (Duggan, 1994). The group used the alarming findings to lobby city officials for repairs. Finding their concerns repeatedly brushed aside, they ultimately filed a lawsuit in 1992 to force the school district to take action. Two years later, a judge ruled in favor of Parents United, handing down a mandate that the school system would have to complete repairs before students returned to school after summer vacation. But the judge took a particularly uncompromising position on the repairs, and as a result, the system decided to continue delaying re-opening schools by several weeks each school year over the following three years. In addition to the general public outcry around the delays, the repair orders had divergent impacts on schools. One school for example, serving primarily lower-income and recent immigrant students, faced serious disruptions in instruction as educators were forced to re-locate their students between five different locations. The principal of the school wrote that while she felt Parents United had a "sincere desire" to repair crumbling school buildings, their decision to pursue the suit was not done in consultation with parents and "did not reflect firsthand understanding of the complexities the day-to-day operations in a school" (Tukeva, 1997). In the public spotlight, Parents United endured even harsher criticism. At one hearing, Parents United members were met with school officials chanting, "shame on you!" for refusing to drop the protracted suit, and city leaders fanned ten-sions by suggesting "monied interests" were behind the suit (Strauss, 1997). Rice-Thurston, voiced her bewilder-ment at the blowback from the court case, saying that "[w]e had no idea... [T]hat's one of the things we've learned—unfortunately, to our chagrin—about going to court. You never know what's going to happen" (O'Hanlon, 1994).

Additionally, the lawsuit had a hand in driving turnover in the school system's leadership—including one of Parents United's key allies. Because they were unable to effectively resolve the issues of building repairs that kept schools closed, two school leaders were fired or resigned (Henig et al., 1999). Amidst public pressure and the threat of a continued school lockout, Parents United chose to dismiss the suit and reached a settlement that would keep schools open and institute a plan for monitoring and funding facility repairs. While repairs would still take a long time to sort out, the stormy conflict helped put the crumbling state of schools—and ineffective bureaucracy overseeing them—at the center of public debate. A principal of an elementary school suggested that Parents United had "made a fabulous advancement in oversight for the school system... So

many eyes and ears are watching that they really don't need to be fearful that we will slip back to where we used to be" (Wilgoren 1997). But after the dust had settled on the fire code controversy, Parents United would never again capture the city's attention—or outrage—with the same intensity through their advocacy efforts.

7 Discussion

The case of Parents United offers important lessons for those interested in the role that public engagement can play in supporting sustainable education reform. In this section, we draw from these lessons and the experiences of Parents United to better understand the prospects for education advocacy in light of recent changes in the political and social context of American cities like the District.

7.1 Finding new advocacy pathways

The civic landscape in which Parents United had come to maneuver so effectively has since been significantly altered. Following the path of other large urban systems like Chicago and New York, the District instituted mayoral control over public schools in 2007. City leaders around the country have similarly sought to centralize education authority in the executive office of the mayor, typically at the expense of locally elected school boards which are dissolved or whose power is significantly reduced (Kirst &Wirt, 2009). The District's transition to mayoral control reversed earlier trends towards decentralization, and eliminated one of Parents United's key allies, the elected School Board. Research indicates that while centralizing education authority may position mayors to better leverage civic partnerships to support education reform (Wong et al., 2007), it can also create decision-making structures that are perceived as less responsive to the concerns of low-income communities of color (Chambers, 2006). The implementation of mayoral control in the District was met with considerable public outcry (Hannaway & Usdan, 2008), and subsequent polls have shown that school system leadership has polarized public support in recent years (Turque & Cohen, 2010). The new governance structure has been the subject of public scrutiny for the degree of oversight and accountability it has provided (National Research Council, 2011; Catania, 2014). The new decision-making configuration, while more centralized, has not necessarily led to greater coordination between the various agencies entrusted with overseeing public education. With the dissolution of the School Board, there have been fewer official and consistent channels parents can engage or allies to cultivate in the political leadership. Former Parents United leaders observe clear changes in how the system deals with families and communities. One interviewee shared that, "[s]ince mayoral control, there is less wisdom operating at high levels in the school systems" and that the leadership has only begun to take the role of parents and communities more seriously. She went on to say that "public engagement, like a lot of

things has to be intentional" and systematic, it cannot simply become a "byproduct of the education process." Guidelines for evaluating public engagement under mayoral control remain somewhat unclear and inconsistent. For example, the school system has received recognition for its attempts to engage communities through online platforms (Committee on the Independent Evaluation of DC Public Schools, 2011), even though they are out of reach for many of the city's lower-income public school families. District leaders have still not developed a broader and more consistent range of measures to create a school system that is responsive to public engagement.

Pathways for public engagement are also shifting as school choice has fundamentally transformed the political context. With Parents United fading in influence by the late 1990's, a new thrust in education reform was beginning to dominate education policy agendas. School system leaders at that time began to float proposals to privatize the management of some schools, and the city's first charter schools opened their doors in 1996. The aggravation stemming from sluggish improvements in the city's schools turned segments of the advocacy community towards charter alternatives. Parents United itself, while acknowledging the public outcry over privatization, also voiced tentative support for contracting out management of some schools (Parents United, 1993; Parents United, 1994b). One of the group's most powerful allies, a business-led advisory committee on the District's schools, grew restless with the slow pace of reform and began to devote its efforts to the growing charter movement (Henig et al., 1999). Charter schools, as one interviewee explained, opened up the possibility that "people don't have to stick around and beat their heads against the wall trying to get something changed." Since that time, charters have grown at a feverish pace, and now enroll 43% of public school students in the District—the third highest percentage in the nation (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2013). In a population almost evenly split between charter and traditional public schools that are administered under bifurcated governance structures, it is difficult to develop a coherent strategy that can target the appropriate decision-makers. It remains to be seen whether the District will follow the path of other cities in America, where rival parent and community groups have sprung up to promote competing agendas, resulting in a civic landscape characterized by a zero-sum competition between charter or traditional public school advocates (Pappas, 2012).

In addition to creating a new public school sector with a separate governance structure, the push for school choice has carried other implications for public engagement in the District. As a result of the proliferation of charters and other measures intended to guarantee students access to higher quality schooling options, only 25% of District students now attend the schools assigned to them based on their residence (21st Century Schools Fund, 2013a). The greater mobility has

served to fan students across the District, rendering the link between school and geographic community more tenuous. The diffusion of students however has not translated into significantly more racially or socio-economically integrated schools, as a 2010 report found that at least 90% of the District's African American charter students attended intensely segregated schools (Frankeberg et al., 2010). Given the high level of student mobility and persisting segregation, the pursuit of city-wide advocacy rooted in neighborhood schools in the model of Parents United would be an uphill climb for community members today. To overcome the diffusion of parents and students, alternative configurations of collective action may play a bigger role, such as social media-based activism (Heron-Huby & Landon-Hays, 2014). And while education organizers and parent leaders have become adept at using platforms like Twitter, these new forms of activism cannot replace the need for intentional relationship-building in establishing more powerful public engagement platforms.

7.2 Maintaining a focus on equity

The strategic choices made by Parents United leaders reflect an activism rooted in an equity framework. Although Parents United was a city-wide group, the leadership grounded itself in the needs of the city's most marginalized communities and took intentional steps to collectively build parent power. Maintaining an equity-based approach to education advocacy should remain an important guiding principle for community members as the District changes from a national symbol of urban decline to a case study of urban transformation. Once proudly anointed as "Chocolate City" by its majority African American residents in earlier decades, the District's African American population dropped from 70% in 1980 to 51% in 2010 (Urban Institute, 2010). These changes in racial composition are accompanied by important socioeconomic changes as well. The District now has the third highest income gap of large cities across America between its richest and poorest residents (Biegler 2012). The school system has been working to court recently arrived and middle class parents, and have focused on building families' confidence in enrolling in the public schools. To this end, the District has widely trumpeted improvements in test scores, undertaken extensive school facility renovation and construction projects, and expanded specialized program offerings (Barras, 2010; Brown, 2013a; Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2013). Some politicians and analysts, however, have pointed out that the celebrated test scores and graduation gains must be placed within the context of shifting demographic changes and examined when disaggregated across the city's diverse student population (Catania, 2014; Smarick, 2013; Nichols, 2014; Brown, 2013b). In order for public engagement to play a constructive role in the future of the District's schools, community leaders and city officials must ensure that attempts to solicit community input are representative of the city as a whole.

Furthermore, parent and education groups must find ways to integrate education advocacy within broader conversations regarding rapid changes and growing inequality in the city, such as debates over affordable housing. If education is dealt with in isolation, then education leaders run the risk of furthering growing disparities and policies that disproportionately impact lower-income communities.

7.3 Diversifying strategy

As became evident over two decades of intense advocacy, Parents United's campaigns required an ever expanding toolbox of strategies to respond to the systemic issues underlying urban school reform. They testified before government bodies as often as possible, took the city to court on several occasions, caught the attention of the media when they wanted to expose particular injustices, and turned out large numbers of supporters whenever they could. The need for a diversified set of strategies continues to be evident for community groups today, especially as the civic landscape of public education becomes increasingly polarized. In the current period, few education issues seem to have the same universal appeal as adequate funding did when Parents United was most active. Education is now squarely on the radar of city politicians, and the District ranks third among large urban school systems in the highest figures of unadjusted per pupil education funding (Cornman et al., 2013). Additionally, with school choice as a central component of the current reform agenda, parent leaders and activists face a particularly difficult challenge in how to best frame their concerns. Few issues have proven to have the same capacity to polarize and entrench opposing camps with divergent views of education reform as school choice (Scott, 2012; Stulberg, 2008). In a recent set of focus groups conducted by the city, District parents voiced concerns that school choice and competition has led to too much uncertainty and a lack of investment in neighborhood schools (21st Century Schools Fund, 2014). With a wedge firmly dividing the governance of charter and traditional public school sectors, community groups can fashion a "bottom-up" agenda for how the divided system may increase collaboration and turn down the heat on school competition.

Diversifying the approach to education reform may also mean expanding the constituency of education stake-holders and finding new opportunities for coalition. While groups like Parents United have historically been focused on mobilizing parents as a vital constituency, urban America has seen a recent proliferation of youth and student-led organizing and advocacy groups as well (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Mediratta et al., 2009). These groups are often allied with other community and parent groups, but uniquely recognize the "expertise" that students gain from their direct experiences in schools themselves (Su, 2009; Mitra, 2008). Additionally, because the political context of public education is shaped in large part by federal-level mandates, there are

more opportunities for national networks of education groups to develop coalitions that share similar political agendas (Wells et al., 2011).

In closing, given the drastic changes to the civic landscape of public education in the District, new forms of public engagement will continue to evolve that address emerging challenges and opportunities. Newcomers to the city, as well as new generations of school reformers, should not take the current schooling context for granted. Instead, they should recognize that the present state of urban school systems is the byproduct of a complicated social and political legacy in which a host of different stakeholders have played a part. Understanding this history is crucial given the constant churn of new reforms that have historically swept the District and urban school systems more generally. Too often, one interviewee stated, new school system leaders would arrive in the District and "throw out everything that was there," prompting Parents United to propose the motto, "We are not a blank slate!" The history of Parents United clearly demonstrates that the District is not just a blank slate in need of a new package of heavy-handed reforms. Instead, school leaders should recognize parents, students, and community members as partners and build public engagement platforms that can support more sustainable reforms. While much has changed since the group's decline, their dynamic approach to education organizing and advocacy is still relevant to the challenges that persist in America's urban schools today.

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Endnotes

[1] The struggles over "home rule" and statehood have sought to address the fact that several important aspects of governance in the District have been controlled by members of Congress who are not elected by local residents, and the lack of local representation at the federal level. For a discussion of the history of the fight for home rule see: Fauntroy, Michael. 2003. Home rule or house rule?: Congress and the erosion of local governance in the District of Columbia. Lanham: University Press of America.