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"A Match on Dry Grass"

Organizing for Great Schools in San Jose

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On a Monday night in the spring of 2009, the pews at St. John Vianney Catholic Church were filled to capacity.[1] Over seven hundred community members came to hear commitments from their elected officials on the Alum Rock Union Elementary School Board in East San Jose, California. Predominantly Latino parents and children from the local Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Charter Academy poured out of buses, joining parents, students, and community members from the neighborhood. Parents held the hands of young children and hushed older siblings, while white-haired grandmothers and older men quietly entered the church. Many families wore yellow T-shirts with "70%" stickers, representing the percentage of district eighth graders who scored below proficient on state tests in reading and math.

Art Meza and Junior Muñoz—local parents and the meeting's co-chairs from the community organizing group PACT (People Acting in Community Together)—called for the crowd to settle down as they opened the action, titled "Saving Our Children with Excellent Schools." Art stated the purpose of the meeting—to create real solutions and partnerships with elected officials. Junior asked the crowd to stand up together and then asked everyone but the first three rows to sit. Junior stated that these few left standing represent the meager 10 percent of students in Alum Rock who will eventually graduate from college if things do not change.

PACT leaders came to the podium to provide research and testimony. Veteran leaders Dianne Doughty and Beth Gonzalez discussed PACT's hope to launch a strategic partnership with the school district to "keep what is working and create more [small district and charter] schools that work." Current ACE

(Achievement, Choice, Equity) Charter School parent Blanca finished her testimony in tears after hearing her son talk about his experience feeling safe and secure at the ACE Charter School, and how he now hopes to go to college someday and eventually become a doctor.

Finally, long-time parent leader Elizabeth Alvarez came to the microphone and recounted the history between PACT, the district, and the small schools. Elizabeth noted the numerous instances since 2001 when the district saw small schools as the enemy. She talked about the district's hostility towards PACT-organized parents, the struggle to develop and pass a small schools policy, and the ongoing fight to maintain the small schools' budgetary, curricular, hiring, and scheduling autonomies. Elizabeth then reflected on the recent successes in Alum Rock, such as the small schools' high state-standardized test scores and the recent openings of the ACE charter and other charter schools.

Elizabeth then turned and addressed board trustees Gustavo Gonzalez and Esai Herrera directly and asked: "Will you lead the district towards a new strategic partnership with PACT and successful charter schools in Alum Rock?" Community members who had struggled over the years to envision, create, and maintain the small schools joined other local parents, students, and neighbors as they turned to the board's trustees to await their answer.

For People Acting in Community Together, a multiethnic, interfaith community organizing group, this moment represented the culmination of years of effort to ensure high-quality schools in the Alum Rock Union School District of East San Jose, California. As a member of the PICO National Network, PACT works with parents and members of religious congregations to initiate change in their community and schools.[2] In this chapter we chart the group's journey toward new small autonomous schools within the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District, charter schools outside of district control, and an empowered community in San Jose more broadly.

In order to create systemic change in any policy arena, PACT follows the PICO organizing cycle, a four-step process that proceeds from listening to research and action to reflection. (See figure 2.1)

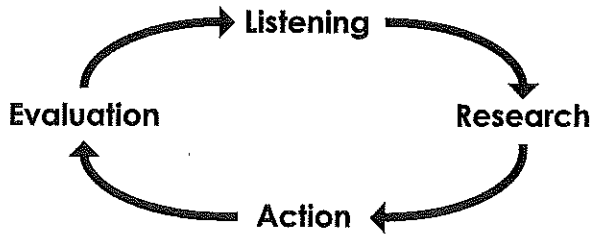

Figure 2.1 Four step PICO organizing cycle.

The organizing cycle guides PACT's work to build relationships, develop leaders, and build power in a way that is responsive to the particularities of new situations, people, and challenges. Indeed, the story of the Alum Rock new small autonomous schools reveals how each turn around the organizing cycle is a unique process that responds to a dynamic context while also building towards a longer term goal of empowering "regular folks" to make change in the community. Throughout the cycle, PACT's work maintains a laser-sharp focus on developing leaders who together form an empowered community. In the context of organizing for educational reform, however, PACT has discovered that the cycle must be especially flexible, leaving time for developing and transforming the culture of schools to institutionalize change.

In this chapter, we trace the efforts of PACT organizers and leaders to organize parents and community members according to the PICO organizing cycle in the Alum Rock small schools campaign. We discuss how PACT first began to engage parents and people of faith in the Alum Rock school district through intensive one-to-one *listening*; through this process they built relationships and identified education as a pressing issue and small schools as their campaign. We then examine how PACT utilized these relationships to develop "regular folks" into leaders through the processes of *researching* and creating three new small autonomous schools within the district. We show how the design team process for the small autonomous schools in Alum Rock helped create a new kind of school culture focused on developing parents as leaders who take ownership and have influence in decisions about their school. We consider how the context of organizing within a sometimes contentious district influenced PACT's campaign for small schools and how planning and staging public *actions* at critical moments enabled PACT leaders to enact and speak to power by defending the small schools. The final part of the chapter follows the *evaluation* and development of PACT's strategy to maintain the small autonomous schools, as well as found additional charter schools outside of the district. In the end, we conclude that PACT's use of the PICO organizing cycle has enabled them to reach their mission of cultivating relationships between "ordinary" people to drive the development of "extraordinary" leaders who take ownership over and positively impact their schools and communities.

PACT Enters the Community of Alum Rock

For many years, the corner of King and Story Roads has been notorious for gang violence in the predominantly poor and Latino Alum Rock neighborhood of East San Jose, California. The neighborhood is so tough that locals nicknamed it "Sal si puedes" (Get out if you can). This likely play on words echoes Cesar

Chavez's and Dolores C. Huerta's rallying cry to farm workers—"Sí, se puede" (Yes, it can be done)—making an ironic label for the Latino neighborhood where Chavez first started organizing. It was in this neighborhood in the mid to late 1970s that Jose Carrasco, one of the founders and first organizers of PACT, started speaking with leaders and members of several prominent Catholic churches to find out what issues were important to people living there. These questions sparked the beginning of a long journey in which PACT organized to empower people of faith to act collectively around their common concerns.

The journey started when community leaders and clergy from a group of Catholic churches in East San Jose asked Jose Carrasco if he would help them get organized. Jose, a second-generation Mexican American with a direct style of communicating and a compact, commanding presence, had organized with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Texas and Los Angeles and had also been deeply involved with the farm workers and Chicano movements. After Jose agreed to assist them, leaders at many of the twelve churches started to hold house meetings and listening campaigns. St. John Vianney parishioners and veteran community leaders Lily and Rudy Tenes recall gathering small groups of people in homes to study the scripture and learn about their concerns. From these house meetings, new leaders emerged who began to speak with members of the broader community. Residents raised concerns about the quality of education, traffic safety, graffiti, road ditches, and gang violence. Lily remembers that one of their earliest campaigns got a traffic light installed on a nearby street.

As the numbers of people involved in each of the individual churches increased, Jose noticed they were identifying similar issues across their congregations, so he encouraged them to work together. Around 1980, they chose the name People Acting in Community Together to use when they worked on common issues, and PACT became a federation of local congregations and parishes. Each church retained its own identity within this federated structure through *local organizing committees* (LOCs) focused on their own congregation's issues. People from each LOC met together as PACT to discuss and work on citywide issues. Though they might have been working on a host of different issues, from safety to youth concerns and health care to immigration, PACT leaders were unified by a shared understanding of themselves as people of faith whose responsibility was to act on their faith values by making positive change for the common good. From the very beginning, Jose emphasized the importance of church dues providing a stable financial base for the group and the centrality of scripture, self-reflection, and moral accountability to provide a deep foundation for organizing.

Early on, PACT distinguished between two types of roles in the organization. Following the Alinsky tradition, they used the term *organizers* for the paid staff who find and cultivate growth and development in community leaders.

Leaders were volunteers, ideally "indigenous" community members, who share a common self-interest with their followers and whose concerns drive the organizing. Some leaders held official (unpaid) positions in PACT, but we follow the group's practice in referring to all volunteer participants as leaders.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, PACT worked on many local, citywide, and even state-level initiatives such as health care and gang violence prevention. PACT scored several major policy victories, including its most high-profile win to date, the passage of the Children's Health Care Initiative in 2000. This initiative guaranteed funding for every child in Santa Clara County to receive high-quality health insurance. Together with other PICO organizing groups, PACT subsequently helped expand this model statewide. PACT also had many early victories in education, such as securing funding for homework centers throughout the city of San Jose, building a youth center in Alum Rock, and gathering support for alternative education high schools. As one of several organizing groups in San Jose, PACT leaders decided to invest their energy into improving public schools and ramped up their focus on education issues in 2000.

From Real to Ideal: Organizing for Education in Alum Rock

In 2000, PACT parent leaders in the Alum Rock school district were working on a campaign to train teachers how to do home visits with their students' families, an approach pioneered by PACT's sister organization in Sacramento and supported by the state through the Nell Soto Home Visitation grants made possible by PICO's efforts. When Matt Hammer arrived as PACT's new executive director that same year, PACT had already begun developing relationships with teachers and families in several Alum Rock schools. A thirty-something white man of Jewish heritage and the son of a former San Jose mayor, Matt was no stranger to politics and pushing for change. When he was fresh out of college, he cut his teeth in organizing with Southern Echo, a community organizing group in Mississippi discussed in chapter 5, and later became an organizer with Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), another PICO affiliate. During Matt's five years at OCO, the group successfully organized to get the school district to open new small autonomous schools to address unequal access to quality education by low-income families in Oakland. OCO helped design and open the schools, which eventually numbered forty and completely transformed the structure of public education in the city.[3] Matt played a central role in this effort and, as part of the intentional sharing of ideas across the PICO network, brought his experience in organizing for small autonomous and charter schools with him as a potential resource to PACT.

After Matt's arrival, organizers and leaders took on several small campaigns at Chavez, Ryan, and Cureton elementary schools in the Alum Rock district. Matt recalls these first campaigns:

> We started helping people begin to develop a priority list of issues that they wanted to work on. It really took off like wildfire. It was very much like throwing a match on dry grass. I don't know that anybody had ever been in that neighborhood asking these kinds of basic questions about what are your dreams for your kids and what's going on at the local public school, and what do you think about building an organization that would have the power to deal with some of these problems?

Matt and other PACT organizers began to work with parents to identify and vocalize the differences between what they saw in the schools their children attended and what they wanted—to differentiate between the real and the ideal. A veteran PACT leader, Maritza Maldonado, participated with Alum Rock parents in those trainings. Maritza, a Mexican American woman, grew up in East San Jose and attended the church where Cesar Chavez organized. Her commitment to organizing came from her Catholic faith and from her experiences as a young girl attending house meetings with her mother and watching the community picket in front of the grocery store as part of the farm workers' famous grape boycott. She describes the PACT training Matt conducted for the parents in Alum Rock this way:

> PACT does a fabulous training on "real" versus "ideal" and one of the first trainings Matt did with parents was put up Ryan School and say, "What's real here? What's happening here?" And they always start off with the physical surroundings—dirty bathrooms, the water fountains don't work, the lack of pencils, the lack of textbooks, all of that stuff. And it's always fascinating to me to see the ideal because most parents can't see beyond what's the reality. And it's always harder to move parents to the ideal. And it only takes one to start dreaming. "So what would you really want your child to experience? What is it that you want?" "Oh, well, I would love them to have drama. I would love them to have music." So why is it that we can't have that ideal for each kid in Alum Rock? Why can't that be the reality?

PACT organizers began to work with parents on the issues they identified: dirty bathrooms, lack of textbooks, and their schools having long-term substitutes rather than permanent staff. Through this process, parents built up their leadership skills as they pursued issues for which they could create solutions

and win. By the end of 2000, they organized and led an action at Our Lady of Guadalupe that filled the church with about one thousand people and successfully pressed the Alum Rock Union School District superintendent to commit to either hiring a permanent principal and staff for Chavez Elementary, providing textbooks and basic materials, and getting the bathrooms cleaned or coming out of the district office to the school to do those things himself. All the while, PACT encouraged parents to explore the relationship between the ideal and the real and to develop their vision of what a great school for their children would look like.

A Campaign for High-Quality Education Options in Alum Rock

After the success of that action, organizers pushed parents to ask deeper questions about what was going in Alum Rock schools and whether students were receiving the kind of high-quality education they needed and deserved. The Alum Rock district was comprised of over 13,500 students, about 77 percent of whom were Latino; 60 percent of students were English-language learners and 89 percent were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.[4] Unlike other large cities with a single public school district, Alum Rock Union Elementary School District was one of nineteen different public elementary and high school districts serving students in the city of San Jose. Amid this fragmented, crisscrossing network of districts, Alum Rock had a reputation as one of the worst districts in the city. From 2000–2008, the district had *seven* changes in superintendents. In 2000–2001, when PACT organizers and leaders began asking questions about the quality of education the district was providing, state-standardized test results revealed that only 31 percent of district eighth graders scored proficient in English/Language Arts and 33 percent scored proficient in mathematics.[5] Parents in the area were becoming increasingly anxious about sending their children to the local schools and worried about their children's prospects for graduation.

LISTENING TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND NEW LEADERS

To determine how best to proceed in Alum Rock, PACT organizers realized they needed to broaden out to include more parents in discussion about their hopes for their children's education. Jose Arenas, a PACT organizer who grew up in the area, began a series of one-to-ones, meeting first with his cousins Laura and Vanessa Gonzalez. These face-to-face meetings focused on listening to their concerns, sharing personal and sometimes painful stories, and talking about building

PACT as an organization with the power to address their shared concerns. Jose asked how Laura's kids were doing at Arbuckle (an Alum Rock elementary school) and about her desires for their education. Laura was excited about her son's teacher Preston Smith, who really engaged parents in their children's education; "I wished everyone was like that—this is what it should be like!" Jose asked her, "Wouldn't you like this every year?" Meanwhile, Jose and Vanessa discussed Alum Rock's terrible reputation, how schools were above capacity and how kids moved around because there was not enough room; Jose ended the conversation by suggesting that they shouldn't settle for a low-quality education just because their parents did. Jose got referrals to more parents and began to hold one-to-ones beyond his own family and friends.

Using one-to-ones and relationship building in this way, PACT initiated a new organizing cycle with an extensive listening campaign at Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. John Vianney churches. The new listening campaign revealed that many congregation members at Our Lady of Guadalupe—like Laura, Vanessa, and long-time PACT leader Maritza Maldonado—were indeed highly concerned about education in Alum Rock. Maritza and other PACT leaders used the relationships they had in place through their church and social lives to begin to build a group of people ready to work toward high-quality educational options in Alum Rock.

As the Our Lady of Guadalupe LOC focused on the need for high-quality schools for the children of Alum Rock, PACT organizers and leaders continued listening and extending their relational networks to seek out more potential leaders. For example, Maritza, both a PACT leader and teacher at Ryan Elementary School, approached the parent of one of her students, Carmen Rodriguez, an immigrant mother of three and a monolingual Spanish speaker who had lived in East San Jose for almost twenty years. Maritza set up a one-to-one with Carmen and then invited her to a meeting to discuss her children's educational experience with other parents. Carmen attended this meeting because she knew her daughter deserved the best in school but did not know how to ask for it. PACT organizers and Maritza worked with Carmen so that she could share her concerns about her children's education with other parents, listen to their concerns and interests, and start to talk about what they could do together about it. Once Carmen found parents with shared interests in education, she invited them to larger group meetings. This original group of five eventually grew to ten, then thirty, and finally fifty parents coming to meetings to talk about better schools.

Though Carmen may initially have begun her involvement in this campaign based on her own self-interest for her children, she gradually developed a stronger sense of the collective stake the whole community shared in demanding a quality education for everyone's children. Through this process, Carmen developed skills PACT considers fundamental to leadership—being able to listen and

conduct one-to-ones to build relationships and the capacity to develop a "following" based on those relationships. This kind of relationship building through listening begins with organizers who are tasked with conducting 20 one-to-ones a week with leaders and potential leaders. These leaders in turn are trained to do their own one-to-ones, and, in this way, the base for PACT's organizing expands outward. "A leader is any volunteer who shows up," explains PACT leader and board member Joan Cotta. "It's immediately empowering to call someone a leader because if you appoint someone a leader, you become what you're told you are." Whether she had known it or not, Carmen was considered a PACT leader even before she began filling up the room with more parents interested in creating great schools.

Eventually, the listening campaign reached a turning point. The one-to-ones had revealed education as a prevalent issue for the community to build a campaign around. Organizers and veteran PACT leaders had identified a sufficient group of new leaders such as Carmen to take bigger roles in the campaign. Meanwhile, with facilitation from PACT organizers, parents and congregation members had begun to reach a consensus that they wanted more than the gradual improvement of failing schools; rather, they wanted to push for creating new, great schools for their children. With a steadily growing base of parents and leaders, PACT began to take steps to make great schools in Alum Rock a reality.

RESEARCH TO DEEPEN LEADERSHIP

While PACT continued to build relationships and new leaders through listening, parents and community members like Laura, Vanessa, Carmen, and Maritza entered the research phase of the organizing cycle to identify potential "winnable" solutions to the problem of low-quality education in Alum Rock. Identifying solutions was a collaborative process in which organizers brought input from educators and other professional organizers while parents and community members contributed their expertise on local needs and desires of the community to investigate possible reforms. Matt talked about his experience with OCO in creating high-quality educational options in Oakland like small autonomous and charter schools. Parents responded strongly to these ideas and wanted to learn more. They read Deborah Meier's book *The Power of Their Ideas*, about the development of small, high-quality schools in neighborhoods similar to theirs. Because PACT parents felt alienated from the large schools their own children attended, they liked the notion behind keeping schools small enough—ideally between 100 and 400 students—so that each child could feel individually known by adult staff.[6]

In 2001, PACT took parents to Oakland and New York City to see what actual, "living and breathing" small schools looked like. This was an eye-opening

experience for many of the parents who, like Carmen, were originally from Mexico and had otherwise never traveled outside of California. They learned firsthand about small schools reform, saw students no different from those in Alum Rock thriving in a culture of close relationships and high expectations, and began to perceive how their "ideal" might become "real." The parents became convinced that the creation of new schools was necessary to generate the kind of wholesale, rapid change needed in Alum Rock. From parents, teachers, and administrators at the other schools they visited, the group also began to learn about the importance of school autonomies that would enable the new small schools to develop a structure, curriculum, and teaching practices that would create a culture of strong relationships and shared decision making among *all* members of the school community. According to Matt Hammer and the parents themselves, they came back from the small school visiting trip "fired up," determined not to settle for anything less than the best for the children of Alum Rock, and focused on developing a plan that would meet their specific needs.

Powerful forces like the Gates Foundation were pushing for small schools and small learning communities across the country. PACT was happy to learn from and gain support from this broader movement without, however, having to embrace it in its entirety. For example, PACT was aware that the broader small schools reform movement was yielding mixed outcomes in terms of student achievement.[7] But PACT believed that its approach—creating new elementary and middle schools owned by parents and supported by the community—contrasted with many of the funding-driven, district-mandated initiatives to break larger, comprehensive high schools into smaller schools.

PACT parent leaders began talking with district officials about the possibility of creating new small autonomous elementary and middle schools within the Alum Rock Union Elementary District. In this stage of the research phase, parents gained knowledge about the Alum Rock district and its political dynamics as they met with the superintendent and board members to talk strategically with them about the reform. The meetings aimed to build relationships with public officials while also educating PACT leaders about the school system and developing their political skills. "Research meetings with decision-makers are where you find out where the real power is," explains organizer Karen Belote. Through their research and meetings, PACT parent leaders remained focused on creating small schools within the Alum Rock district, as well as deciding to press the district to approve the application of one charter school.

PACT was disappointed to find, however, that these initial efforts were met with hostility by the district superintendent and other officials, who were focused on their own reform agenda and expressed no interest in working with organized parents on theirs. Undeterred, PACT leaders continued their efforts to organize for new small autonomous schools, but the superintendent's opposition evolved

into a personal backlash with "wounds" that PACT leaders would still feel keenly nearly a decade later. The superintendent fired or eliminated district positions held by PACT leaders and made public accusations about PACT's nonprofit status, even referring to them on television in one instance as "Parents Acting Like Fools." PACT leaders spent months embroiled in a vitriolic battle with this superintendent before deciding to address the issue with school board members. After a large action at Our Lady of Guadalupe church, school board members launched an investigation into the superintendent, which eventually led to his departure for issues related to fiscal mismanagement.

Under a new, more amenable superintendent, PACT leaders resumed the process of contacting and meeting with district officials. They were told that a new small autonomous school *policy* must be in existence before any small schools could be approved and created. Consequently, PACT leaders began organizing for such a policy, while continuing to build a strong base of shared leadership.

This shared leadership was cultivated and enacted in the regular local organizing committee (LOC) meetings. In LOC meetings, leaders rotated responsibilities such as chairing meetings, leading reflections, conducting one-to-ones, scheduling meetings with elected officials, and facilitating those conversations. PACT leader Elizabeth Alvarez describes this process:

> It's very important for there to be shared leadership and for every person to know how to lead a meeting. When we do the meetings with board members and others, it's one of us that leads the meeting. It's not the organizer and it's not Matt. It's the parents or people in the community that are actually leading those meetings, and so you move up. You learn how to lead a meeting, how to feel that sense of ownership and that sense of empowerment that you didn't have before.

These responsibilities were an intentional means through which PACT developed leadership skills, such as public speaking and political strategizing, built leaders' ownership of the work, and eventually created a sense of empowerment for the leaders.

Exercising such political and leadership skills was new and often intimidating to the vast majority of the parents engaged in the Alum Rock small schools organizing, and individual leaders often required a "push" to develop to their next level of learning or growth. PACT leader Laura Gonzalez talks about how one of the organizers, Alicia, would always push through her initial resistance to get her to do challenging things:

> It's not that I didn't want to do it—it's just that public speaking just terrifies me. Since being with PACT, though, I've chaired some meetings and things that I never would have done before. I've done meetings

> at the school where it was just me and other parents that were running the meeting and presenting, and that was something I would never have done before PACT. So as a person I've grown and as a mother and as a student—I went back to school—and that was something they would always talk about and so little by little, I took some classes here and there, and I owe it all to PACT.

Many PACT leaders shared these kinds of personally transformative experiences, from Elizabeth Alvarez, mother of five, now working on her master's degree in urban planning, to Cristina Ortiz, an immigrant from Mexico, who testified at school board meetings in support of the small school proposals, and to Art Meza, who challenged the superintendent and school board members to clarify district administrative policy at a public meeting.

In 2002, persisting in their efforts to win a small autonomous school policy, PACT leaders held another big community meeting at St. John Vianney Church. This was a momentous action at which PACT leaders' efforts finally paid off; they got a commitment from the Alum Rock school board to pass a policy allowing for the creation of new small autonomous schools and support for the charter school it backed. The new small schools policy was to include autonomy over hiring, scheduling, budgeting, and curriculum. PACT believed that the various autonomies would be critical in allowing the would-be new small autonomous schools to form a culture distinct from that of other district schools; the autonomies would also enable the new school leaders to include strong family and community participation in the new schools. As a result of continued PACT engagement, the school board finally passed the policy in 2003, committing itself to the creation of six new schools. At long last, the ideal schools, previously only part of parents' dreams, would soon become a reality in Alum Rock.

THE DESIGN TEAM PROCESS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In 2003, PACT parent leaders joined with educators to form Small School Design Teams for what it saw as the first three of the six schools. These teams would begin the challenging process of envisioning, designing, and advocating for the new Alum Rock small autonomous schools. To bring in additional technical and professional expertise, PACT hired Marty Krovetz and Dennis Chaconas to coach the teams through the planning and proposal writing process. Marty Krovetz was a San Jose State University professor of education and head of the LEAD Center, an emerging Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) affiliate. Dennis Chaconas was a former Oakland Unified School District superintendent. Both Dennis and BayCES (the CES affiliate in Oakland) had been key partners in small schools creation in Oakland.

With PACT support, parents and educators on the design teams visited other small schools, interviewed school leaders, other parents and community leaders, and learned about parents' rights, curricular issues, and school budgeting. They also learned about California's Academic Performance Index (API), the state's system of standardized testing through which the new schools' success would be measured. While each of the design teams' learning processes were similar and they all shared a vision of schools enriched by highly engaged parents and small, personalized environments, the three teams each developed a different focus for their school proposals. For the elementary school L.U.C.H.A. (Learning in an Urban Community with High Achievement), the design team envisioned an extended day, featuring a full-school gathering to kick off each day, monthly community meetings, and the goal of developing college-bound students and conscientious leaders for a global society. The bilingual educators and parents on the Adelante Dual Language Academy design team crafted a K-8 language immersion program where Spanish would predominate in the early years and English would be gradually phased-in each year; parents would come to read with students every week and students would be immersed in cultural learning. The teachers and parents on the Renaissance Academy design team envisioned a middle school focused on project-based learning around social justice, science, and the arts, featuring exhibition nights to engage the entire community in student learning, block scheduling for greater depth, and teachers who looped with the same students throughout middle school.

For all three teams, the design process emphasized parents as the primary educators of their children and leaders in the school community. Parents' ideas and experiences shaped the designs as much as educators; they helped write parts of the proposals and they spoke at district school board meetings in support of their designs. Carmen Rodriguez highlights learning about the power of parents acting collectively through this process (translation follows):

> Descubrimos que teníamos mucho más derecho que ellos que eran los directores y los maestros y eso nos dio como mucha fuerza y mucho poder. Entendimos que si nos uníamos, unidos más personas, muchas personas teníamos más fuerza. Aparte era aprender a hablar con las personas que están ahí, cómo hablar con ellos, no pelear, sino hablar . . . con las palabras correctas y exigir lo que realmente debíamos exigir, lo que merecíamos, lo que merecían nuestros hijos, lo que no nos estaban dando.
>
> We [parents] discovered that we had much more right than they who were the principals and teachers, and that gave us a lot of strength and a lot of power. We understood that if we joined together, more people joined together, we were stronger. In addition, it was learning to speak out to the people who are there, how to speak with them, not to fight,

> but rather speak out . . . using the right words and demanding what we really had to demand, what we deserved, what our children deserved, what they weren't giving us.

The design teams included potential principals and teachers for the new schools, recruited through existing relationships with PACT leaders and organizers. While parents lent their expertise to design the vision of a school culture that engaged them as true partners in supporting student learning, teachers and educators lent their expertise in pedagogy, curriculum design, and instruction. The design team process helped deepen relationships between the parents and educators. Kristin Henny, a teacher on a design team (who later became principal of the school she helped to design) highlights the deep connections she forged with the L.U.C.H.A. parents involved in the design team:

> I have those parents who were on the design team who I have probably the deepest relationship with because we went through so much blood, sweat, and tears. So for those parents, it's a friendship. We've crossed that line between I'm their school principal and I'm their friend to "We've worked together on a professional level."

Matt explains that the design team process was purposeful about relationship building and meant to illustrate to the would-be principals a model for enacting leadership in their new schools. Indeed, Kristin credits the design team experience for getting her started thinking about parents as empowered leaders who can impact school cultures. Armed with knowledge about the power of organized parents and shared leadership, the parents and future school staff culminated the design team process by proposing three new small autonomous schools to the Alum Rock Union School District.

And they were successful. In the spring of 2004, PACT leaders, parents, and teachers celebrated a major win when the school board approved the three new small autonomous school proposals. The schools were scheduled to open the following fall for the 2004–2005 academic year, and the process from plan to implementation was hectic and rushed, by all accounts. In a major push that spring to recruit students to fill the new schools, the design team members spoke at masses at all the local Catholic churches, went door-to-door in the neighborhoods, and even stood at the entrance to Mi Pueblo, a large local Mexican grocery store, to catch parents and convince them to enroll their children in the new schools. Parents responded enthusiastically, and all three schools opened their doors that fall.

To translate the design team plans into their ideal visions of actual schools, parents and educators had to continue to find a way to work together. In the next

section we examine one of the new schools closely and show how parents and educators at L.U.C.H.A. began to develop a new kind of school culture.

A New Kind of Culture: Organizing Meets Small Schools

The buzz of over a hundred 5 to 11 year-old voices fills the outdoor basketball courts and concrete playground at L.U.C.H.A. Dressed in black pants, collared shirts, and dark sweaters and sweatshirts, students wait in groups, some standing and talking, others playing with balls, and still others running and chasing each other. Principal Kristin Henny seems to know everyone there, greeting each child and parent by name as she walks around. Teachers greet children and parents as more arrive, and many mothers—and a few fathers—with younger siblings in tow stand off to the side chatting in Spanish, waiting to watch the "L.U.C.H.A. launch."

The principal blows a whistle, and the children organize themselves into lines of about twenty. "Good morning L.U.C.H.A. leaders!" Kristin's voice booms to the crowd. After the Pledge of Allegiance, Kristin leads the L.U.C.H.A. creed. Teachers and students, and even a couple of the parents, loudly and enthusiastically declare together, "I am a leader in my home, in my school, and"—pointing at the neighborhood all around them in a large circle—"in my community." Together they recite a promise to each other to be responsible, respectful, compassionate and—pounding their small fists into their hands enthusiastically—"to work hard every day!"

Following announcements, Kristin inserts a CD into a portable player, and a volunteer from each class comes to the front to help lead. The Jackson 5's "Blame It on the Boogie" blares out over the playground and students start spinning, clapping, pointing left and right, up and down, and running in place. The kids are smiling as they dance, and teachers and City Year volunteers join in as well, everyone moving to the rhythm of the song.

As the last notes ring out and the tinny speakers fall silent, Kristin announces it is time for class. Students leave in an orderly fashion. Mothers gather up toddlers for the walk home; some checking first with Laura Gonzalez, the school's administrative assistant, to see if there is any work she needs help with. The launch is over and another day at L.U.C.H.A. has begun.

This scene at L.U.C.H.A. exemplifies the vibrant culture of the school. The many parents who stay to watch the L.U.C.H.A. launch and offer to help afterward typify the school's high level of parent engagement. The parents talking with each other and with Kristin before the launch begins are a testament to tight-knit

relationships at the school. The reciting of the L.U.C.H.A creed is an explicit recognition of the values—leadership, responsibility, respect, compassion, and hard work—that guided the founding of the school during the design team process. Now they guide teachers in their interactions with students each day. In this way, educators and parents at L.U.C.H.A. have created school structures and strategies that support a new kind of school culture, a culture that L.U.C.H.A. parents and educators believe is a big part of the reason for the school's high performance and success.

TEACHER ORIENTATION AND HOME VISITS: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Before L.U.C.H.A. even opened its doors that fall, teachers attended staff training and development designed to build relationships. The principal, Kristin, explained that it was important to "have that time for team building and having staff know each other well before they're even interacting with the community because . . . we want to build a cohesive group of teachers who know each other and have those relationships as well." This intentional relationship-building process created a cohesive team of educators who were ready to reach out to parents when the school year started.

Just as the goal in PACT's organizing cycle is to constantly strengthen and grow a network of relationships, teachers at L.U.C.H.A. wanted to build relationships with *all* parents at the school to support every child. So, in the first month of school, teachers conducted home visits with all families. Home visits, as pioneered by PACT's sister organization in Sacramento, entailed teachers going to their students' homes to meet students' families or caregivers, introducing themselves, and learning about students' academic and emotional needs from their families. One teacher, Melissa McGonegle, explains that the home visits gave the families

> a sense of how much the teachers care and a chance to clarify any expectations or questions about the year. I think it's just really a chance to spend that time talking about the student one-on-one and not worrying about "they got a 75 percent on this math test," but really, "what are your hopes and what are your dreams for your child?" I feel like it's been successful if it's a new family to L.U.C.H.A. and they leave excited about whatever upcoming event there is, and if I get a sense from the parents about how I can best support them with any kind of behavior issues and then what they're most proud of their child for, so that I can really be on the lookout for how I can help develop that over the school year.

These home visits played a role similar to the organizer's one-to-one meeting. Just as an organizer views each person as a potential leader and expert on their community, teachers at L.U.C.H.A. viewed parents as experts about their children and potential leaders in the school community. Similar to organizers, L.U.C.H.A. teachers asked about parents' ideals in terms of their hopes and dreams for their children, looking for ways to involve parents in the school community.

VOLUNTEERING AND COMMUNITY MEETINGS: ENGAGING PARENTS

In addition to home visits, the design team also sought to facilitate parent engagement by requiring participation through a commitment of thirty volunteer-hours of service for the school. While at first, this volunteer work generally took the form of more traditional parent *involvement* (such as field trip chaperone duty, paperwork support, or help with food for events), these activities and subsequent trainings enabled parents to become more proactively *engaged* with student learning and school-wide support (such as classroom assistance, homework checking, creating and planning school activities, or advocating for the school at the district level).

L.U.C.H.A also built parent engagement through monthly community meetings. These evening gatherings were an opportunity to build community between parents, teachers, administrators, and students and engage them in the key activities and decisions affecting the school. In contrast to parent meetings at traditional schools elsewhere in the district where only a small handful of parents participate, about 70 percent of the parents (150–175) attended L.U.C.H.A. community meetings every month.

One such community meeting exemplified the high level of engagement and ownership parents at the school felt. The principal, Kristin, had asked, in both English and Spanish, for parents' feedback on a summary of their school that was to be part of an award application. A Latina mother raised her hand and pointed out a sentence in the summary that read:

> A plethora of events take place throughout the year to encourage that parents are involved and informed and able to positively contribute to not only their own child's progress, but the greater development of the entire community.

The mother objected to the wording of this sentence, saying that it sounded like the school was trying to get the parents to come and be involved, but instead, she said it was the "parents who create the events that parents participate in."

TEACHER TEAMS AND PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS: COLLABORATING FOR STUDENT LEARNING

In order to fulfill the design team's vision for L.U.C.H.A., the growing relationships between teachers and the deepening parent engagement in the school needed to be focused on student achievement. As a result, the principal and teachers opened their classroom doors and worked to build authentic professional collaboration to improve instruction. Kristin hired teachers who were interested in building a collaborative culture and consistently emphasized this goal in orientation and other activities. She explained that the teacher who thrives at L.U.C.H.A. is a "team player that wants to learn and develop as a teacher, and learn from their peers, and work with their peers on a regular basis." Once the school opened, teachers collaborated on curricular issues in weekly staff and grade-level meetings, reviewed data to strategize how to help struggling students, observed their peers regularly in the classroom, and reflected together on their teaching practice. Once the structures for collaboration were in place, Kristin found that "people end up going above and beyond, because they see how beneficial the collaboration is." This ongoing process of collective reflection and improvement dovetailed with PACT's organizing approach in which individual development fuels organizational learning and action.

Meanwhile, teachers at L.U.C.H.A. began to draw upon parents as resources and key partners in educating students. As Matt Hammer explains, a teacher who is thinking like an organizer is a good listener and will "think about parents as co-educators of their kids, and as resources, rather than as standing in the way of some ideal education plan that the teacher has for the kid." The culture of parent engagement with learning has become so strong that one L.U.C.H.A. father explains that the primary focus at the school is not on parents supporting the teachers, but rather on the teachers supporting the parents. L.U.C.H.A. teacher Carlos Ponce concurs:

> Parents are the most important teachers, and we have students for a year, and then they go on to another class. Their parents are going to be the most important example and teachers in their lives, so we really value their opinion and their help, and their ideas.

PARENT TRAININGS AND DECISION MAKING: DEVELOPING LEADERS

As parents became engaged in collaboration with teachers around student achievement, L.U.C.H.A. staff and PACT organizers held trainings for parent leaders to help them develop skills and knowledge about resources to support

their children's learning, begin to help them prepare for college, and handle discipline and motivation issues. Principal Kristin explains that "it's not just that we expect the parents to be leaders, but we help them to tangibly receive those skills and shape their leadership through trainings and workshops." These skills helped parents to take part in shared decision making and leadership at the school. According to Matt, this shared leadership means

> always looking for opportunities for people to take on leadership and that that leadership is about being in a relationship with other people, representing their interests. It's who's in control and who's making all the decisions, so just as much as possible, creating . . . shared leadership, democratic decision making and a relational culture inside a school.

Teachers and parents were consistently involved in making decisions at L.U.C.H.A., and the monthly community meetings provided a key forum for these processes. For example, Kristin used community meetings to inform her hiring decisions. Myong Chang, a new L.U.C.H.A. teacher, recalls interviewing for her position first with Kristin. She and other prospective teachers were then interviewed by small groups of parents at a community meeting, and their subsequent feedback to Kristin informed whom she hired.

Shared leadership and the use of school tasks as leadership development opportunities at L.U.C.H.A. paralleled organizing principles. Both parents and teachers were framed as leaders, and this expectation also extended to students. The emphasis on student leaders is most clearly illustrated in the L.U.C.H.A. launch, the ritual described at the beginning of this section. The L.U.C.H.A. creed, in which the students pledge "I am a L.U.C.H.A. leader," is not only recited each morning at the launch, it is embodied in the way teachers think of and teach their students. Teacher Carlos Ponce explains how and why they view students as leaders:

> We want to set them up for success and we see it as fostering leaders, people who are going to be of value to their community, and leaders outside of their home. And so that's why we call them L.U.C.H.A. leaders. To us they're more than students. They're the people that are going to be leading our country one day, and so we want to prepare them for that.

"OUR SCHOOL": A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP

Over time, L.U.C.H.A. appeared to be producing empowered students, teachers, parents, and community members who, in the words of Matt Hammer, "deeply own the school." In such a culture, according to PACT, the success of students and the school becomes a shared responsibility of everyone, so parents are more

engaged, teachers are more committed, students are more motivated, and everyone moves together toward shared goals. Veteran PACT leader and former Alum Rock teacher Maritza Maldonado emphasizes how this organizing culture resulted in a sense of ownership at L.U.C.H.A. and the other small schools. "That's what makes it work. A sense of everyone moving in the same direction, that this is our school. It's not the principal's school. It's not the teachers' school. It's our school."

Through building a culture of engagement and shared responsibility for student learning, PACT organizers and leaders felt that L.U.C.H.A.'s high academic standards for all students started to produce solid results. They point to the fact that, by the end of its first school year, L.U.C.H.A. had an Academic Performance Index (API) score of 753 (out of a total possible 1000). In 2005–2006, L.U.C.H.A.'s API score rose to 834, the highest in the district (excluding the KIPP charter school), and in the third highest decile for similar elementary schools in the state. Proud parents and organizers pointed out that Renaissance Middle School, one of the other new small schools, became the highest performing district middle school (excluding KIPP) that year as well. As one L.U.C.H.A. parent said in a community meeting, the PACT organizing process helped the community create a vision and the result was that the school was "el trabajo de todos los padres" (the work of all the parents).

Small Autonomous Schools at Risk: Responding to Shifts in Context

As the new small schools established cultures of engagement and began demonstrating strong student performance, hostility and suspicion arose from teachers and principals at other schools. Principals of nearby schools felt they had students "taken" from them, other teachers thought small schools were being given special treatment and more money, and some thought the small schools were "creaming the crop"—taking the best students from other schools. Meanwhile, the originally supportive union leadership changed, and the new officials no longer wanted to allow small school teachers to work an extended day. The new small schools shared facilities with larger, traditional schools, and there were administrative tensions over common space usage, and even animosity between students at the two schools at the middle school site.

Many parents and community leaders involved with the small schools believe that a lack of communication across the district about what the small schools were, how they would operate, and how students would be enrolled, contributed to these tensions. This lack of communication came in part because of turnover in district leadership. During the 2004–2005 school year in which the small

schools opened, a new superintendent and board of trustees took leadership of the district. The new leadership was far more interested in district-wide standardization than site-based autonomy for new small schools. Tensions were heightened when the new superintendent created a Small Schools Taskforce that excluded PACT leaders, despite promises to include them. This taskforce discussed what it called "unfair" budgetary autonomies, and that led small school proponents to feel their autonomies were under attack.

A number of dynamics may have contributed to the new district leadership's lack of support for the new small schools and their autonomies. First, the district office and PACT leaders appeared to have diametrically opposed theories of action for what would improve educational opportunities for Alum Rock Union Elementary School District students. The district favored a uniform approach across the district, featuring standardized curricula, direct instruction models, like Open Court reading and Saxon mathematics, and greater centralization of administration. In contrast, PACT organizers and leaders believed student achievement would be improved by creating school cultures that fostered parent engagement and strong relationships, and by giving schools the flexibility to make their own decisions around hiring, curriculum, and budget. Secondly, the district appears to have perceived PACT as an outside group, without educational expertise, that was activating parents, publicly exposing the district's problems, and providing unsolicited solutions. Indeed, a number of individuals, including a former Alum Rock Union Elementary School District board member and government agency staff outside of the district, noted the district's insular tendencies and resistance to "people coming in from the outside and telling them what to do," particularly noneducators.

Despite these tensions, the original small schools policy passed in 2003 had outlined the creation of six new small autonomous schools, so PACT set about recruiting and supporting two additional design teams for the next round of school proposals. Since PACT believed that education-specific assistance to schools was not its core mission, PACT created the ACE (Achievement, Choice, Equity) Public School Network as an independent organization to provide this kind of technical support. Although at this point PACT was more focused on creating in-district small schools, it wanted to keep its options open, so ACE was also planned to be a locally rooted, charter-management organization for future potential charter schools.[8]

Meanwhile, the prospects for the two new school proposals began to feel politically uncertain as the superintendent and board began to publicly voice concerns about the schools. PACT leaders continued to push for their approval using tactics that may have heightened tensions with district administrators, such as showcasing the shortcomings of the district's traditional schools and

writing letters to school board members expressing disappointment with the superintendent's actions.

ACTION FOR POWER

Energy began to vibrate in the room as more and more people streamed into the Mexican Heritage Plaza and greeted one another on a warm, spring evening in 2005. The group of over seven hundred Alum Rock residents was largely Latino but included a smaller number of whites and Asians, and people of all ages: families juggling babies in strollers, laughing teenagers, elderly church ladies helping each other navigate the stairs, and quiet older Mexican men with work-hardened hands. PACT distributed translating equipment at the sign-in tables, so Spanish speakers could listen to simultaneous translation of the action. Reporters arrived and TV cameras began to circulate through the crowd, while organizers engaged in frantic negotiation with facility staff to let the overflow crowd squeeze into the room. At the front of the room, a table faced the audience, and Alum Rock school board members Tanya Freudenberger and Kim Mesa were seated behind the table. Large, white poster-boards with the PACT logo and a list of questions sat on easels behind them.

Fearing that the school board was retreating in its support of the new small autonomous schools reform, PACT leaders staged this major public event, billed as an Action for the Future of Alum Rock Schools. PACT was able to turn out such large numbers of people because of the relationships that the leaders had built in their communities. As Darcie Green, a staff person to a state assemblyman and a former PACT leader, says: "The reason they're able to turn out two hundred people, three hundred people to a meeting is because it wasn't just in a flyer. Everybody knows somebody else and it's one-on-one relationship based." These people represented votes, and their numbers would serve to hold officials accountable to promises for small schools. Meanwhile, media coverage of the event expanded the arena to an even larger potential audience. Veteran leader Lily Tenes puts it most succinctly, "People are power."

This action illustrates PACT's organizing approach. An action team of PACT leaders and organizers carefully planned each detail; leaders took specific roles in the meeting, from chairing or time-keeping to giving what the group calls the "credential" (outlining PACT's mission and accomplishments), or asking the officials to commit to positions on the issue. Each of these roles enabled leaders to gain new political or public speaking skills, while organizers worked behind the scenes, prepping and supporting leaders, coordinating logistics, and facilitating media access. In this way, in addition to bringing the issues to a head in the public arena, the action was a key leadership development opportunity.

When the hundreds of parents, children, and community members finally found their seats at the 2005 action, the PACT leaders chairing the action welcomed the crowd and outlined the ground rules, noting: "This is not an open forum. Any speakers must be acknowledged by one of the chairs." A local priest offered a prayer, followed by a PACT leader who gave the PACT credential. PACT leaders then delivered a research report, using a PowerPoint presentation, to describe the creation of the small schools and frame the need for continued commitment by the Alum Rock school board, so that superintendent turnover would not threaten the small schools.

PACT leaders then gave testimony to bring, as the group says, "our pain and passion" before the public officials. These stories were deeply personal and moving while articulating the need for high-quality education options like the new small autonomous schools. Youth shared their feelings of helplessness and fear at a stabbing at their school and their hurt and indignation at a teacher's scornful reaction to their Mexican accent; mothers talked about the renewed hope they had for their children now as students at one of the new schools.

Tension mounted when PACT leaders "spoke truth to power," as the group says. The chairperson pointed to the large poster-board covenants sitting on easels at the front of the stage, saying, "As a people of faith, we take covenants very seriously. As PACT leaders, we believe in accountability." A panel of parent and community leaders lined up in front of the table. Each, in turn, stood at a microphone facing the school board members and asked a yes or no question designed to "pin" the school board members to a concrete and public commitment that they could be held accountable for in the future. For example, PACT leader Vanessa Gonzalez asked:

> Will you continue to champion autonomy as described in the district policy and lead on decisions that support the spirit of autonomy and site-based decision-making, especially budgeting?

Both school board members had been given the questions prior to the action, so there were no surprises, but PACT leaders "pushed back" until the official clearly stated yes or no in front of the entire congregation. PACT seems to be both feared and revered by politicians and decision makers for this kind of public confrontation between the power of position and authority and the power of people during an action.

In the end, Alum Rock school board members Kim Mesa and Tanya Freudenberger did not agree to all of the commitments proposed by PACT leaders. According to organizer Alicia Ross, the board members bowed to last-minute pressure from the superintendent who insisted they make no substantive commitments, and "we won about half of what we wanted." The board members

committed to helping maintain the site-based budgeting autonomy of the small schools and agreed to look at facilities issues, but they did not agree to support the proposals for two additional new small schools or to persuade the union to approve extended days for small school teachers.

Despite the few tangible wins and continued uncertainty about the fate of small autonomous schools in Alum Rock, the action was both a transformational personal experience for many PACT leaders and an opportunity for those gathered to experience their *collective* power in pressing elected officials to respond to their concerns. As Executive Director Matt Hammer explains:

> It's really an action when people hopefully come to see their power to get something done. Typically up to that point, we've been calling people leaders: hopefully coming out of an action, people are calling themselves leaders.

PACT organizer Marie Moore highlighted Art Meza's individual development over the course of the small schools campaign as a prime example of the "win" of personal transformation that results from organizing and culminates in an action. Art, a parent of five with a child in each of the three small schools, was not involved in the design teams, but enrolled his children in the new schools in their first year. A local high school graduate and life-long resident of East San Jose, Art has a reserved and unassuming manner, as well as a familiar ease with many parents and teachers at the schools.

When we first met Art, he described himself as "more of a soldier and a body out there." When we asked him whether he was a leader, he said, "So I feel that I'm lacking in that area but one good thing is that I know that there are some parents that will be out there. We all serve a nut or a bolt in this machine." But later, after participating in many more one-to-ones, research meetings, and helping to lead an action, Art talked about how he had learned a great deal and relied on PACT to help him with public speaking, political strategy, and understanding how to network and build relationships with other parents. We asked again if Art considered himself a leader and he reports, "Yeah. I do my best. That's one word that I can actually say and tell you, I'm a PACT leader, and a parent, even if the district doesn't like it—they're just going to have to live with it."

Art's humble demeanor belied the vast knowledge of complex educational policy that he had learned in the past year, from standardized testing and district administrative policies to average daily attendance funding formulas and California state law regarding confidential government meetings. Once too intimidated to talk with his children's teachers, Art became one of three parents who called a meeting with the superintendent to discuss site-based budgeting and

pressed the issue when the superintendent nearly took away control of the meeting and denied them the opportunity to speak. As a man who previously felt he couldn't speak in public, Art eventually went on to chair the major PACT action that opened this chapter. In the end, Art's participation in PACT transformed him from a private parent to a public leader willing to act collectively with others to face the district and push for high-quality educational options in Alum Rock.

"Death by a Thousand Cuts": Defending Autonomies

Despite the continued organizing, PACT leaders faced major disappointment at a subsequent meeting when the Alum Rock school board voted to deny the proposals for additional new schools on the grounds that a facilities assessment was needed. As for the three existing small schools, the district continued to chip away at their budgeting, hiring, scheduling, and curricular autonomies in an ongoing battle characterized by PACT organizer Alicia Ross as "death by a thousand cuts." For example, the schools were now required to pay 25 percent of their budget back to the district in overhead, a portion PACT considered unreasonable.

PACT leaders and organizers cared so much about autonomies because they connected these autonomies with the flexibility to develop a school culture like L.U.C.H.A.'s that is essential to the ensuing academic success of students. Maritza explains that it wasn't just the school's size or their principal, but rather their culture that mattered so much:

> So it's what we know, right? That you have to change culture. The culture of the school has to be different—when you have autonomy around curriculum or around budgeting and around staffing, wonderful things can happen.

Indeed, these autonomies appeared to be connected with the successful L.U.C.H.A. practices we described above. The autonomy around hiring meant that school leaders had the freedom from district procedure to engage parents in finding and hiring teachers who were willing to put in the extra time and effort needed to improve students' academic performance. The autonomy around budget-making decisions meant that parents could develop leadership skills and give valuable input at community meetings about how to make the best use of the school's discretionary funds. The autonomy around curriculum meant that teachers could collaborate about how best to supplement the district curriculum to meet the needs of their individual students. It was through these

autonomies that principals could extend leadership opportunities to teachers and parents, who in turn developed the leadership to demand these opportunities for themselves.

In addition to threatening school autonomies, the district appeared to disrupt the new schools in other ways as well. For example, the district issued mandates preventing PACT organizers and ACE school coaches from stepping onto school grounds, which forced them to hold meetings in the parking lot and at other off-campus locations. Also, the superintendent instructed the small school principals not to have any contact with PACT, implying that their job security was at risk if this directive was ignored. In December of 2005, the school board rewrote the "new small autonomous schools" policy into a more generic "small schools policy" to eliminate specific mention and description of any autonomies. Meanwhile, tensions among small school principals, PACT, and ACE arose when ACE was unable to follow through on all three years of seed money originally promised to the small schools to help them cover their budget as their enrollment was increasing. Preston Smith, founding L.U.C.H.A. principal, predicted that in such a contentious environment, "the district will [eventually] swallow and eat and crush those schools."

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN ALUM ROCK: REFLECTION AND STRATEGY FOR A NEW CONTEXT

Certain that the district would not consider or approve any further small autonomous school proposals, PACT leaders debated internally about how to provide more high-quality educational options quickly. Some parents, focused on the need for immediate change from the entrenched cultures in failing schools, proposed focusing more of their resources on establishing charter schools. Although PACT had been supportive of the creation of several charter schools in Alum Rock, its organizing up to that point had focused on the creation of small autonomous in-district schools. Many long-time PACT leaders in fact felt conflicted about supporting charters and wondered if charters undermined public education. But the district's intransigence toward small schools and deepening commitment to standardization via Open Court and Saxon math curricula eventually convinced PACT leaders and organizers that moving to open a charter school would be the only way to regain leverage in the district. PACT decided to propose a charter school that could instill a culture of success on its own terms, like the current small schools, but would be guaranteed the autonomies that the small schools were struggling to maintain. Furthermore, PACT leaders and organizers believed that when the district began to experience the financial impact of the competition of funds and students going to the charter instead of the district schools, Alum Rock Union Elementary School District administrators and

board members might eventually become more amenable to additional small autonomous schools within the district system. Although there is little evidence that such competition had created change in other districts, PACT remained hopeful that this strategy would work in their specific local context.

California charter laws require an organization to propose a charter for a school to the district in which it would be located. PACT's first charter proposal was developed by parents in a design team process similar to that for the district-sponsored small schools, but the proposal was eventually denied by the district. A second proposal, written this time primarily by new ACE director Greg Lippman was denied twice by the district despite a protracted effort to work collaboratively with them. Since California law allows charter proposals denied by a district to be considered by the county, ACE, with PACT's active support, took its charter proposal to the Santa Clara County Board of Education. Despite heated testimony from Alum Rock district administrators against the proposal, the charter was unanimously approved by the county, and the ACE Charter School opened its doors to academically struggling middle school students in the fall of 2008.

As the future of Alum Rock's three small schools continued to hang in the balance, PACT Executive Director Matt Hammer became increasingly interested in working with the larger network of charter school management organizations in San Jose. In addition to ACE, the other charters in the area included Rocketship Education (co-founded by Preston Smith, L.U.C.H.A.'s founding principal), Downtown College Prep (co-founded by ACE director Greg Lippman), and KIPP Charter Schools. Matt referred to the combination of small autonomous and charter schools as a "new schools movement" in Santa Clara County. PACT did not necessarily embrace charter schools as *the* answer to public education across the country, as many in the emerging charter movement claimed, but the group believed that charters represented an important option for creating great schools in Alum Rock.

Though PACT planned to continue organizing new parents in Alum Rock and supporting existing small school parents in their struggle to maintain their autonomies, the ACE charter represented another opportunity to instill an organizing culture in a school at its outset. ACE lacked the design team process so critical to L.U.C.H.A., so PACT provided an organizer at the school site to work with parents and the principal to develop a culture of parent engagement and leadership opportunities. As a result, it appeared that ACE had several characteristics consistent with the organizing culture at L.U.C.H.A.

ACE Charter School Principal Vanessa Sifuentes valued parent engagement in the school community and believed in shared ownership of the school. In their first year, the ACE Charter School started a Parent Leadership Group with the help of Marie Moore, a PACT organizer. Vanessa describes the group:

> The Parent Leadership Group consists of a really strong core of invested parents. I'd say it's probably between fifteen and twenty really, really strong families who plan our monthly meetings. They coordinate the agenda and then they tell me when it's my turn to speak. It's really helpful for me but ultimately, it's helpful for the parents because they get a sense of ownership over what's happening at their school, and they can plan things whenever they want.

Two ACE parents, Enriqueta Archundia and Graciela Díaz, explain why they come to the meetings:

> In other schools, there are groups for informing parents—maybe five parents will come out of three hundred or five hundred children at the school. We only have one hundred children here, and each month we have more than half of the parents come to the meetings. We come because we feel connected like a family. The principal is talking with us, with the students, and they tell us about the developments of the children; they tell us right away. Whenever there are problems, they solve them.

In addition to helping plan the monthly meetings, ACE charter parents were engaged in teacher-hiring decisions and in a number of other ways, appeared to be growing the leadership skills to be able to collaborate with teachers and the principal to collectively develop solutions to school problems.

However, the school faced high levels of teacher turnover in its first year, with only one teacher slated to continue into the second year. In that context, it was perhaps not surprising that ACE charter teachers did not emphasize parents as partners or leaders to the extent that teachers at L.U.C.H.A. did, and that only one of the teachers we spoke with was familiar with PACT beyond Marie, the organizer at the school. Yet many of the elements of an organizing culture were present at the ACE charter. At the time of this writing, it was too soon to report the academic success of the school as measured by test scores. But the principal, organizer, and key parents were working hard to build an engaged community of parents and teachers who take collective responsibility and leadership for high levels of student learning and achievement.

"THE TIDAL WAVE AT ST. JOHN VIANNEY": ACTION TO REACTION

In March 2009, PACT held the action titled "Saving Our Children with Excellent Schools" that opened this chapter. The action followed the 2008 election that resulted in a new school board more open to small autonomous schools and

led to the departure of the superintendent who had so opposed them. When veteran PACT leader Elizabeth Alvarez addressed board trustees Gonzalez and Herrera directly and asked, "Will you lead the district towards a new strategic partnership with PACT and successful charter schools in Alum Rock?" the response from board members was "YES!" This declaration echoed through the church as over seven hundred community members erupted into applause and shouts of joy.

As the action continued, a mix of veteran and new PACT leaders and parents received numerous commitments, one after another, from the newly elected members of the Alum Rock Board of Trustees, commitments that would have been unheard of a year earlier. Board members pledged to provide or extend current leases on district facilities for the current charter and district-run small schools. The trustees also promised to ensure that new principals for both L.U.C.H.A. and Renaissance Academy had staff and community support and committed to hiring a superintendent supportive of small schools and charter schools. Finally, the board agreed to recommend a stronger small school policy that included budget, personnel, and curriculum autonomies. As action co-chair Art Meza read the last of these commitments, the crowd began to clap once again, leading to a standing ovation for all the work leading to this moment; the work not only of current PACT leaders at that action, but of those who participated throughout the almost decade-long Alum Rock small schools campaign.

As the last of the crowd left the church, PACT leaders, parents, and organizers filed into a small room behind the altar for the initial debrief. PACT organizer Marie Moore began with congratulations all around, from action co-chairs Art and Junior to all the "pinners" and parents providing testimony. Veteran PACT leaders, Beth, Dianne, and others commented on the strength of this action and the importance of making sure board members followed through with their commitments. Matt Hammer framed the wins as commitments from district officials who "saw the tidal wave at St. John Vianney coming and wanted to get ahead of it." He then reminded everyone about the organizing principle that the importance of the action is in the reaction. Leaders would need to reflect on and evaluate whether officials followed through on the commitments they made and if, in the end, they were achieving their goal of great schools for all of Alum Rock's children.

Conclusion: From Ordinary People to Extraordinary Leaders

Across many years and twists in the journey, the Alum Rock small schools campaign illustrates how PACT utilizes key strategies and processes to create an empowered community and high-quality schools. The PICO organizing cycle

(listening, research, action, and reflection) is fundamental to PACT's strategy for change, as it enables the organizers and leaders to maintain core organizing processes while responding to shifting contexts and challenges. We have presented particular phases and strategies within the organizing cycle as though they are discrete and easily categorized, but PACT's organizing is more dynamic and multilayered than any simple prescriptive set of steps. For example, as we have seen, there is really never a point at which one-to-ones cease and the focus on relationship building disappears. Similarly, constant reflection and learning are built into every stage of the cycle.

We found that enacted through this dynamic organizing cycle are three core processes—building relationships through listening, developing leadership through relationships, and building power through organized leaders in action. *How* PACT approaches these activities in the specific context of East San Jose is critical to the outcomes they produce. First, in the Alum Rock small schools campaign, building relationships through listening involved one-to-one meetings between parents and PACT organizers to understand community members' deep concerns and dreams for their children. Leaders and organizers together identified small schools reform as a "winnable" solution to the problem of poor education and alienating school environments.

Second, PACT develops leadership through relationships simultaneously at both the individual and group levels. PACT organizers understand empowerment as a developmental process, such that both individual growth and community collective power must be carefully cultivated and supported over time. Organizers develop deep, trusting relationships with individual leaders in order to "push" or challenge them to take the next steps in their personal development. Individual growth fuels the empowerment of the community of leaders and organizers that make up PACT through the building and maintaining of relationships among a network of people. In the Alum Rock campaign, the research process also enabled leaders—many of them mothers who had not previously been active outside their homes—to deepen their leadership by equipping them with knowledge about the educational system, skills in public speaking, facilitation, and strategic thinking, and the confidence to build public relationships with district and county education decision-makers and policy-makers. For PACT, this is the kind of leadership necessary to build power to make change in the world.

According to PACT, power comes through organized people, the third key process the group uses in its work. The 2009 action that opened and closed our chapter was a classic example of the way PACT leaders built power, showed their power, and spoke to power, leading to public commitments by Alum Rock school board members. This show of more "unilateral" power by PACT leaders is also balanced by ongoing attempts at building "relational" power in which

leaders try to meet and work with public officials to move a particular issue forward outside of actions. As we saw, PACT cannot completely control the willingness of district officials to collaborate. But the group never gave up its efforts to push officials to support small schools and its offer to work together for that goal.

THE CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES OF PACT'S EDUCATION ORGANIZING WORK

These strategies and processes have enabled PACT to make significant progress in improving education for San Jose children. Nevertheless, the group faces considerable challenges in sustaining its current work and reaching its larger goal of providing high-quality education for all of San Jose's students. First, developing the ongoing relationships so essential to PACT's organizing can be challenging when one organizer leaves and a new organizer joins PACT's staff, and this kind of turnover has happened often at PACT in recent years. Many long-time leaders were on their third PACT education organizer in the span of the Alum Rock small schools campaign, and we heard a weary note as small school educators and PACT leaders contemplated the need to start over in developing those relationships with a new organizer. Moreover, although no PACT leader explicitly mentioned it, having only a few bilingual Spanish-speaking organizers may also have made relationship building more challenging, particularly with the many monolingual Spanish-speaking Alum Rock parents. Despite this organizer turnover, however, PACT leaders appear to continue growing, first in relationship with one organizer and then another, to develop their individual leadership skills. New organizers can even bring different strengths, experiences, and, as one outgoing organizer suggested, fresh perspectives and less attachment to old wins, which can be advantageous in long-term, complex education campaigns.

A second challenge PACT staff and leaders face in their education organizing work is the complexity of shifting the culture within the institution of public schools. In fact, Matt Hammer considers PACT's nationally recognized Children's Health Care Initiative a comparably easy "win" for the organization, since it involved "simply" changing a policy and shifting funds from one place to another. The education organizing process, by contrast, is much more challenging due to the protracted nature of the campaigns required to change the way the institutions of public education operate. PACT has found it needs to build a new culture within schools as part of an effort to shift the larger educational system. In education, PACT has had to create design teams and build a coalition of charter school management organizations, activities that do not fit neatly within any phase of the organizing cycle, but have proven to be necessary for PACT to navigate the changing educational context in Alum Rock. PACT has also been

engaged in long-running efforts to improve alternative education for community youth and stem the high dropout rate in East San Jose. The alternative education organizing has been similarly multifaceted, ranging from policy work with state legislators to change state alternative school funding to collaboration with county administrators to revamp the county alternative education system.

Nevertheless, PACT and their allies have demonstrated that, by using an organizing approach, cultures of engagement and achievement can be established at new schools. Yet the organizing paradigm and the emphasis on autonomies suggest that each school needs to create its own authentic design process, rather than simply replicating the same version. Indeed, from the morning launch and shared decision-making practices at L.U.C.H.A., to exhibition nights at Renaissance, and Friday morning reading with parents at Adelante, the small autonomous schools' cultures each had characteristics that were distinct to their context and undoubtedly part of their success. More deeply, though, the small autonomous schools had in common a culture based on building relationships, developing leadership across the community, and sharing decision making and power to create a sense of ownership over the school. Thus, education organizers face the challenge of balancing the time it takes to support community-driven design processes to build school cultures appropriate to each context, with the reality that individual processes for every school may not be the quickest path to creating high-quality education for the greatest number of students.

Another challenge of education organizing in Alum Rock is staff turnover at the new schools. Principals, like organizers, are particularly central to relationship building, but, like organizers, they are in short supply and have proven hard to keep. Many strong L.U.C.H.A. educators, including principals Preston Smith and Kristin Henny, have left the school to lead new Rocketship charters. This challenge is buffered by parent leaders who exercise ownership and strong and deep levels of parent-teacher collaborations. As a result, these kinds of school cultures may well outlast the active involvement of a key principal and even of an organizing group in a school. Additionally, new charter schools led by educators who helped create the original small autonomous schools, even without the active partnership with PACT, may spread this new school culture even further.

However, PACT is not satisfied with creating strong cultures of academic success at individual schools; they aim to create high-quality educational options for *all* of San Jose's children. "This work is not just for one, two, or three children. We're trying to create change in the whole district," explains PACT parent leader Elizabeth Alvarez. PACT leaders and organizers like Matt Hammer reason that if small autonomous schools and charter schools in Alum Rock illustrate that children in these neighborhoods can succeed and excel academically, then parents will likely move their children to these schools and organized parents will demand the creation of similar schools. Meanwhile, if the Alum Rock Union

Elementary School District has to compete to maintain student enrollment and the associated per-pupil funding from the state, then the district will be forced to improve the overall quality of Alum Rock schools. Whether this theory of change will be borne out in San Jose remains to be seen, however, because it depends in the end on how district officials choose to respond to this competitive pressure. In addition, the growing influence of the larger charter school movement may well shape developments in Alum Rock. PACT remains hopeful that it might benefit from these pressures while, at the same time, concerns remain that some students might be left behind in the rush to charters.

The story of the Alum Rock parents, students, community members, and their schools is not over. PACT continues to engage both veteran leaders and new parents and community members in each successive phase of the PICO organizing cycle to build relationships through listening; develop leadership through these relationships; and build power through organized, educated, and empowered leaders. In the case of Alum Rock, these processes helped to develop ordinary parents and community members into extraordinary leaders capable of demanding and creating high-quality educational options not only for their own children, but for all the children in their community.