

From Ocean Hill-Brownsville to Pittsburgh: A Study in the
Evolution of Parent Involvement in Public Schools

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	4
Chapter 1: Introduction	5-7
Chapter 2: School Involvement/Engagement	8-14
Methods of Parent Involvement	10
History of Parent Involvement and Engagement	12
Chapter 3: Ocean Hill-Brownsville, 1968	15-26
Post-Strike	23
Chapter 4: Pittsburgh, Present Day	27-53
Mayor’s Commission on Public Education	29
A+ Schools	35
Charter Schools	40
Charter Schools in Pittsburgh	43
“Won’t Back Down”	44
National Reception	46
Local Reception and Yinzercation	50
Chapter 5: Parent Nation	54-71
Methodology	55
Parent Nation Meetings	57
Discipline	60
Special Needs	63
Year One	67
The Future of Parent Nation	68
Chapter 6: Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Pittsburgh Public Schools	72-74
Chapter 7: Conclusion	75-76
Bibliography	77-82

Abstract

This thesis explores the history of two efforts during the past half-century to enhance parental input in public schooling: the Community Control movement in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in 1968 and the formation of Parent Nation in Pittsburgh Public Schools in 2012-2013. I use a combination of historical and field research methods (observations, interviews) to explore the two case studies. The events leading to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teachers Strike of 1968 exemplified high parental involvement in school decision making, in a context of sharp political and racial conflict. The formation of Parent Nation in Pittsburgh occurred in a very different political and cultural environment and, crucially, one in which the role of charter schools has fundamentally transformed modern educational discourse. While the Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Pittsburgh stories differ greatly, both are valuable for demonstrating the complexities inherent in all efforts, past and present, to significantly enlarge parents' voice in educational decision making.

Acknowledgements

This project was a significant effort that requires significant thanks. I would like to thank A+ Schools and the members of Parent Nation for allowing me the opportunity to attend meetings as part of my research, and for the openness of all to share their experiences with me. I wish Parent Nation the best of luck with future endeavors. I would also like to thank my Ethics, History and Public Policy Advisor, Professor Jay Aronson, for his help in finding A+ Schools for this work. Most of all I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Professor Steven Schlossman, for his endless time and support with this project. Without him this project would not have been possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Parents, communities, and schools have been tied to each other in the United States since organized schooling first came into existence. The relationship among the three has evolved significantly as society has changed.

Publically sponsored schools first emerged in the colonies, organized by parents of homogeneous communities, to instruct students in basic skills and religious beliefs of their respective communities. Public school has evolved with the nation to address the needs of increasingly urban, heterogeneous communities. Schools, just like society, have been forced to address religious and ethnic tensions, as well as varying definitions of what is “best” for children, that come with such a diverse nation.

Throughout the history of these changes in schools, parents have taken on varying roles of involvement. At some times, parents have taken a backseat, trusting professional educators to define what is in a child’s best interest. At other times, parents have overruled the authority of the school. The roles adopted by parents and the communities lie somewhere on a spectrum between wholly uninvolved in school affairs and full parental/community ownership over school functioning.

Research supports family and community engagement as an essential ingredient to the success of schools. But the question remains: how much involvement is too much? In the case of the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville Strike, a predominantly African-America community sought to recreate a school district to reflect the racial composition of the community—at a time when

Jews dominated the city's teaching force. An extreme example of the Community Control movement of the 1960's, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike highlights the tensions that arise when communities take action to gain ownership of their schools, and political engagement becomes ideologically and racially combative.

In present-day Pittsburgh, parents and community members have organized to form Parent Nation, a group advocating better standards and more transparency in Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS). The group was organized with the help of an education organization in the city named A+ Schools, and has struggled to gather support among parents. Parent Nation highlights a very different situation today regarding parent, community, and school relationships than during the Community Control era: parents over past decades have not forced their way into schools, as during the 1960's, but instead have become disconnected from schools. Which raises an interesting historical question: if parent and community involvement is now something that must be sought from scratch—both by the schools to involve parents and by parents to ensure they are involved in their child's school—when did parents get pushed out of schools?

The teachers' strike of Ocean Hill-Brownsville School District contrasts in many ways with the reality of PPS today. There has been no strike in PPS, nor is there the same widespread public outrage and political wrangling that was present in Brooklyn nearly half a century ago. But to say that outrage does not exist in PPS today would be wrong. The outrage exists; it just exists a bit below the surface.

PPS in 2013 and Ocean Hill-Brownsville in 1968 are not without their similarities. Both communities face tension stemming from class and race relations, and the role of teachers unions emerges in both neighborhoods. The national education scene plays a role in each story as well: the Community Control Movement reached far beyond a neighborhood of Brooklyn, just as the

fight for educational equity in PPS exemplifies what many social activists are increasingly defining as the leading civil rights issue of the twenty-first century.

In this thesis, I will explore the history of parent involvement/engagement in schools, focusing especially on the past half-century. Ocean Hill-Brownsville will be used to set the scene for a field study based analysis of A+ Schools today. I will use the two case studies to explore the issues facing parents and schools during each time period; the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Strike of 1968 will serve as an extreme example of the Community Control Movement, while parent organization efforts in PPS today will be used to demonstrate how issues affecting parents and schools are variously addressed in a modern context.

The two—Ocean Hill-Brownsville and A+ Schools—are obviously not directly comparable. Rather Ocean Hill-Brownsville provides a brief backdrop to highlight the fraught politics of parent-community-school relations, and context through which to view the current work of A+ Schools. The methods employed by parents to gain voice in Brooklyn schools in 1968 were unique to that context, and are far-removed from the realities of PPS today. I will argue that while Ocean Hill-Brownsville provided an extreme example of community involvement/engagement in schools, with levels of racial and ethnic tension not seen in today's PPS, both PPS and Ocean Hill-Brownsville illuminate the abiding central issues that have always complicated relationships between parents, communities, and schools.

Chapter 2: School Involvement/Engagement

School interaction with parents, guardians, families and communities can take a variety of forms, and the definition of family involvement/engagement can include a wide range of practices. One recent publication defines family engagement as encompassing “anything that better prepares students to learn, and families’ and schools’ support of that learning.”¹

Traditional parent and family involvement roles are organized through the school and “typically take a service orientation, where schools provide parenting classes or other programming to help parents better support their children in school.”²

However, the authors of *A Match on Dry Grass*, a book chronicling the work of education grassroots organizations, clearly differentiate this traditional type of involvement from what they consider true engagement. Dennis Shirley defines the difference: “Parental involvement—as practiced in most schools and reflected in the research literature—avoids issues of power and assigns parents a passive role in the maintenance of school culture. Parental engagement designates parents as citizens in the fullest sense—change agents who transform urban schools and neighborhoods.” Although “involvement” and “engagement” are terms that are commonly used interchangeably, the difference is real and can be defined in terms of the direction of communication: one-way communication from the school to the home is much less effective at raising student achievement and improving the overall school experience than two-way communication which encourages dialogue between the school and the home.

Involvement is typically a prerequisite for engagement—parents who are not informed on the working of their schools, and therefore do not clearly understand of the faults and successes

¹ Smith et al., *Family Engagement in Education: Seven Principles for Success*, Report, National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance, 2012, 5.

² Warren, Mark R. and Karen L. Mapp, *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

within a school, are generally unable to make useful contributions to decision making about schools, whether those decisions involve budget allocations or new attendance policies. There are exceptions to this, however. When a school is failing to meet the needs of its students, the symptoms for students can be very obvious—failing school report cards, low test scores—and in these situations parents can feel a need to skip involvement and go straight to high levels of engagement aimed at dramatic transformation within a school.

Commonly, parents, guardians, and families within one community display different levels of involvement and engagement. Although I will use the terms “involvement” and “engagement,” I will oftentimes provide a deeper level of description to differentiate varying levels of parental involvement.

It must also be noted that individuals who involve themselves with schools are not always the parent of a child—they can be grandparents, guardians, concerned community members, etc. Therefore, in referring to parents and community members I intend to encompass all individuals who have taken on a mentoring role within a school environment and are not staff, faculty, or school administration.

Schools can show clear preferences in how involved they wish parents and community members to become in their schools. However, it is also true that parents do not have to abide by the wishes of the school. In both Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Pittsburgh, there have been contested moments when a discrepancy existed between what involvement the school sought and what engagement the parents desired. The difficulties in converging these two sets of desires into an effective alliance between school and home can prove insurmountable. A viable or sustainable compromise does not necessarily have to emerge.

Methods of Parent Involvement

If we were to construct a continuum of interaction between parents, communities, and schools ranging from least to greatest level of involvement, the continuum would start with parent involvement, followed by parent engagement, and end with parent control. Of course, the least involved parents would be those who chose not to engage with schools, but in most cases this would be a failure by the parent to engage in low-level involvement, as schools must communicate with parents on some level.

The Parent Involvement Continuum generated by Barbara Tucker Cervone and Kathleen O’Leary in their paper, “A Conceptual Framework for Parent Involvement,” best summarizes parental involvement and the range of interaction it entails.³ Cervone and O’Leary categorize roles into four distinct areas—“Reporting Progress,” “Special Events,” “Parent Education,” and “Parents Teaching”—and differentiate between parents acting in passive roles versus active roles within these categories. Passive roles treat parents as consumers of information regarding school, such as reading a classroom newsletter or attending an Open House, whereas active roles engage parents in the education of their children within the school environment. The authors cite “Parent Leaders” as the best example of active parent participation in all categories, noting that all roles that require active participation from parents are synonymous with requiring a greater time commitment.

On our larger continuum, parent involvement is followed by engagement. Engagement involves a politicization of the parent role. While actively involved parents can act as leaders within a school, this is done on the terms of the school. Parents may be acting as leaders, but they are leaders in a defined and limited role. Engagement entails parents making decisions within a

³ Cervone, Barbara Tucker and Kathleen O’Leary, “A Conceptual Framework for Parent Involvement,” *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*, 1982.

school, in a capacity that can effect change. Parent engagement occurs when parents vote for changes to the school budget, elect school board members, or work to revise school policies. Parents who start their own initiatives in the school are engaged as well: they are creating roles for themselves within the school settings. Schools that engage parents empower them as important investors in the running of a school.

Table 1 (Barbara Tucker Cervone and Kathleen O'Leary, "A Conceptual Framework for Parent Involvement," *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*, 1982)

Parent Involvement Continuum			
Parents as Passive Participants	Good News Notes	Open House	Welcoming Committee
	60 Second Phone Calls	Audiovisual Presentations	Parent Bulletin Board
	Star of the Week	Potluck Supper	Information on Home and Weekend Activities
	Newsletter	Father's/Mother's/Sibling's Day	Information on Community Resources
		Spring Fling	Lending Library (Book, Toy, Record)
		End-of-the-Year Picnic	Classroom Observations
		The Gym Show	Workshops on Topics of Interest to Parents
	Call-In Times		A Course for Parents
	Parent-Teacher Conferences		Parent-to-Parent Meetings
			Parent Objectives in the IEP
Parents as Active Participants	Home-School Notebooks	(Parent Leaders)	(Parent Leaders)
	(Parent Leaders)	(Parent Leaders)	(Parent Leaders)
	Reporting Progress	Special Events	Parent Education
Parents as Passive Participants			Parents Teaching
			Parents as Active Participants

While parent involvement and engagement can and do occur at all grade levels and in all types of schools, it is usually much more essential and much more pronounced at the elementary level. Generally these schools are smaller and more community-based, two factors that lend themselves to higher levels of engagement. For involvement, especially, elementary students

need greater levels of attention, and therefore classroom parent helpers, reading leaders, and similar roles are much more integral to elementary school classrooms.

History of Parent Involvement and Engagement

The fact that parent involvement is recognized as a complex issue indicates that parent involvement in schools is not automatic. Before and during the beginning phases of public schooling in the 19th century, the authority of parents was never questioned; teachers answered to the communities in which they taught.⁴ A large part of the school/teacher/parent/community dynamic changed at the turn of the twentieth century when “what once was informal and unstructured became self-conscious, legalistic, and bureaucratic—the object of studied attention and systematic organization.”⁵ This change began slowly during the mid-nineteenth century and has continued ever since. As William W. Cutler III writes in his work, *Parents and Schools: The 150-Year Struggle for Control in American Education*, the professionalization of schools contributed in large part to this change:

Parents have always had a legitimate claim to influence—more so perhaps than anyone else—but after 1900, their personal stake in their child’s classroom performance carried less and less weight with the professionals who were now in charge of America’s schools. Classifying parents as outsiders, educators invited mothers and fathers to get involved with homework or special events without giving them authority or even making serious work for them to do.⁶

⁴ Kaestle, Carl, *Pillars of the Republic*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 3-29.

⁵ Cutler, William W. *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control in American Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

Involvement through homework-help or classroom volunteerism is an oft-cited form of parent involvement. The problem with this non-political form of interaction for many parents, especially for parents who feel poorly served by their district, is that it is so removed from influencing standard school policies or practices. Aiding teachers and schools is important, but it does not empower parents as actors within their children's schools.

Both Ocean Hill-Brownsville in the 1960's and Pittsburgh in the 2010's are examples of districts in which parents wanted more than relatively passive parent involvement (in Ocean Hill parents, as we shall see, also wanted more than engagement). Though their place in history is separated by more than fifty years, both case examples illustrate a general trend cited by Cutler as first emerging to prominence in the post-World War II era:

Convinced that their voice was muted or silent, many parents, both low-income and middle-class, began to insist they had rights at school. Once again, the home became the adversary of the school, but modern parents, unlike their nineteenth century counterparts, had to overcome bureaucratic precedents against their having any influence. Rejecting the claim that parent education was a prerequisite for parents' right, they argued instead that their right to be involved derived from who they were, not what they knew.⁷

What had begun during the turn of the century as increased autonomy in schools by teachers and administrators had been compounded by growing bureaucracy within schools. This created a situation where parent involvement in schools was not implied and new bureaucratic procedures complicated this situation of parents who wished to again become involved in schools.

In the period following World War II, when white flight to suburbia left many cities with a much higher share of minority families, the disconnect between home and school in urban environments became more pronounced. Minority families were more likely to be uneducated, or

⁷ Ibid., 12.

at least less educated than their white counterparts who had fled the city. White flight had two principal results for parents' roles in schools. First, whereas white, middle- and upper-class parents had generally felt entitled to their right to be involved at school (and were generally unafraid to push for accommodation), minority parents faced the barrier of being less educated and less likely to be fully aware of their rights within a school, or perhaps intimidated by a school environment that they had never felt comfortable in themselves. Second, minority parents would have to communicate concerns to majority-white teachers and administrators, adding a racial dynamic to school bureaucracy. Schools did not take responsibility for ensuring the comfort of all parents in the school, because schools without parental interference were less trouble for schools themselves.

The scholarship that exists on parent involvement today is mostly the result of research that began in the 1980's—that is, post-Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Therefore, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflicts occurred in a time when bureaucratic domination was the long-term norm in New York City Schools, and direct involvement by parents in educational decision-making was very far from automatic. By the time Parent Nation was formed in Pittsburgh in the early 2010's by contrast, the need for parent involvement in schools was accepted in educational scholarship and in modern education politics as a necessary part of a successful school environment. Indeed, parent involvement was even required under certain federal funding laws. But in both case settings, despite the different historical contexts, the articulation of parents' role in community schools was never simple or straightforward and had to be negotiated by parents themselves.

Chapter 3: Ocean Hill-Brownsville, 1968

In the fall of 1968, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) of New York City Schools went on three citywide strikes in a matter of three months.⁸ The Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn became the focus of the nation's interest. The strike was caused by a conflict between the UFT and the locally-elected Community Board that had taken over control of hiring and firing practices in Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools. Although Ocean Hill-Brownsville was only one of three experimental districts in New York City Schools that year, it stole the spotlight.

While the strike occurred in fall of 1968, the build-up started much earlier. The passing of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 under President Lyndon Johnson furthered the acknowledgement and support of education as a component of a "Great Society," symbolized best by the Head Start prekindergarten program for impoverished children.⁹ In that same year of 1964, a one-day walkout was held by parents and community members in protest of the segregation in city schools. More than 460,000 students did not attend school that day.¹⁰ Though the event was deemed unsuccessful, it set the scene for the issues that would bubble to the surface four years later: the issues of race and rights in schools.

The Economic Opportunity Act, in addition to its material contribution to education in the form of Head Start, furthered educational advancement for low-income families, specifically black families, by helping to fuel the Community Control Movement in schools. The Community Control Movement is an umbrella term to describe a branch of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's that advocated wide-ranging self-governance of black communities, but that was in many

⁸ Podair, Jerald E., "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis: New York's Antigone," Lecture, Gotham History Festival, Gotham Center for New York City History, New York, October 6, 2001.

⁹ "Economic Opportunity Act (1964)," Pearson Education, Accessed March 06, 2013, http://wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/751/769950/Documents_Library/eoa1964.htm.

¹⁰ Ravitch, Diane, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools*, (New York: Basic, 1988), 276.

cases most closely focused on schooling: “Community control...should be understood as a demand for accountability by parents to whom the schools have never accounted.”¹¹ Tied to the evolution of the Black Power movement, Community Control encompassed governance and economic ownership. The ideal empowered community was to be governed by local residents, its schools were to be staffed with community teachers teaching a community-relevant curriculum, and the neighborhood was to be filled with black- and locally-owned businesses.¹² Rhody McCoy, the future superintendent of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School Board under the community control experiment, summed up the movement’s goals by stating:

People—black people—want control over their schools for self-determination, for building a strong self-image, for individual and community development, for restoration of confidence in education, for economic stability, for recognition, and for survival. Community control means community growth and development, and the school is the hub of this growth.”¹³

Two widely publicized education studies made a significant impact on the future of New York City Schools in 1966 and 1967. In 1966, the Coleman Report, authored by the renowned John Hopkins University sociologist, James Coleman, made waves nationally for its conclusion that lower academic achievement of low-income and minority children was related mainly to their home environment. The Coleman Report came out the same year that the combined enrollment of blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York City public schools surpassed 50%.¹⁴ Simultaneously, a report by the New York City Temporary Commission on City Finances, released in summer 1966, revealed a huge opportunity for the city schools: state aid was being

¹¹ Cutler, William W. *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control in American Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago), 177-8.

¹² DeFilippis, James, and Susan Saegert, *The Community Development Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 31.

¹³ Harris, Glen Anthony, *The Ocean-Hill Brownsville Conflict: Intellectual Struggles Between Blacks and Jews at Mid-century*, (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), 139.

¹⁴ Ravitch, Diane, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools*, (New York: Basic, 1988), 292.

given to New York City schools based on the schools uniting in a single district. To divide each borough into a separate district would make the city eligible for an additional \$100 million throughout the entire city. For all that the Coleman Report claimed regarding the relative ineffectiveness of additional school funding per se on raising low-income, minority student achievement, it seemed that New York City would not take any chances.¹⁵

On April 30, 1967 the New York State legislature gave New York City Mayor John Lindsay approval for an increase in financing to NYC public schools if a decentralization plan could be provided to the state by December 1, 1967. Mayor Lindsay then announced the formation on an Advisory Panel on Decentralization, which would come to be known as the “Bundy Panel” after chairman McGeorge Bundy of the Ford Foundation. Mario Fantini, also of the Ford Foundation, headed the staff of the advisory committee. The panel was purposely stacked with Ford Foundation input—the Ford Foundation would later serve as a large financier for the school community control experiment—while members of both the teachers’ union and the school board were intentionally left out of the discussion.¹⁶

The Bundy Report’s decentralization plan was a challenge to the “bureaucratization” of education that had long been the norm in education in New York.¹⁷ Instead of maintaining leadership in the superintendent, Board of Education, and Teachers’ Union, The Bundy report recommended a new “community control system” of largely autonomous local districts. In 1967-68, the Board of Education permitted the establishment of three experimental districts to be run by locally elected school boards.¹⁸ The Ford Foundation, Mayor Lindsay and the city’s “elites” favored this plan after the failure of earlier citywide school integration plans. Community

¹⁵ Ibid., 293-4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 329-337.

¹⁷ Cutler, William W. *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control in American Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago), 13.

¹⁸ “Two Cities”, New York's Mayors: John V. Lindsay, 2010, <http://lindsay.mcnyc.org/two-cities>.

control of schools was seen as a way “to avoid urban unrest” while maintaining the status quo of racial divisions in the city.¹⁹

East Harlem, Lower East Side of Manhattan and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn were chosen as the three experimental districts, but no site garnered the same attention as Ocean Hill-Brownsville. During the summer of 1967 the community board of Ocean Hill-Brownsville was elected and community control began to take shape. However, within the first few months cracks in the system began to appear:

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville local board soon clashed with the UFT over the extent of its personnel powers. The local board claimed the power to hire and fire teachers and administrators in the district; the union argued that only the central Board of Education could perform these functions.²⁰

The community board also wanted greater control over the curriculum used in local schools and began to institute changes within schools throughout the 1967/1968 school year.

The changes made by the community board to the school during the first year of its existence stimulated pushback from teachers and administrators. In early May 1968 the community board ordered the transfer of nineteen white, Jewish UFT teachers and administrators from Junior High School 271 in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. The Jewish teachers were to be replaced by black teachers and principals. Although the Jewish teachers still had jobs within New York City Public Schools, the teachers, and the UFT, saw the transfer as a firing—a firing that set off a chain of events that no one fully anticipated.

¹⁹ Podair, Jerald E., "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis: New York's Antigone," Lecture, Gotham History Festival, Gotham Center for New York City History, New York, October 6, 2001.

²⁰ Ibid.

The major argument was over whether the community board had the power to hire and fire union members. Those fired complained that they had not been given warning or reason for their firing. For community and community board members alike, the reasons seemed obvious: this was their school, and if teachers were not embracing the new direction of the school, the teachers, unionized or not, they could not be kept in a school that they were not helping to improve. The community board, moreover, felt that the teachers fired from 271 had actively tried to sabotage the community control project. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville community, the board made clear, was not going to take it.²¹

While the initial firings happened in May, negotiations were unsuccessful through the summer, resulting in a strike by the UFT in September 1968. Two other strikes would follow, with this strike phase of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy lasting until mid-November.

The divide was quickly felt throughout the borough and the city at-large. Much confusion stemmed from the situation in Ocean Hill-Brownsville being unlike anything that had come before—there was no precedent for what to do when a community was willing to take a stand against a union not serving the community. In the past, districts had used programs like parent “education” to “control community input, while they (districts) monopolized authority.”²² Earle H. West, a board editor for *The Journal of Negro Education*, similarly described the lack of respect in school districts for parent involvement and engagement: “There is a feeling that parents are at best to be grudgingly tolerated, and at worst an influence to be actively counteracted.”²³ What was a district, and more importantly a teachers’ union, to do when parents were not willing to be walked over anymore?

²¹ *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement 1954-1985*. WGBH Educational Foundation. 1987.

²² Cutler, William W. *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control in American Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago), 176.

²³ *Ibid.*, 175.

Ocean Hill-Brownsville was the focus of the community control movement, but it was also the focus of a bigger controversy: racial tensions and outright racial outrage. While the conflict did not definitely divide along racial lines, it certainly appeared so. Ocean Hill-Brownsville had been a Jewish neighborhood in the 1940's and 1950's until Jews had moved to other areas of the city and blacks had moved in. However, much of the advancement of Jews, professionally, had occurred within the school district, even after the racial composition of the area had changed. Jews had gained stable jobs through promotion in the school district, and with that promotion and economic advancement had come a strong commitment to professionalism and meritocracy. The firing of teachers brought this meritocratic belief into question, and the UFT, therefore, inevitably came into conflict with the community control movement: "The UFT in essence was against community control but not in practice; that is, as long as the practice of community control did not happen in their district."²⁴

Extreme accusations of anti-Semitism and racism were openly thrown back and forth between the UFT and the community board. Some believed that such accusations were a product of the unique dynamics of New York City. A *Look Magazine* article from April 1969, "The War for City Schools," explained: "If the Ocean Hill confrontation had happened in Boston, then the fight would have been between black parents and the Irish-Catholic teachers...but in New York, the Jews were it and the timing was right for discord."²⁵

So, while the community board tried to maintain quality education as the central topic of discussion of the teachers' strike, the message was commonly diluted in favor of the more obvious story: race. The divide in Ocean Hill-Brownsville and throughout the city was pronounced:

²⁴ Harris, Glen Anthony, *The Ocean-Hill Brownsville Conflict: Intellectual Struggles Between Blacks and Jews at Mid-century*, (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), 137.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 135-6.

The strikes divided the city into two hostile camps. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville local board, the city's black community, and local board allies among Manhattan government, business, media, and intellectual elites charged the UFT with racism. The UFT, supported by the mainstream labor leaders and most of the city's outer-borough white middle-class population, accused its opponents of class bias, union busting, and anti-Semitism.²⁶

A large source of confusion, aside from racial dynamics and the motivations of the firings as seen from each side, was the divide in the formerly united liberal political front. Blacks and Jews had, until the mid-1960's, been united in liberal politics—Jews had been especially vocal supporters of the Civil Rights Movement. As Jews had faced much religious discrimination over the years, they still did not feel wholly assimilated into the white Christian majority. With the rise of the New Left as part of the activist movement and the Black Power Movement in the late 1960's, "the Jewish commitment to liberalism was to come under attack."²⁷ But it was not until the firing of teachers in May in Ocean Hill-Brownsville that the evolving civil rights politics of the nation was brought to a head in Brooklyn.

In an article written to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike, Richard Kahlenberg defines the crux of the political confusion surrounding the strike:

When white people fired black people for no cause, liberals knew it was wrong; when conservative employers arbitrarily fired unionized employees, they knew which side they were on. But what was one to think when black people were firing white people, and when the assault on labor unions came from the left?²⁸

²⁶ Podair, Jerald E., "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis: New York's Antigone," Lecture, Gotham History Festival, Gotham Center for New York City History, New York, October 6, 2001.

²⁷ Harris, Glen Anthony, *The Ocean-Hill Brownsville Conflict: Intellectual Struggles Between Blacks and Jews at Mid-century*, (Lanham: Lexington, 2012), xiii.

²⁸ Kahlenberg, Richard. "Ocean Hill-Brownsville: Unleashing American Liberalism." *The New York Sun*, Accessed March 2, 2013.

The conflicts in Ocean Hill-Brownsville quickly degraded into an insult-slinging battle between the UFT and the local board. Nothing could be stated about the other side without the comment having an immediate, racially- and politically- charged interpretation.

The alleged political link between the Black Power movement and the push for community control did not sit well with all of those involved with Ocean Hill-Brownsville. In video interviews taken of parents the year of the strike, one mother detailed her feelings:

We only want to control our school in our area. We want to get the opportunity for our children to learn the same way that other children in other areas learn. And our main concern is for the legislature to support our guidelines. All we want is better education for the children. We don't want Black Power...If the legislature or any of them would come down and see the schools that our children go to school in they wouldn't be so interested in what type of power we wanted.²⁹

Dolores Torres who served as a member of the community board during the strike voiced a similar sentiment. In recounting the cries of “Black Power” she heard during a protest, she could not help but be discouraged that such cries were mixed in with cries of “Power to the people.” “Power to the people,” she felt, was a sentiment that reached many people—Ocean Hill-Brownsville, in her eyes, was a demonstration of community control, not black control. “Power to the people was a promise as old as the nation,” but in the combative atmosphere of the strike such a message was lost even after the end of all strikes in mid-November 1968.^{30,31}

²⁹ *Ocean Hill-Brownsville Parents Speak, 1968, Vimeo*, Museum of the City of New York, 2012.

³⁰ Podair, Jerald E., "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis: New York's Antigone," Lecture, Gotham History Festival, Gotham Center for New York City History, New York, October 6, 2001.

³¹ *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement 1954-1985*. WGBH Educational Foundation. 1987.

Post-Strike

Mayor Lindsay named the months of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike in fall 1968 the “worst of my public life.”³² Indeed, it was a loss for all involved. The repercussions would be felt for decades to come. The largest result of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike, and of the failed Community Board initiative more generally, was a withdrawal of mayoral and community involvement and engagement in schools, towards a Board of Education-centric model. The Community Control movement ironically led to less community voice and more Board of Education control.

In 1969, the New York City Decentralization Law was passed in April, after much negotiation. The United Parents Associations (UPA), a New York City education organization formed in 1921 and known for its “distinctive but generally conservative voice in New York school politics,” had been involved in the issue of parent education for years before the strike, and tried to assert its voice during the drafting of the 1969 bill. The UPA advocated a plan that might have ensured the survival of a form of community control: parents-only voting for school boards. The UPA felt that, if all citizens were allowed a vote in the process, “special interests would intrude on the parents’ natural right to control the education of their children.”³³ However, the UPA’s parent-centered initiative was ignored.

The Decentralization Bill mandated that a Board of Education consisting of seven members—one from each city bureau and two appointed by the mayor—be formed, with five borough representatives elected by the public. The bill also increased the authority of the top school administrator, now renamed “chancellor,” and endowed with additional powers beyond

³² “Two Cities”, New York's Mayors: John V. Lindsay, 2010, <http://lindsay.mcnyc.org/two-cities>.

³³ Cutler, William W. *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control in American Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago), 187.

that of a superintendent.³⁴ The biggest blow to community control in low-income communities was the election of Board of Education members: “The boards were elected by all the city’s voters, not just public school parents. It was forgotten, too, that low-income voters do not usually participate politically as much as middle- and upper-income voters.”³⁵ It was forgotten by everyone except those who had to live most directly with the consequences of these realities.

Lewis M. Feldstein, who served as Executive Assistant to Mayor Lindsay, summarized the effects of the 1968 strike: "All the battling caused greater damage...even for the communities that wanted greater control got less control for thirty years."³⁶ Instead of shifting power into the hands of parents, or the Mayor, power was chiefly placed in the hands of the Board of Education. So it remained until Mayor Michael Bloomberg asserted mayoral control of the public schools in 2002.³⁷

Fast-forward six years: Boston Public Schools in the fall of 1974 was facing a crisis of similarly epic proportions. To combat white parents’ efforts to avoid desegregation and school busing, a community engagement model was included in integration plans, both at the school level and citywide.

Judge W. Arthur Garrity directed principals to establish Racial-Ethnic Councils to be elected by and composed of parents, both black and white, an order that actually elevated racial tension in some schools. In addition, he required school officials to set up nine District Advisory Councils and a Citywide Parents’ Advisory Council to thwart those who might stand in the way of integration at the neighborhood level.³⁸

³⁴ Ravitch, Diane, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools*, (New York: Basic, 1988), 386-7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 389.

³⁶ "Two Cities", New York's Mayors: John V. Lindsay, 2010, <http://lindsay.mcny.org/two-cities>.

³⁷ Wong, Kenneth K. and Francis X. Shen, “When Mayors Lead Urban Schools: Toward Developing a Framework to Assess the Effects of Mayoral Takeover of Urban Districts,” Lecture, School Board Politics, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Boston, October 2003.

³⁸ Cutler, William W., *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control in American Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 177.

Racial-Ethnic Councils served a function more small-scale than the Community Board of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, while the Advisory Council, also known as the Citywide Coordinating Council, functioned on a larger scale.

The Citywide Coordinating Council served as an involvement model more so than an engagement model—the main job of the Council of forty individuals was to monitor desegregation. Regardless, the inclusion of various political beliefs on Council ensured that a range of Bostonian views on busing and desegregation were accounted for. Council was not just composed of pro-integration parents, but “involved many parents who thought the court orders and desegregation plans to be a bad policy, yet they joined in to try to make desegregation work peacefully.”³⁹

Almost a decade after Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the strike seemed like a distant memory in New York, so far removed was it from the new norm of the school system:

By the late 1970s, cooperation, not confrontation, had become the order of their day. In fact, school reform by itself was not compelling enough to sustain parent activism in declining neighborhoods in need of enough comprehensive redevelopment.⁴⁰

Community control—the movement that had given a voice to parents and community members that were tired of a white-dominated, ineffective public school system in minority neighborhoods—had been replaced and summarily forgotten.

Perhaps the most telling statement about decentralization was made in 1968, a year before the Decentralization Law was even passed, by a parent of Ocean Hill-Brownsville who

³⁹ Formisano, Ronald P., *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1991), 89.

⁴⁰ Cutler, William W., *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control in American Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 179.

said, "Most people use the work 'decentralization'. You can decentralize but that don't change anything. We're talking about change."⁴¹

Community control created change, but not in the direction its proponents had desired or in the quality of education the city's children received. Community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville created a change in the liberal dynamic; it created a change in the way the city viewed the parents of the movement; it changed the structure of New York City Public School governance for the next thirty years.

⁴¹ *Ocean Hill-Brownsville Parents Speak, 1968*, Museum of the City of New York, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/29063912>.

Chapter 4: Pittsburgh, Present Day

Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) is a district facing difficult financial and political issues. Serving slightly over 24,000 students in fifty-four schools—from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade—PPS’ most troublesome concern is equity within the district. African-American students achieve at a significantly lower level than their white counterparts, even accounting for socioeconomic status, on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), a statewide standardized test in math and reading administered to all students in grades 3-8 and grade 11 on a yearly basis.⁴² In 2012, black students scored, on average, 31.9 percentage points lower than white students on the PSSA Reading Test, and, on average, 30.9 percentage points lower than white students on the PSSA Math Test.⁴³

The disparity in achievement between black and white students in PPS is nothing new, nor are many of the other issues facing the district. A concerted effort was made to raise the standards of the district beginning in the fall of 2002 under the leadership of Pittsburgh’s Mayor Tom Murphy. Murphy’s appointment of the Mayor’s Commission on Public Education led to the release of a report, “Keeping the Promise: The Case for Reform in Pittsburgh Public Schools,” in September 2003, which set the stage for the formation of a community organization designed to address the issues laid out in the report. That organization became A+ Schools: Pittsburgh Community Alliance for Public Education, an organization that remains very active in the district today.

A decade after the formation of the Mayor’s Commission, A+ Schools began its newest initiative: a parent ambassador program. The program started with the 2012-2013 school year in five K-5/K-8 PPS schools and was a concerted effort to get parents and community members

⁴² The PSSA is also administered in grades 4, 8, and 11 for science, and grades 5, 8, and 11 for writing.

⁴³ *2012 Report to the Community on Public School Progress in Pittsburgh*, Report, (Pittsburgh: A+ Schools, 2012), 11.

involved and engaged in their local schools. That program, later renamed “Parent Nation,” is now approaching the end of its first (school) year of existence with mixed-results. While Parent Nation has connected PPS parents and empowered its members to seek further education on issues relevant to the district, it remains unable to grow its numbers and its future role as a parent-led educational organization in Pittsburgh remains unclear.

Parent Nation is a modern-day example of parent involvement and engagement in public schooling and is valuable for the insight it provides regarding the concerns of parents and communities, the methods such individuals use to become involved in schools, and the struggles that come with seeking greater voice and autonomy within a school setting. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teachers’ Strike took place at a moment in time where parents and a community felt they had no choice but to rise up against a public school that was not serving their needs. Parent Nation in PPS demonstrates a much more even keeled approach to gaining a parent voice in the schools. Each of these two snapshots of history is united by a parental desire to improve educational opportunity for their children.

The landscapes of Brooklyn circa 1968 versus Pittsburgh circa 2013 vary greatly, thus, the issues that Parent Nation chose to address during its first months of existence were highly related to the current national and local educational issues. Charter schools, a non-issue in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, have proven to be a hot-button issue related to school choice and school funding. As a necessary component of understanding PPS and the work of A+ Schools, the role of charters, both in PPS and on a national level, will be a main concern of this study. Much of my commentary is centered around a film released in the fall of 2012, “Won’t Back Down,” and the reaction it received both on the national stage and in Pittsburgh, where the film is set. “Won’t Back Down” will serve to frame my analysis of the work of A+ Schools and Parent Nation.

While Parent Nation currently operates within traditional public schools, charters generally have a vastly different approach to parent involvement/engagement and thus those parents who choose to remain in traditional public schools represent a very specific demographic.

District discipline policy and the needs and rights of special needs students were two key issues explored by Parent Nation. Both policy areas were chosen because of their relevance to the work of involved parent and community members and because of the interest the issues stirred at meetings. The anecdotes that will be reported in this thesis surrounding student discipline policy and special needs students' rights, as well as other observations and conversations collected at Parent Nation meetings and through interviews, illuminate key motivations for parent involvement in PPS and Parent Nation. It will be argued that what has been accomplished thus far by Parent Nation has mainly been foundation-building for projected future endeavors, but that Parent Nation's strategic planning process suggests the possibility of a meaningful future for the organization.

Mayor's Commission on Public Education

In 2002, the situation in Pittsburgh Public Schools looked grim: on July 9th, three Pittsburgh foundations whose financial subsidies had long been crucial to the funding of PPS pulled their grants to the district, noting the "sharp decline of governance, leadership and fiscal discipline" by PPS officials and the Board of Education.⁴⁶ Together, the Pittsburgh Foundation, the Heinz Endowments and the Grable Foundation accounted for \$11.5 million in grant money to

⁴⁶ Lee, Carmen J., and Eleanor Chute. "Foundations Yank Pittsburgh School Grants," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 10, 2002.

the district over a five-year period. In other words, the announcement was a significant wake-up call to the district.⁴⁷

In response, Tom Murphy formed the Mayor’s Commission on Public Education. Thirty-eight citizens representing seventeen Pittsburgh neighborhoods were recruited to serve “a cross-section of the city: major employers and small business people, educators, legal experts, clergy, and parents from more than a dozen neighborhoods.”⁴⁸ To be sure, the cohort was far from a random sample of citizens—every committee member was connected in some way to the community, and many members worked as managers, directors, and presidents of local companies and organizations. Representatives included those from higher education—the President of Chatham College, Dr. Esther L. Barrazone, along with Professors Lauren Resnick and Jerome Taylor of the University of Pittsburgh; Mark A. Nordenberg, Chancellor of University of Pittsburgh; and Stephen A. Schillo, Duquesne University’s Vice President of Management and Business. The foundations whose actions caused the Commission’s formation were also represented: William E. Trueheart, President and CEO of the Pittsburgh Foundation, served as Commission Co-Chair; and Susan H. Brownlee, Executive Director of the Grable Foundation, and Maxwell King, Executive Director of the Heinz Endowments, both served on committees.⁴⁹

The Commission’s mission was to research, with the help of the RAND Corporation and the Pennsylvania Economic League, the state of Pittsburgh Public Schools, including the range of public opinions on the state of PPS. Following a fact-gather and research phase, the Commission was to report back to the city and suggest “far-reaching” solutions to the myriad of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Keeping the Promise: The Case for Reform in Pittsburgh Public Schools*, Report, (Pittsburgh: Mayor’s Commission on Public Education, 2003), 2, 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2.

problems they were sure to find.⁵⁰ The team was divided into three committees: Leadership and Governance; Student Performance, School Funding and Financial Management; and Standards and Accountability.

Interviews were a central part of the process. Among those interviewed were Helen Faison, interim superintendent for PPS from 1999-2000; the reigning PPS Superintendent, John Thompson, and Board of Education President, Jean Fink, as well as all Board of Education members serving in office between September 2002 and May 2003. Subcommittees conducted interviews in separate sessions with each official. The Committee also held meetings directly with Pittsburgh residents in various neighborhoods during its nine-month investigation.

The Final Report, released in September 2003, was far-reaching. The report opened with shocking statistics on the state of PPS: 54% of all students, and 69% of African-American students, could not read at grade level; and 61% of all students, and 75% of African-American students, were not performing at grade level in math.⁵¹ With such a stunning equity gap between African-American and white students, the Committee concluded that, “There is a desperate need for more parental involvement and community-based strategies that work in partnership with the schools. They found that the district's financial management and leadership issues directly contribute to the disparity in quality education.”⁵²

The Committee criticized PPS for unjustifiable financial costs—estimating that the district was spending more than \$10 million per year to keep an unnecessary number of schools open, especially since enrollment in the district was projected to decline “26% over the next

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

⁵² "Mayor's Commission on Public Education Releases Report Findings and Recommendations; Commission Combined Community Input with Expertise," *PR Newswire*, September 22, 2003.

decade.”⁵³ Some of the final recommendations included the “develop(ment) of staffing plans to adjust for declining enrollment,” and the transition to a “calendar that matches the state’s fiscal year,” which would allow time for budget reallocation in the event of unexpected cuts in funding from state sources.⁵⁴

A large part of the Committee’s investigation and criticism of the district was directed at PPS leadership, mainly the Board of Education. Anyone who followed the initial coverage of the Mayor’s Commission would have little trouble understanding why. A *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article detailing contents of the letter from the three Pittsburgh foundations to PPS stated:

The board is divided, the administration is embattled, key personnel are leaving or under attack, and morale appears to be devastatingly low...the district's management problems are due to the “increasingly dysfunctional” relationship between the school board's majority and minority factions and between the board and the administration.⁵⁵

Even during the interviews, members of the Mayor’s Commission were disappointed with the responses of Board members, who seemed too preoccupied with the description of their job to acknowledge the greater purpose of their job: to ensure the academic progression of students. “Board members tended to discuss fiscal matters and their responsibilities to those who elected them and spent little time discussing the academic achievement of students in the city’s public schools.”⁵⁶

For more productive conversations, the commission members had to go out of state. They turned to:

⁵³ *Keeping the Promise: The Case for Reform in Pittsburgh Public Schools*, Report, (Pittsburgh: Mayor’s Commission on Public Education, 2003), 8, 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁵⁵ Lee, Carmen J., and Eleanor Chute, "Foundations Yank Pittsburgh School Grants," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 10, 2002.

⁵⁶ *Keeping the Promise: The Case for Reform in Pittsburgh Public Schools*, Report, (Pittsburgh: Mayor’s Commission on Public Education, 2003), 14.

Superintendents from public school districts in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Springfield, Massachusetts... who described how they worked with their districts from political, demographic, and education perspectives, and how they succeeded in engaging their communities in creating strategic plans and cultures of achievement that benefit their schools.⁵⁷

The Final Report also mentioned other city school districts that addressed their problems in more constructive ways than in Pittsburgh: “Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, and Seattle have found the courage to confront their shortcomings and the resolve to travel the hard road of reform and have arrested decline and reversed downward trends.”⁵⁸ A noticeable trend in the cited cities was the recent increase of mayoral power over the schools. Detroit and Washington, D.C. schools had also increased control over schools, but were not mentioned in the report; neither was New York City Schools, which had recently come under the direct authority of Mayor Bloomberg.^{59,60}

The Commission recommended an increased role for Pittsburgh’s mayor in the Board of Education selection process, stating as its first principal recommendation:

The Pittsburgh Board of Education should be appointed by the Mayor from a pool of candidates provided by a nominating commission whose members reflect the racial, geographic, professional, and economic diversity of the city.⁶¹

Under the Commission’s recommendation the Board would consist of eleven members, two more than the traditional (and current) Board of Education model.⁶² Further measures were also

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁹ Lee, Carmen J., and Eleanor Chute. "Mayors in the Schools: Will City Join in Trend to Give More Control Over Board Members." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 21, 2004.

⁶⁰ At the time the Pittsburgh report was released, Mayor Bloomberg had just taken control of the city’s schools, a turning point in taking away significant power from the Board of Education for the first time since the decentralization of NYC schools following Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

⁶¹ *Keeping the Promise: The Case for Reform in Pittsburgh Public Schools*, Report, (Pittsburgh: Mayor’s Commission on Public Education, 2003), 51.

suggested to limit the power of the Board, specifically eliminating the Board's ability to levy taxes and line-item veto PPS budget items.⁶³

There was high press coverage of the release of the Mayor's Commission Final Report, with coverage and reaction strewn across the Sunday edition of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Despite the recommendations by the Commission for the selection of Board members, some feared that black representation on the Board would suffer as a result of mayoral appointment.⁶⁴ Apart from other concerns raised by various parties and detailed descriptions of policy recommendations made to the district, there was a telling opinion piece written by six representatives who had served on the Mayor's Commission. For all the tension between the district and Board members, the representatives placed greater emphasis on the parent and community role in education—from the perspective of those actively engaged in the district:

A school system that is satisfied with itself simply because "all the children aren't failing; they're just not working at grade level" is not acceptable to us as parents, or as Pittsburghers... We are six parents representing five different neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. Among us we have 16 kids, of whom 15 are students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. We are black and white. Professionals and at-home parents. Coaches and PTA volunteers. Republicans and Democrats. And one thing is certain: We're united in our concern for our children's future and we're channeling our energies, not into political volleying or senseless name-calling, but instead focusing on student performance and delivering on the promise of a better educational system.⁶⁵

The Mayor's Commission is a clear example of a concerted effort by the Mayor to include and engage both parents and the community in improving PPS. While many of the suggestions made in the final report have not been implemented over the past decade—the financial state of the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Lee, Carmen J., and Eleanor Chute. "Mayors in the Schools: Will City Join in Trend to Give More Control Over Board Members." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 21, 2004.

⁶⁵ Allen et al., "The Mayor's Commission on Public Education: Three Perspectives," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 28, 2003.

district is abysmal, the School Board is still composed of nine elected members, a huge achievement gap remains between black and white students—encouraging the active engagement of the community was seen as a step in a new direction.

A+ Schools

An important recommendation of the Mayor’s Commission was the formation of an organization in the city to “monitor the progress of reform, regularly inform the public and engage community partners to help improve educational outcomes of students.”⁶⁶ That organization became A+ Schools: Pittsburgh Community Alliance for Public Education in 2004 when it was founded as a non-profit. A+ Schools took up the mission intended by the Commission and centered its efforts on the advancement of student achievement in PPS. The Commission’s report stated very clearly in an opening section, “We know what high performing school districts look like: attention is riveted on improving student performance. Starting today, every decision related to the Pittsburgh Public schools must be based on how it will affect student achievement. While our situation is grim, there is hope.”⁶⁷ A+ Schools was founded to be that hope, by “demand(ing) (the) excellence” the Commission deemed “a prerequisite for change.”⁶⁸

A+ Schools has evolved to address many of the school district problems raised by the Final Report. This is no surprise because Carey Harris, the current Executive Director of the

⁶⁶ *Keeping the Promise: The Case for Reform in Pittsburgh Public Schools*, Report, (Pittsburgh: Mayor’s Commission on Public Education, 2003), 57.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

organization, became a founding co-director of A+ Schools after serving on the Mayor’s Commission as a member of the School Funding and Financial Management Committee.^{69,70}

A+ Schools can most accurately be described as a non-political organization in a highly charged political environment. Schooling, and especially public schooling in the age of unions, charters, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top, is highly divided in far more ways than traditional political categorizations can capture.

From its small beginnings, A+ Schools has grown to a nine-person staff focused mainly on reforming PPS through the promotion of more effective teaching, which the organization believes is the key to correcting inequities between black and white students in the district. This articulation of its main goal is likely tied to its main source of funding: A+ Schools is supported by grants from several organizations, but most notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has been pursuing its Teacher Effectiveness Initiative (TEI) for several years.^{71,72} In addition, funding comes from the Grable Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, and the Pittsburgh Foundation—the three major funders of PPS whose withdrawal of support in 2002 sparked the formation of the Mayor’s Commission.⁷³

A+ Schools is far from a radical organization. Still, it is truly innovative in the sense that few education organizations in Pittsburgh have been as successful in garnering the attention of so many parents, teachers and administrators, or have been as deliberate in seeking to remain connected and engaged with all parties involved in PPS—the teachers’ union, school administrators, teachers, staff, parents, students, community members, and PPS-supporting

⁶⁹ At the time Harris had been serving as the Executive Director of the South Side Local Development Company.

⁷⁰ McNulty, Timothy, “Mayor’s Task Force on Schools Ready,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 17, 2002.

⁷¹ Also known as “Empowering Effective Teachers”.

⁷² *Empowering Effective Teachers: Readiness for Reform*, Report, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, February 2010.

⁷³ “Donors and Supporters,” A+ Schools: Pittsburgh’s Community Alliance for Public Education, 2013, <http://www.aplusschools.org/about-us/who-we-are/donors-and-supporters/>.

foundations. In a sense, then, A+ Schools is notable for its effort not to be radical—and this clearly makes its parent advocacy approach a far cry from anything seen in Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

A+ Schools currently has five key initiatives: Board Watch, School Works, TeenBloc, Voter Education, and Parent Nation.

Board Watch seeks to address the issues highlighted by the Commission. The Board of Education is not mayor-appointed, as the Final Report strongly recommended. However, the goal of Board Watch is to include an accountability component in the elected Board model. A+ Schools trains volunteers to attend Board meetings and rate Board members and the Board as a whole in five areas: Focus and Mission (“Board is focused on achieving its goals”); Transparency (“Board processes are accessible to the public”); Conduct (“Conflict is managed respectfully”); Role Clarity (“Board provides policy leadership and oversight”); and Competency (“Board members are informed”).⁷⁴ Each month the Board receives a grade in each category, ranging from “A+” to “F,” as well as an overall grade. Grades are then calculated as the average of all volunteer grading.⁷⁵ Concrete suggestions are included at the end of each report card for the Board—comments ranging from “focus less on details and micromanaging” to “post agendas well in advance of the meeting”.⁷⁶

School Works is a team of volunteers trained by A+ Schools. Instead of reporting on the workings of the Board of Education, School Works focuses on data collection within schools concerning PPS “staffing, training, coursework, support services, resources and

⁷⁴ “Board Watch Q&A,” A+ Schools: Pittsburgh's Community Alliance for Public Education, 2013, <http://www.aplusschools.org/about-us/press-room/fact-sheetsqas/board-watch-qa/>.

⁷⁵ The average number of trained volunteers attending each Board meeting varies, but all Board meetings are attended by at least three volunteers.

⁷⁶ “February 2012 Board Watch Report Card,” A+ Schools: Pittsburgh's Community Alliance for Public Education, 2013, <http://www.aplusschools.org/wp-content/uploads/February-2012-Board-Watch-Report-Card-v2.pdf>.

learning opportunities for Pittsburgh students,” specifically noting areas in need of improvement concerning resources for students and teachers. School Works began in 2009 and is directly tied to the Empowering Effective Teacher Initiative of the Gates Foundation: volunteers utilize the Research-Based Inclusive System of Evaluation (RISE) rubric developed by the Gates-funded Empowering Effective Teachers Plan.^{77,78}

TeenBloc is a collaboration of A+ Schools, the Coro Center for Civic Leadership, and the Marilyn G. Rabb (MGR) Foundation that engages high school students in discussions and helps facilitate student initiatives to improve PPS.⁷⁹ Though TeenBloc is not as specifically tied to the original suggestions of the Commission, it provides an environment for leadership development in students.

Voting practices in Pittsburgh were noted in the Commission’s Report: a combination of mediocre voter registration and low voter turnout caused concern that school board election results were distorted by a lack of voters.⁸⁰ A+ Schools’ Voter Education initiative takes a two-pronged approach. For the upcoming 2013 School Board Elections, A+ Schools has encouraged voters and current School Board Members and prospective candidates to sign an “Educational Equity and Excellence” Community Pledge, ensuring that future members of the Board of Education are held accountable to Pittsburgh citizens.⁸¹ In addition, A+ Schools produces and distributes non-partisan information on candidates, dates of candidate forums, and information regarding district budget and the roles and responsibilities of school board members.

⁷⁷ “School Works Q&A,” A+ Schools: Pittsburgh's Community Alliance for Public Education, 2013, <http://www.aplusschools.org/about-us/press-room/fact-sheetsqas/school-works-qa/>.

⁷⁸ “Why PPS?” Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2013, <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/domain/13>.

⁷⁹ “TeenBloc,” Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2013, <http://www.aplusschools.org/our-programs/teenbloc/>.

⁸⁰ *Keeping the Promise: The Case for Reform in Pittsburgh Public Schools*, Report, (Pittsburgh: Mayor’s Commission on Public Education, 2003), 100.

⁸¹ The pledge reads: “YES! I’m ready to stand up for great public schools in Pittsburgh. When parents, educators, students and community members unite, we can fight for the schools our students need. You can count on me to make this vision a reality for students in Pittsburgh.”

Although not a year-round initiative, perhaps the best known of A+ School's work is the *Report to the Community on School Progress in Pittsburgh*—a yearly publication produced on PSSA test scores in Pittsburgh schools that is released via press conference in early November. The report details demographic information on the students, PSSA scores, enrollment, attendance, staff figures and special accomplishments of each school within PPS (elementary through high school), as well as all charters that willingly release their data to A+ Schools.⁸² Comparison of achievement across schools serving the same grade levels is also noted. The report has been produced annually since 2005 and is mailed to every household with enrolled PPS students and younger children as well.⁸³

Board Watch, School Works, TeenBloc, and Voter Education all utilize parents and community volunteers to a limited degree (TeenBloc uses parents in a supporting role). Before 2012, however, there was no initiative by A+ Schools to specifically address the role of parents and community members in schools, or to utilize parents working in traditional involvement and engagement roles in schools.⁸⁴ The introduction of a parent ambassador program, which became known as Parent Nation, sought to further ease communications between schools, the administration, and the community within an often-contentious city context.

The formation of a parent-school-community ambassador program, the goal of which is to eliminate barriers faced by parents and community members who wish to become more involved in their schools, addresses societal concerns not covered by other initiatives. Whereas A+ Schools had successfully run programming that involved parent involvement in schools in a somewhat neutral role (both Board Watch and School Works utilized standardized evaluation

⁸² *2012 Report to the Community on Public School Progress in Pittsburgh*, Report, (Pittsburgh: A+ Schools, 2012).

⁸³ A+ Schools: Pittsburgh's Community Alliance for Public Education, 2013, <http://www.apluschools.org/>.

⁸⁴ Voter Education, while it could approach parent engagement, does not seem to reach much beyond encouraging more informed voting; parents are not actively engaged with developing budgets nor are they working directly with school board candidates within the A+ role.

tools), placing parent ambassadors in the community schools where their children attend is a much more charged initiative, especially in low-income, low-achieving schools where the school's basic ability to teach effectively may be in question. Therefore, climate of the school and the district at-large become much more important.

Charter schools, and the dynamic they have added to the parent-community-school relationship, are essential to understanding the unfolding of the parent ambassador program's (later named Parent Nation) first year. The release of "Won't Back Down," a film examining public schools, charter schools, and parent trigger laws at the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year—a film that concretely illustrates unusually heavy parent involvement in the schools—contrasted sharply with the more limited vision of involvement advanced by Parent Nation in the same school year.

Charter Schools

Many of the issues brought to light in the Mayor's Commission Report remain equally relevant in PPS in 2013. However, PPS is also a district within a larger context and, as such, sheds light on important changes that have taken place in education on a national scale over the past forty-five years since the famous Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teachers' Strike of 1968. In particular, the introduction of charter schools, both on the national scene in 1991 and in the city of Pittsburgh in 1998, has caused a significant shift in conversation from the earlier era's discussion of school districts and teachers' unions. The role that charter schools should play

within districts is now a central and difficult issue, as charters are frequently at odds with school districts and unions.^{85,86}

Charter schools have added a new dimension to parent involvement in the modern era. The first charter school in the nation, City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota, opened in 1992, over two decades after the Ocean Hill-Brownsville struggles highlighted the volatile politics of an expanded role for parents in educational governance. Although City Academy was founded by former school teachers, its founding ignited a fierce debate over the emergence and growth of charters—what interests they represent and who they serve.⁸⁷ Do they serve students? Do they serve their owners? Charters are, after all, run on a results-oriented business model, which some could interpret as principally serving students and parents (the customers) in order to benefit the charter operator (business owners). The idea that a business model could best serve student interests is accepted by some but bashed by others in heated conversations surrounding charters.

Cutler categorizes charters as among the “more radical forms of parent participation,” and many commentators would agree.⁸⁸ Parent trigger laws—laws that allow parents to “trigger” a change in low-performing schools; these changes can include transferring control of public schools to charter schools—have been signed into law in seven states, though Pennsylvania is not one of them. Schools eligible for parent trigger consideration usually, at minimum, have been “low performing” for two years (in Indiana), or have failed to meet Annual Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind for three years (in California, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas).⁸⁹

Furthermore, it is not unusual for charter schools to require more commitment from parents in

⁸⁵ While legislation was first passed by Minnesota in 1991 approving charters, the first charter did not open its doors until September 1992.

⁸⁶ Chute, Eleanor, “Charter Schools Grow Stronger in PA”, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 28, 2008.

⁸⁷ Sanchez, Claudio. "From a Single Charter School, a Movement Grows," *NPR*, August 31, 2012.

⁸⁸ Cutler, William W. *Parents and Schools: The 150-year Struggle for Control in American Education*, (Chicago: University of Chicago), 12.

⁸⁹ "Parent Trigger Laws in the States," State Parent Trigger Laws, Accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/state-parent-trigger-laws.aspx>.

order for their child to attend. This commitment can range from signing a contract guaranteeing that a parent will actively contribute and promote his or her child's learning, to mandating volunteer hours from each family.⁹⁰ Traditional public schools rarely, if ever, have the resources or ability to enforce such requirements.

Are charter schools, then, a form of community control? After all, it seems that any school that can be brought into a neighborhood by parents of that neighborhood—including many low-income neighborhoods—is a textbook example of community control. However, many argue that charter schools are, in reality, the furthest thing from community control. A May 2012 article from the Black Agenda Report, a left-leaning news commentary organization, drew a clear line between charters and the community control movement:

Anyone who believes that the Lords of Capital would finance anything that puts real power in the hands of poor parents is in serious need of remedial education. The job of front organizations like Parent Revolution is to put a democratic façade on a corporate takeover of the public schools.⁹¹

The article goes on to state that charter supporters only want to perpetuate public schools insofar as their failure allows charters to receive funding. The author labels both Compton and Adelanto, two elementary schools in Los Angeles that pioneered the charter movement, as failures in which “the process dissolved in acrimony and bitterness.” Charters exist, according to the authors, to continue a cycle of exploitation of the poor (minorities) by the rich (whites).

⁹⁰ Smith et al., *Family Engagement in Education: Seven Principles for Success*, Report, National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance, 2012.

⁹¹ Ford, Glen, "Charters Have Nothing to Do With Community Control of Schools," Black Agenda Report, May 8, 2012.

Charter Schools in Pittsburgh

Currently, Pittsburgh is home to nine charter schools, with city students attending another twenty-two charter schools located just outside of the city, with Pittsburgh funding. That brings the total number of students enrolled to 3,447 as of January 2013, which is approximately 12.2% of the Pittsburgh student population.⁹² Charter schools in recent years have caused a huge strain on the budget of PPS. There has been a push to make PPS a district of “First Choice” in the hope that improving PPS will persuade parents to choose PPS cyber classes and public schools over cyber charter and charter schools that are expected to cost the district \$52.7 million in 2013.⁹³

A meeting between PPS Superintendent Linda Lane and charter school leaders in late February 2013 was scheduled to ease tensions between the two schooling systems. Lane noted that, prior to the meeting, communication and interaction between PPS and Pittsburgh charters was neither “happy” nor “collaborative.”⁹⁴ Much of the sentiment voiced by previous PPS Superintendent Mark Roosevelt in 2008 still rang true: “it (state charter school law) almost makes you by necessity adversarial.”⁹⁵

Despite obvious tensions between public schools and charters, both within Pittsburgh and on a national level, A+ Schools has chosen to maintain a neutral position on charter schools. It neither endorses nor opposes such schools based on principle. Rather, A+ Schools contends that any school that can serve Pittsburgh students well is worthy of public support. Therefore, when “Won’t Back Down,” a movie that addresses parent trigger laws, charters, and teachers unions—the three lightning rods of modern school politics—A+ Schools was in a position to play the role

⁹² Chute, Eleanor, "Pittsburgh Charter and City Schools to Meet," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 26, 2013.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ ---, "Charter Schools Grow Stronger in PA," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 28, 2008.

of conversation-starter within the city, neither advocate nor critic, about a movie that had already stirred much national debate.

“Won’t Back Down”

“Won’t Back Down,” a film released nationwide in late September 2012, provides a valuable lens through which to highlight public opinion surrounding charters, unions, and public schooling.⁹⁶ In the film, Maggie Gyllenhaal plays an impoverished mother, Jamie Fitzpatrick, who desperately attempts to get her young daughter out of a failing inner-city school district. When she is unable to pay tuition at a private school, or win her child a spot at a local charter school, she enlists the help of a teacher, Nona Alberts, played by Viola Davis, to initiate a takeover of their community public school. The two join forces and are, against all odds (school administrators, the teacher’s union, a bureaucratic system), able to garner the support of parents, community members, and the school board for their parent-teacher takeover of their school.

The portrayal of the failing public school before Gyllenhaal and Davis intervene is sad. At best, the children are disengaged and sitting at their desks in silence; at worst, students are out of control and being supervised by an indifferent teacher who looks like an incompetent babysitter. In one scene, a teacher is immersed in online shopping for a new pair of boots while children tease a fellow classmate a few feet away. At another point, Gyllenhaal’s daughter wets herself in front of the class and subsequently hides in a hallway closet after being denied a bathroom pass by a teacher who thinks Gyllenhaal is becoming too involved in school affairs.

⁹⁶ *Won't Back Down*, directed by Daniel Barnz, performed by Maggie Gyllenhaal and Viola Davis, (Pittsburgh: Walden Media, 2012), film.

The film paints a picture that while there are good teachers to be found in even the worst schools, those teachers are (a) stifled by their coworkers and (b) few and far between. They know their colleagues are poor educators, yet they have little power beyond encouraging their own students. Furthermore, as is the case with Davis's character, even the good, caring teachers have become jaded by years of working in a system that simply tries to stay (barely) afloat. As for the district: "The only thing that the district does right is protect what the district does wrong."⁹⁷

The film is ripe with political messages: the highest paid teacher is also the lowest performing; the young Teach for America (TFA) teacher—a white male—is the only one who has not lost hope in the school; the teachers immediately turn their backs on Davis's character as soon as her partnership with Gyllenhaal is discovered. The TFA teacher serves as a voice of reason between Gyllenhaal and long-tenured teachers and their unions, who react to Davis with a much-voiced, "You're messing with our jobs" line of argument. The TFA teacher is a captivating educator, one of the best teachers in the building, who uses song to connect lessons to his students. He captures the moderate view of teachers' unions, which is to say that the unions have positives and negatives, and when instituted correctly they benefits teachers and students.

Throughout the film, there is an ambitious, wide-ranging "change the school, change the neighborhood" mentality. The main characters recruit additional parent support by listing neighborhood drug use and environmental factors as working against school change. School reform is portrayed as a lever of total neighborhood transformation. The name chosen for parent-organization change, "Parentroopers," is fitting for the rogue urban soldier persona that Gyllenhaal's character eventually takes on. Indeed, at a rally for community support, there is the sense that Parentroopers are going into martial combat—and that going into battle is the only chance to be heard in a district that is stuck in its ways. Contrast the movie name with "Parent

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Nation,” the real-world version of *Parental Troopers*, and it is clear how the drama is enhanced for cinematic purposes.

A quote by Gyllenhaal’s character seems to capture the A+ Schools’ neutral position on relations between charter schools and teacher’s unions. An exasperated Gyllenhaal, who by this point in the film has been accused of being anti-union, anti-teacher, and everything in between, says, "I just want a better school for my kid."⁹⁸ Such a simple, yet powerful statement speaks to the struggle for parents to navigate school politics. No parent’s first priority is politics when her child’s education is involved. Like any good parent, Gyllenhaal wants what is best for her child, politics be damned.

National Reception

Nationally, the film “*Won’t Back Down*” fueled a charged debate on the role of parent-trigger laws. To some, including lead actress Maggie Gyllenhaal, the amount of attention the film received was unexpected. Gyllenhaal noted in an interview on the TODAY Show, “The movie has started up some controversy which was really a surprise to me.”⁹⁹ Much of the controversy had to do with the anti-union message evident in the movie—not surprising, given that the movie was released in the same month that Chicago Public School teachers went on strike for eight days, shutting down schools across the city and keeping over 350,000 students out of class.¹⁰⁰ Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel sought a court order to send the teachers back to work. Although the courts never agreed to hear the case before the union reached a settlement

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ "Lessons Learned: Maggie Gyllenhaal in "Won't Back Down"" Interview by Kathie Lee Gifford and Hoda Kobb, NBC, September 21, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Payne, Ed, "Q & A: What's Behind the Chicago Teacher's Strike?" *CNN*, September 17, 2012.

deal, the Chicago teachers strike highlighted the escalation of labor relations in a school setting.¹⁰¹

For her part, Gyllenhaal attempted to stress her liberal upbringing to defuse blanket criticism of the film as anti-union, in hopes of promoting the film as the beginning of a rational, nationwide conversation about the failing state of schools. This emphasis seemed to be lost in much of the nationwide discussion about the film. Some might argue that it is surprising that Gyllenhaal was unaware of the controversy that the film would stir. If recent film history had been consulted, widespread criticism might reasonably have been expected. Three years prior, a groundbreaking documentary, “Waiting for Superman,” was widely released and caused an avalanche of commentary.¹⁰² The film followed the journey of five families and their young children as they tried desperately to access quality education through the charter school lottery. The film’s title set up the premise: charters were the superhero sent to rescue children from education deserts; public schools in poor urban environments, their bad teachers protected by unions, were throwing away the future of low-income minority children. Non-unionized charters and their leaders were the saviors of ghetto youth.

“Waiting for Superman” pulled at the heart-strings, as any powerful documentary is meant to do, but in showing the opportunity offered by charter schools to those lucky enough to receive a spot, the film painted a bleak picture of seemingly emotionless and amoral teachers unions—the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, the two largest unions, in particular. A *Time Magazine* article that appeared at the time of the general release of the film summed up the film’s moral appeal: “Davis Guggenheim's edifying and heartbreaking new documentary...is more than an important documentary: it is engaging and, finally, enraging

¹⁰¹ Pearson, Michael, "Wins, Losses and Draws in Chicago School Strike," *CNN*, September 19, 2012.

¹⁰² *Waiting for Superman*, directed by David Guggenheim, (Paramount Vantage, 2010), film.

— as captivating as any *Superman* movie, and as poignant as a child's plea for help.”¹⁰³ The film received as much criticism as it did praise, with many anti-charter groups countering that the impact of charters was overstated, that charters were not significantly more effective than public schools, and that even their successes can be misleading due to selectivity and comparatively high attrition rates.

The tie between “Waiting for Superman” and “Won’t Back Down” goes much deeper than subject matter. Both films were produced by Walden Media, a production company owned by billionaire Philip Anschutz, who is known for his conservative political leanings. His connection to the production of both films has served as a lightning rod for criticism. Parents Across America (PAA), a national non-profit parent organization whose self-proclaimed mission is to bring “the voice of public school parents – and common sense – to local, state, and national education debates,” criticized Anchutz in its indictment of “Won’t Back Down.” They called it a “‘Parent trigger’ reality distorted to fit corporate school reform message,” citing the owner as a “major donor to anti-gay, creationist and other right-wing causes.”¹⁰⁴ Such allegations were meant to discredit the claim that charter schools serve the public good, and to paint them instead as the projects of soulless capitalists. In the same press release, PAA referred to “Waiting for Superman” as an “anti-public-education pseudo-documentary,” an indication of how seriously the ideological divide between charters and traditional public schools is often portrayed in popular discourse.

Of course, “Waiting for Superman” is a documentary while “Won’t Back Down” is a fictional drama inspired by real life events. But to many commentators there is little difference between the political message each advances. To those in the anti-charter camp, both movies

¹⁰³ Corliss, Richard, "Waiting for 'Superman': Are Teachers the Problem?" TIME, September 29, 2010.

¹⁰⁴ “Parents Give “Won’t Back Down” Movie Trailer a Thumbs-Down.” Parents Across America, June 14, 2012.

present highly inaccurate and rosy pictures of the impact charters can have on children, and ignore the business relationship that charters form between children, achievement, and charter stakeholders. To those in the pro-charter camp, the films galvanize the public about the awful state of public education for low-income and minority children, and demonstrate to a capitalist nation a real-world solution that benefits children through adult competition.

To anyone in-between these two viewpoints: well, it would almost seem as if no such person exists. The gap between pro-charter and anti-charter supporters has only become more pronounced in recent years. In a January 2013 *New York Times* article, “Teachers and Policy Makers: Troubling Disconnect,” writer Sara Mosle highlighted an interesting insight by Stanford researcher Michael Petrilli, who:

Recently conducted an analysis of Twitter and the tens of thousands of followers of Ms. Rhee, who is pro-charter, and Ms. Ravitch, who is anti-charter, and discovered that only 10 percent overlapped. Just as conservatives gravitate to Fox News and liberals to MSNBC to hear their preconceived notions and biases confirmed, Mr. Petrilli speculates that those in education are now preaching solely to the converted, a phenomenon known in the media world as “narrowcasting.”¹⁰⁵

While Ocean Hill-Brownsville in the 1960’s seriously divided the liberal political camp, today’s national conversation surrounding school reform and especially school choice is divided across political and philosophical party lines. The connection Parents Across America draws to Walden Media and its various film involvements marks a line between the left (teachers and their unions) and the right (big business and charters). In most public discourse there is no in-between (or, as PAA would argue, the moderate position is on the left).

¹⁰⁵ Mosle, Sara, “Teachers and Policy Makers: Troubling Disconnect,” *The New York Time*, January 31, 2013.

However, as nothing in politics is quite this clear-cut, neither is the division of opponents and proponents of charters so clearly along rigid party lines. Countering the party-line argument is the theory that opinions about charter schools actually divide along socio-economic lines. The film was shown at both the Republican and Democratic national conventions in pre-screenings over the summer. As writer Leo Zimmermann argues in a blog entry on *The Contemporary Condition*,¹⁰⁶ Republicans and “Democrat celebrities,” such as Michelle Rhee, “though they show different faces...are heads of one hydra, serving an elite groups of extremely wealthy people. They are fighting and winning a trans-partisan campaign to deliver the public educational system into the hands of private companies.”¹⁰⁷

Local Reception and Yinzercation

A+ Schools, taking a position of neutrality on the charter debate, seems to reflect a relatively rare stance of political moderation—a position that, as usual in highly politicized national conversations, rarely gets much press. Many parents—including Gyllenhaal in “Won’t Back Down”—could care less about the politics if the politics do not help secure a better education for their child. A+ Schools, hearing of the film over the summer and the controversy it was stirring up, organized a screening in early October in hopes of starting a collaborative discussion involving all parties invested in school improvement. The audience was purposefully filled with parent volunteers, students, and teachers connected to A+ Schools, and was jointly hosted by PPS and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers. Following the end of the film, a panel

¹⁰⁶ *The Contemporary Condition* is a blog that hosts various authors to post entries on hot-button political issues.

¹⁰⁷ Zimmermann, Leo, “The Assault on Public Education: Inspired by Real Events,” *The Contemporary Condition* (web log), September 12, 2012.

representing the teachers union, school district, and a representative from Walden Media answered a few questions from the audience.

A+ Schools' interest in hosting a discussion concerning the film was amplified because Pittsburgh was deeply tied to the making of the film. The film was set and filmed in Pittsburgh, even though it was loosely based on of a parentally led reform movement in California. To the uninformed viewer—and it is likely there were many given the nation-wide release of the film—“Won't Back Down” appeared to recount a parent-trigger episode centered in Pittsburgh's public schools. The film makes numerous references to the city—Gyllenhaal's character works as a bartender at a sports bar filled with Steelers memorabilia, and she wears a Steelers shirt. The film is “set” in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, a poor, predominantly African-American community (although the film does not accurately capture the Hill's racial composition). The film also references Viola Davis' character, a public school teacher, as a second-generation PPS teacher from a multi-generation Pittsburgh family. In short, the film, pure and simple, looks like a Pittsburgh story.

Furthermore, “Won't Back Down” was of particular relevance to A+ School's new initiative, Parent Nation. A+ Schools purposefully recruited parents interested or already involved in PPS schools to Parent Nation in an effort to foster parent involvement and engagement in schools—parents that, like Maggie Gyllenhaal's character, were passionate for a solution to low-performing urban schools. However, unlike Gyllenhaal, Parent Nation parents were not motivated and did not have the power to “pull the trigger” on PPS schools—there are charters within Pittsburgh that can serve parents looking for the high parent involvement school policies that are a staple among many charter networks. Parents within Parent Nation were

recruited for their efforts to funnel Gyllenhaal-level drive into improving existing PPS schools through activism and building parent and community networks.

The audience take-away from the screening of the film in Pittsburgh was varied. A+ Schools judged it to be a more productive conversation than the one that followed “Waiting for Superman,” in which the organization in hindsight viewed itself as ill-prepared for the charged backlash that followed. Very different was the view of Jessie Ramey, a prize-winning historian and ACLS post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Women’s Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, who authors a blog on education in Pittsburgh entitled “Yinzercation” (a combination of “education” and “Yinzer Nation”), and has become well-known for her outspoken views on the state of local schools.¹⁰⁸ After attending the screening, she was upset that the conversation that followed remained superficial:

The audience was left with shallow platitudes – “we can all agree that kids come first.” Yeah, we love kids. I think we can all agree. And “we need to put students before grownups,” which makes my head explode every time I hear it, since it’s actually a pat little phrase used to silence teachers and parents trying to speak up for students. Worse, the audience was told we simply need parents and teachers to “work together” and all our problems will go away.¹⁰⁹

Ramey was further displeased by the lack of critical conversation addressing the role of Walden Media (her other blog posts indicate a deep-seated dislike for preferential tax treatment of the film industry in Pittsburgh).

A powerful post that appeared in Yinzercation on September 25, 2013 elaborated Ramey’s concerns about “Won’t Back Down.” Ramey cited underfunding and inequitable

¹⁰⁸ Pittsburgh natives, “Yinzers,” are known for their pride in their city, and most importantly, their sports teams. Parent Nation is a play on the widely known “Steeler Nation,” but this Pittsburgh “nation” at large is also known by another name: “Yinzer Nation.” It is no surprise, therefore, that Ramey has an opinion on “Won’t Back Down”.

¹⁰⁹ Ramey, Jessie B., “Won’t Be Silent,” *Yinzercation* (web log), October 5, 2012.

funding of schools as the root causes of substandard public education, but said that this was not the takeaway message of the film:

The film blames teachers and school administrators. And it promotes a “solution” supported by the ultra-right filmmakers – parent trigger laws designed to close public schools – that have nothing to do with real parents and teachers working together to fix real problems. The fact is, I am Maggie Gyllenhaal – and so are you. All of us parents, teachers, and concerned community members working together every day to support our public schools and make real change. Pulling the trigger on a school such as Pittsburgh Manchester PreK-8 would never solve the problems facing urban public education.¹¹⁰

Ramey’s blog spotlighted an inherent problem regarding fictional films about school reform: they show fictional solutions. Ramey, like *A+ Schools* and *Parent Nation*, believes in the coordination of parents and community members in schools, working in tandem with teachers and administrators. Though this kind of in-the-trenches work may not create immediate solutions like those dramatized in a two-hour feature film, change does not happen like it does in the movies, Ramey argues. It is much more complicated and long-term.

¹¹⁰ Ramey, Jessie B., “I’m Maggie Gyllenhaal, and So Are You,” *Yinzercation* (web log), September 25, 2012.

Chapter 5: Parent Nation

The political, cultural, and economic landscape in which the A+ Schools parent/community ambassador program emerged in the early 2010's differed greatly from that which shaped the 1960's Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflicts. But just as Diane Ravitch categorized "the problems of New York City" schools in the 1960's as "the problems of other American cities on a magnified scale," so too does the parent ambassador program (i.e., Parent Nation) in Pittsburgh provide a lens into the national school reform debate today as it has evolved since the emergence of charter schools as key components of modern educational discourse.¹¹¹

A+ Schools' parent/community ambassador program was initially conceived as a starting point for strong, orchestrated, district-wide involvement by parents and community members in all PPS schools. The initial plan called for the cultivation of teams of ten parents and community members at four low-income, low-achieving schools. Faison K-5, Mifflin K-8, King K-8 and Manchester K-8 schools were slated as the schools targeted for the first year of the parent ambassador program. Each of six parents and four community members per school was expected to reach out to five additional parents, in the hope that every school would quickly build up a cohort of at least fifty involved individuals at each site.

By specifically targeting Faison, Mifflin, King, and Manchester, the expectation was that parents who became involved at the elementary level would move naturally to upper-level schools along with their children, and bring with them the desire to stay involved during the totality of their children's schooling. Faison is a feeder for Westinghouse 6-12, Mifflin is a feeder for Taylor Allderdice High School, and King and Manchester both send students to Perry

¹¹¹ Ravitch, Diane, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools*, (New York: Basic, 1988), xiii.

High School. Thus, future expansion of the ambassador program upward from the elementary school into the upper-grade schools was integral to the original design.

Under A+ Schools's initial plan for the ambassador program during Summer 2012, meetings held at A+ Schools were designed to provide a forum to build connections among parent ambassadors at different schools. This process, it was hoped, would teach volunteers how to recognize the presence and absence of key components in schools—particularly, what made for great teaching and a range of characteristics that academic experts had tied to school equity. Ambassadors would also play a key role in assessing how each school utilized a school climate tool that had been adapted by A+ Schools to address particular problems within PPS.

Although these were the intentions, the parent and community ambassador program quickly took on a somewhat different life of its own. In its first few months, it evolved into an ambassador-directed group focused mainly on its own members' general education about PPS.

Methodology

My initial research on Parent Nation began during the summer before its launch in 2012. During late June-mid August, I served as a summer research assistant at A+ Schools during which time I attended both monthly staff meetings and weekly community organizer meetings. At the staff meetings all A+ Schools initiatives were discussed—including Board Watch, School Works, Teen Bloc, and Voter Education—in addition to progress on the yet-unnamed Parent Ambassador initiative. At weekly community organizer meetings, updates on the recruitment of initial members of parent ambassador school-based teams were given. In both contexts I served

mostly as an observer and I documented group discussions in hand-written notes for my own research.

My research over the summer was focused mainly on fact gathering regarding the perceived benefits of parent engagement and the best parent engagement practices to inform early ambassador training. Though some of my research contributed to the opening sections of this paper, the findings from this stage of my research were neither the main focus of the early ambassador meetings, nor did they contribute to my documentation of the progress of Parent Nation in 2012 and 2013 that appears below.

As the school year progressed, beginning with the first ambassador meeting held in September, I attended once-monthly Parent Nation meetings from September 2012 through March 2013, with the exception of a December 2012 meeting that was held during Carnegie Mellon University's winter break. Therefore, I attended six meetings of this type in total. During the meetings I sat at the table with parent and community members and A+ Schools meeting facilitators and recorded my observations and exchanges among various individuals present. I openly shared my student/researcher affiliation with the group, noting that I was observing for my undergraduate honors thesis. I had numerous personal conversations with participants before and after meetings, and during meeting breaks.

In addition to ambassador meetings, I continued to attend monthly staff meetings when possible, based upon my class schedule, attending six total. Due to the time involved traveling by bus from campus to the A+ Schools office, I was unable to attend more meetings. However, the meetings I was able to attend gave me a multifaceted view of the ambassador program—the intentions of A+ Schools, the between meetings follow-ups by on-staff community organizers

with Parent Nation members, and my own assessment of what collaboration between A+ Schools and various Parent Nation school groups produced on a monthly basis.

To supplement conversations recorded during meetings, I conducted phone interviews with one parent and two community volunteers closely tied to the Parent Nation discipline and special needs initiatives. I attempted an additional interview over e-mail with a representative from a larger organization involved in A+ Schools, but was unsuccessful.

Parent Nation Meetings

The first meeting of the ambassador program was held on a Wednesday morning in late September. One of the largest decisions of the first meeting was what the newly formed group would be called. The process highlighted a tension within the group: what name could accurately encompass the roles of those active in the program? Not everyone at the meeting was a parent—there were community members without children in the school as well. One woman in particular, a community member, felt just as invested in the project as parents at the meeting. She worried that a parent-oriented name would make it difficult to attract badly needed community members. Most of the adults at the meeting were parents, however, and they did not think a name that included “parent” would dissuade community members from getting involved. The main concern was persuading large numbers of parents to take notice and step-up their involvement. Lengthy discussion did not generate consensus, and not everyone approved of the chosen name: Parent Nation (a play on “Steeler Nation”). The name was kept in the hope that it would generate widespread support in the city for its uniquely Pittsburgh sound. Everyone present at the meeting, the argument went, was part of Steeler Nation. Ambassadors hoped that the pride in Pittsburgh sports could be transformed into pride for Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Much of the first meeting of Parent Nation focused on the art of building relationships—both with other parents and ambassadors, and with school officials. The presentation by A+ Schools made an effort to highlight the ways in which ambassadors could recruit others, mainly through one-on-one meetings with parents who seemed interested. Commitment to others and from others was stressed as key to building a team that would “do,” as opposed to just “talk.” This sentiment seemed to strike a chord with ambassadors—one parent brought up the frustration he felt when his school’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA) would waste meetings doing absolutely nothing. Other ambassadors chimed in that all the PTA was good for was “hosting bake sales,” and parents nodded in agreement. The frustration many felt with PPS was a frustration with the traditional and limited types of parent involvement, as embodied in the PTAs, that were already in place at most schools.

During the first year of the initiative (until March 2013, when my fieldwork ended), the attendance at Parent Nation Meetings hovered between fifteen and twenty adults. There were generally a few more women than men, and most of those who attended meetings were parents (as opposed to community members). Parent Nation meetings were scheduled for the third Thursday of each month, from 10am to 1pm. Given the timing of the meetings, working parents with inflexible jobs were naturally unable to attend. However, there was not significant drop-off in attendance due to the new scheduling of the meetings. Liberty K-5 was even added to the list of Faison K-5, Mifflin K-8, King K-8, and Manchester K-8 when it was clear there was enough interest from one Liberty parent.

Ambassador meetings gradually evolved into member-led affairs, beginning with the January 2013 meeting when parent members brainstormed and selected specific policy concerns in an effort to define their “platform.” Ideally, A+ coordinators aimed to have the group focus on

two items that could guide the remaining meetings of the year and possible action beyond May. A large part of the motivation for this, I gathered, was the design flaw (or perhaps inherent nature) of the first months of meetings. Though productive in bridging the backgrounds of parent volunteers and discovering commonalities between school environments and volunteers, time allocations for each discussion topic was rarely followed. Staying on-topic was a huge hurdle for a room full of volunteers. Though A+ Schools staff did loosely guide the flow of meetings, it oftentimes seemed difficult to balance the desire to accomplish agenda items with the desire to let a natural volunteer discourse develop. After all, the intent of the parent/community ambassador program was to provide and guide the group with training wheels before letting Parent Nation take on greater autonomy.

Parents and community members seemed starved (even at meetings early in the spring semester) to share knowledge, insights, questions, and concerns about PPS and individual school policy at meetings. The passion behind each comment was real—many volunteers spoke from personal experience dealing with the school as parents, community members, volunteers, or PPS employees. Within ten minutes of the platform brainstorm, someone brought up the issue of equity within the district—the comment resonated with every Parent Nation member in the room. The consensus was that no one was properly addressing equity issues in PPS.

Keino, an A+ Schools community organizer, opened the discussion to the possibility of the group adopting an educational council framework, “to be the eyes, the ears and the mouth of failing black students.” Surprisingly, although many would consider the Parent Nation members better informed than the average PPS parent, none had heard of the PPS Equity Advisory Panel. The Equity Panel is a district group that collaborates on the latest district progress report and strategic plan, *Equity: Getting to All*, which was released by the district in August 2012. Keino

used the opportunity to encourage further recruitment of five parents by each current Parent Nation ambassador, noting that targeting contact with parents of students (both black and white) not achieving their potential could create a significant force in the schools and district. Although the group did not choose equity as a key platform item, the lack of knowledge in the room about the Equity Advisory Panel shows a shortcoming in the district in its efforts to connect with the public on policies that do address key parent concerns.¹¹²

Other topics brought to light by the platform brainstorm included grievances with handling of the “Excellence for All” district initiative, standardized testing opt-out (an initiative widely blogged about on Yinzercation), PPS site-based and district-wide budgets, and Title I funding. From the suggestions, one team presentation and one policy presentation was chosen for each of February, March, and April. A presentation scheduled for May planned to catalogue all Pittsburgh education organizations in a community resource guide so that future planning could include engaging a wider range of existing grassroots groups and filling a need for PPS parents not already served by other community groups.

The team presentation topic in February focused on anti-bullying work already underway in Mifflin, while March covered special needs in schools.

Discipline

One of the most successful and well-represented schools at every Parent Nation meeting has been the parents and community volunteers of Mifflin K-8. The anti-bullying program that

¹¹² "Pittsburgh Public Schools," Pittsburgh Public Schools, 2013, <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/site/default.aspx?PageID=1>.

incorporates a revised discipline policy has been highly successful at the school, and represents a dramatically different approach to student policy than discipline procedures of the past.

Lutual and Sara, an active couple in Parent Nation, began their mission to transform the discipline policy at Mifflin when their son was brutally attacked by several other youths two years ago. The school district policy stated the boys who had attacked Lutual and Sara's son faced two possible discipline paths: either the boys could be suspended or expelled. Lutual and Sara were taken aback—they wondered how there was no program in place meant to prevent bullying in the first place, only extreme “solutions” once the incidents had occurred.

In district policy, the “level of intervention is determined by administration according to prior history, nature of the incident, and a tiered approach.”¹¹³ Lutual and Sara saw the potential for a tiered approach to bullying prevention. Working with the local Hazelwood community and with Mifflin School, the duo reestablished the school's PTA and PSCC (Parent and School Community Council) to build support that would be needed for their new initiatives. They built their strategy: “inform, engage, and mobilize families, youth, and community.”¹¹⁴

The initiative at Mifflin took many forms, as bullying takes many forms in many contexts within a school day. As Lutual assured the members of Parent Nation during his February presentation, “We want our children to be safe before school, at school, and after school.”¹¹⁵ From the start of the day, parent volunteers wait at bus stops with children, acting as safety guards. Those that can ride the bus with students do so, and they are sometimes able to be driven back to a drop-off point by bus drivers after children safely make it to the school building. Some parents are given public bus passes to offset the costs of their bus duty. The important point is

¹¹³ Lutual et al., “Power of a Friend: The No-Bully Zone,” Presentation, (Parent Nation, A+ Schools, Pittsburgh), February 21, 2013.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

that parents who are already familiar to the children, and therefore hold authority over the children, are present on four of six Hazelwood buses, both to and from school, five days a week. The one special needs bus that delivers children to Mifflin is also covered: a grandmother of a special needs child rides the bus every day.

Mike, a parent who has lent his time and energy to the discipline policy development at Mifflin and contributed to the Parent Nation presentation, noted that the goal of the bus monitors was to ensure a stable environment for children as soon as the school day begins: “If your morning starts with chaos it can take until the afternoon to turn it around but we expect our kids to turn it around by school. We are sending our kids to school in chaos.”¹¹⁶ Children who had been rushed out of the house in the morning would no longer have to worry about unstable bullying environments on buses. Instead of bus driver monitoring, the children of Mifflin would have parent and community involvement in their school day from the get-go.

Once at school, a school safety patrol is now in place, run by the son-in-law of Lutual and Sara, Lyneel, who supervises fourth- and fifth-grade students that monitor the halls. Sara is adamant about the recruitment methods of the patrol. Instead of enlisting students without discipline problems, she specifically seeks out those with “C” and “D” averages, and those with discipline referrals. The patrol is a way to instill responsibility in such students: “We have taken some of the bad kids and turned them around.”¹¹⁷

Rewards for good behavior and a student’s lack of discipline referrals comprised the positive reinforcement component of the new discipline policy. Students were given P.R.I.D.E. dollars for good behavior and for staying out of trouble, and were able to redeem the currency for treats at the P.R.I.D.E. store within Mifflin. The P.R.I.D.E. Program stands for: Promise-Ready,

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Integrity, Determination, and Excellence. Students were also able to reach different growth levels within P.R.I.D.E. Lutual, Sara, Lyneel, and Mike all raved of the results for students—both those who were not discipline problems before the initiative, and those for whom the P.R.I.D.E. initiative significantly decreased their outbursts.

Parent Nation members wondered aloud during the presentation what happens to the children for whom P.R.I.D.E. dollars are not incentive enough to stop their misbehavior. Lutual responded simply, “I adopt them.” He went on to explain that he had taken several students under his wing until he could connect to them on a level that demonstrated his caring.¹¹⁸

Lutual, Sara, Mike, and Lyneel represent a highly involved and committed group of parent volunteers. Lutual, Sara, and Lyneel are at Mifflin on an everyday basis to ensure the success of their discipline initiatives—something that is not feasible for many parents. Their work has gained notice within the district and represents a major opportunity for Parent Nation to gain recognition because its members are district change-makers.

Special Needs

The concern about awareness of special needs policy and rights of special needs parents and students within PPS was first brought to the attention of Parent Nation during the platform brainstorm at the January meeting. In PPS, special needs students account for approximately 17.3% of the student body.¹¹⁹ Such students are referred to as being ‘IEP’ students because of their Individualized Education Plan.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Local Task Force for the Right to Education in Allegheny County, 2013, <http://www.ltf3.org/>.

Two women within Parent Nation raised the issue. Monique, a parent with children in the district, explained her struggle to get resources for her son. When her son was in second grade, she pushed to get him tested for special needs and listed for an IEP. However, since his behavior in class was a serious problem the district refused to provide him with IEP services. Monique had the advantage of serving as a teacher's aid within the district, and thus she knew "who to call and who to see" within PPS to get her child the services he was entitled to. Still, it was not until five years later, when her son was in seventh grade, that he received the full services he was due. It took five years for a mother who knew the intricacies of the PPS bureaucracy to get IEP services for her son. From such an experience she wondered what that could possibly mean for parents without connections in PPS or knowledge of its operations.

Monique's story struck a chord with another woman at the January meeting: Pam. Pam's son was diagnosed with autism, but he was also classified as gifted within PPS. When she was looking to gain services for her son, which he was entitled to under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), she was told that unless her child enrolled in kindergarten he would be unable to receive benefits (although her son was five, his birthday was too late to qualify for kindergarten that year). She had "to fight all the way to Harrisburg" in the end. Initially given a legal procedural document outlining her right, she said she was utterly confused. She summed up her ordeal by saying: "The only hope is to find the right person who's gonna help."¹²⁰ Pam's takeaway lesson? "I realized you really have to be an advocate to get good schooling for your kids."¹²¹

Special needs was chosen as the issue to be discussed in-depth at the March Parent Nation meeting. The choice was not surprising because Pam is one of the more outspoken

¹²⁰ Harbin, Pam. Telephone interview by author. March 22, 2013.

¹²¹ Ibid.

members of the group, and because African-American children, both within PPS and nationally, are more likely to be labeled as IEP cases than their white counterparts. Special needs is tied to the larger discussion of equity, but not just by race: “They (PPS) look at numbers of kids, they don’t look at needs of kids” when determining site-based budgets. “Even when they assign special needs teachers, it is based on numbers, not on time needed for each student.”¹²²

Pam serves on the Pittsburgh Local Task Force on the Right to Education, which she described as having the reputation of a “white women’s organization.” She was quick to announce this association early in her presentation and urged anyone who was so moved to seek involvement in the Task Force because diversity, in her opinion, could only help to spread awareness about the importance of accurate IEP labeling and access to full resources for IEP students.

The Pittsburgh Local Task Force on the Right to Education was established by state decree in 1972 and exists for several purposes, including to “serve as a resource for children with all disabilities and their families in the 42 school districts in Allegheny County,” and “to communicate needs and problems to the appropriate sources.”¹²³ The task force runs a local parent-to-parent helpline, monthly meetings and coffee hours, and monitors PPS when made aware of complains.

Pam’s involvement with Parent Nation and the Local Task Force represents an important story line. Pam became involved in the PSSC and PTO at Liberty K-5, where her son attended, after her struggle to get services for her son convinced her that she needed to fight for quality education. She says, “When I first started there it was a group of parents that were fifth grade

¹²² Harbin, Pam, “Special Needs Education in PPS,” Presentation, (Parent Nation, A+ Schools, Pittsburgh), March 21, 2013.

¹²³ Local Task Force for the Right to Education in Allegheny County, 2013, <http://www.ltf3.org/>.

parents and they had a really effective PSCC and PTO.”¹²⁴ The problem was that when their children graduated, the PSCC fell apart. Pam remained trying to regain momentum for the Liberty PSCC, which is around when she became involved in A+ School’s Board Watch and the Pittsburgh Local Task Force. Pam’s involvement in the district snowballed.

While her son now receives IED, her current concerns stem from finding an appropriate higher-level school to move him to when he graduates fifth grade. Pam made a point during her presentation to differentiate between special needs and learning disabilities. Her son has a special need, but is neither a behavior problem, nor does he have a learning disability. Challenging middle school-level programs to meet her son’s gifted abilities while also meeting his needs as a child with autism can be a struggle to find: “Every time PPS has communicated new programs in the district, they have never put anything about kids with special needs.”¹²⁵ Instead she must call the PPS district office about possible enrollment restrictions for IEP students for each new program.

Pam and Monique represent parents who have taken a stand after being confronted with the needs of their children in a district seemingly ill-equipped to handle special needs. Both view the future of the organization as closely tied to teaching the ropes to parents that have not yet dealt with district special needs policies. While the Pittsburgh Local Task Force and Liberty PSCC represent other outlets for Pam’s activism, Parent Nation clearly fills a gap in her involvement with the district, in large part because of the diversity of opinions, schools, and needs represented at meetings.

¹²⁴ Harbin, Pam, “Special Needs Education in PPS,” Presentation, (Parent Nation, A+ Schools, Pittsburgh), March 21, 2013.

¹²⁵ Harbin, Pam, Telephone interview by author, March 22, 2013.

Year One

In its first year, Parent Nation has not grown significantly in numbers, although it has attracted some new faces to monthly meetings. From an outsider perspective, it seems that the most useful aspect of the organization is the collective knowledge that the ambassadors share with one another, and the collaborative and education-oriented environment of meetings. Meetings are spent talking, yes, but about much more than when the next bake sale should be held. Parents and community members are explicating important educational issues that many parents know little about because the formal educational policies are genuinely complicated and convoluted.

Parent Nation faces significant barriers to achieving greater success. The recruitment of new members is a slow process, and without more bodies in attendance, it is hard to become a “do-er” organization. Many of the parents in Parent Nation struck me as clearly activist individuals—they have obvious personality traits conducive to promoting the needs of the needy—in this case Pittsburgh Public School children. The uncertain issue is how many parents (and community members) really have the time and inclination to become ongoing activists, and the will to make school reform a priority in their personal lives. My sense from attendance at multiple meetings is that such people, despite initial enthusiasm, are few and far between.

At the very first meeting, a blog entry was shared with the ambassadors: “A Fruitcake to a Powerful Organization.” The author compared one parent approaching a school administrator as “a fruitcake,” to which a room of ambassadors laughed and nodded in agreement. This is because parents who have gotten involved with Parent Nation have been the fruitcake at one point in their prior encounters with schools—they were the voices that weren’t afraid to speak up. Finding others willing to be fruitcakes is not always easy—if it was, “fruitcake” would not

describe an oddball. Two parents were described as “a fruitcake and a friend,” three as “troublemakers,” four parents earned the group a meeting with a low-level administrator; it took ten parents to convince a school official to take a concern seriously. Fifty parents were the point when organized parents could hope to become “a powerful organization.”

A+ Schools envisioned Parent Nation as reaching “powerful organization” status within the first year. Based on several months of observation, that seemed a bit of a reach to me. However, there is unquestionably serious commitment among those who are currently involved. At the least, this group has already proved that it is beyond the fruitcake stage.

The Future of Parent Nation

The withdrawal of foundation funding from PPS in 2002 and the subsequent Mayor’s Commission on Public Education brought to light many issues that had been brewing in PPS. The formation of the Mayor’s Commission brought hope that increased mayoral involvement in the district could mend issues of inequity, low achievement, and an ineffective Board of Education to put PPS on-par with high achieving urban districts. The chain of events that followed—the release of the findings report the following September in 2003, the formation of A+ Schools in 2004, and the creation of Parent Nation nearly a decade later in 2012—proved how seminal the Mayor’s Commission report had been.

However, in 2013, PPS is still a district with work to be done. It is a district that some parents and community members fear has reached a desperate point. A significant budget crisis looms on the horizon—the district is projected to be broke by 2015—tensions with area charter schools are still very real, and inequitable educational outcomes are still a reality for black

students.¹²⁹ The Board of Education election, six months from now in November 2013, is for five district seats. With only one incumbent running for reelection, “setting the stage for the biggest change of board membership in more than 20 years,” perhaps there is hope that the next decade will be the decade for major school reform to significantly alter the course of PPS.¹³⁰ During that time, Parent Nation has the potential to fuel involvement and engagement in a district that needs all variety of additional resources.

For the parents and community volunteers of Parent Nation, there is a consensus that now is the time to act. Many strongly believe that their organization is a crucial component of making change happen in the school district. Wallace Sapp, a community volunteer at Manchester, said that he believes the district is at a crucial turning point and that now is the most desperate condition that Pittsburgh Public Schools have ever been in: “The missing ingredient is parents. If they don’t find a way to bring parents into the schools to take control of the schools, then we’re not gonna make it.”¹³²

Lynell is another community volunteer with a daughter who will attend Mifflin in a few years. He believes that Parent Nation will take action in the upcoming year, and he is confident that such action will generate change. But he is not confident that the district will be able to significantly reduce inequity between black and white students: “I think it probably will be put on the back burner because we definitely need more parent involvement. We need a lot more people.”¹³³ An aroused citizenry, in his view, cannot be ignored.

¹²⁹ Chute, Eleanor, “Tough Fiscal Choices Ahead for Pittsburgh Public Schools,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 14, 2012.

¹³⁰ Chute, Eleanor, “Four Leaving Pittsburgh School Board,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 13, 2013.

¹³² Sapp, Wallace, Telephone interview by author, March 26, 2013.

¹³³ Brimage, Lynell, Telephone interview by author, March 27, 2013.

I believe that Parent Nation has the ability to transcend its origins as a branch of A+ Schools. Unlike the other initiatives of A+ Schools—Board Watch, School Works, Teen Bloc, and Voter Education—Parent Nation was conceived to operate in individual schools and expand naturally into additional schools by following students as they progress through the grades. The key to parent involvement is their child: personal concerns have been the driving force of conversation during Parent Nation meetings. It seems unlikely to me that parents who are fully engaged with the schools will entirely disengage as their child progresses to higher grades. Thus, expansion of Parent Nation into additional schools within PPS in coming years is highly plausible. Furthermore, the emphasis that members of Parent Nation have placed on parent and community education as vital concerns of district policy, and on enabling parents within the district to assume increasingly visible positions, show an astute awareness by Parent Nation of how the needs of parents and community members can gradually infiltrate into the power structure of PPS.

At a March meeting, one member of Parent Nation claimed to be strongly considering a campaign for one of five board election seats. Numerous other parents were seeking leadership positions in school PTA and PSCC organizations—those they previously deemed “only good for selling cookies.” While positions within established school governance might not have held much potential for exercising power in the past, they are clear, direct, and swift avenues through which to raise awareness in schools of the existence of potential change-makers.

Of course, everything is dependent on the future actions of Parent Nation. Recruitment of new members has not been fruitful and Parent Nation has yet to initiate major or even minor change in PPS as an organization. Thus far, the success stories of Parent Nation have been a reflection of individual effort. Without collective, district-wide effort, Parent Nation has the

potential to disintegrate into isolated pockets of success by engaged parents and community members in individual PPS schools.

Chapter 6: Ocean Hill-Brownsville and the Pittsburgh Public Schools

It would be foolish to systematically compare the case of the Teachers' Strike and Community Control Movement in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in the 1960's to the case of Pittsburgh Parent Nation in the modern day. They are not similar situations; they are valuable mainly as they highlight the range of parent involvement and engagement in schools in two very different historical, geographic, and political contexts. Ocean Hill-Brownsville serves as an extreme example of community involvement and engagement in schools—an instance in which the point of mediation between the community board and the union was passed very early, and where the tensions surrounding parental involvement in public schools resulted in numerous hostile confrontations. Ocean Hill-Brownsville was embroiled in raw racial and ethnic tensions not seen in PPS—the combative environment surrounding the Teachers' Strike in 1968 led to a complete break-down of civil discussion and severed previously strong, long-lasting political ties between Jews and African-Americans.

To be sure, Pittsburgh Public Schools is dealing with a serious equity issue regarding disparate achievement of African-American and white students in the district, and has been since before the Mayor's Commission Report publicized the district's failures. Overall, a civil dialogue has been maintained (whether or not that dialogue includes the Board of Education depends on the year, however). Parent Nation demonstrates the need for a stronger dialogue in the district to include parents' viewpoints in a meaningful way. Parents whose voices are ignored will make their voices louder; as recent experience across the nation demonstrates, parents will no longer let themselves be ignored when it comes to the education of their children.

Brooklyn circa 1968 and Pittsburgh circa 2013 represent very different forms of parent involvement, and yet there are underlying similarities. The changes that occurred in Ocean Hill-

Brownsville and Pittsburgh both sprouted from mayor-initiated reports and had ties to national philanthropic organizations—the Ford Foundation in the case of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the case of Pittsburgh.¹³⁴

Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Pittsburgh Public Schools represent a wide range of experiences regarding mayoral involvement in school reform. Pittsburgh picked up where Ocean Hill-Brownsville ended: PPS followed in the footsteps of other urban districts in the first years of the twenty-first century by reintroducing mayor control in schools, whereas the Teachers’ Strike of 1968 resulted in the relinquishing of power from both the mayor and parents. In “the scramble to find remedies for academically failing, financially struggling school districts across the country,” schools in New York, as we saw earlier, returned in part to a past model of bureaucratically dominated school leadership.

At the most basic level, Ocean Hill-Brownsville and PPS embody the typical challenges of modern-day urban education. Since “urban school districts are a sort of incubator for “best practices” where problems common to all districts are addressed and solved,” both cities offer brief glimpses of nationwide flashpoints in educational reform during these two time periods.¹³⁵ School reform efforts in both cases were messy because urban education involving large minority populations is inherently messy, especially when districts try to be at the frontlines of major social and political change.

The case studies of Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Pittsburgh Public Schools are snapshots of complicated, complex, parent-community-school interactions. Each provides insight into the diverse methods and approaches employed by parents and communities seeking greater voice

¹³⁴ Though, obvious, Pittsburgh has connections to many large, Pittsburgh-based organizations as well—the Heinz Endowment, the Pittsburgh Foundation, and the Grable Foundation.

¹³⁵ Lee, Carmen J., and Eleanor Chute. "Mayors in the Schools: Will City Join in Trend to Give More Control Over Board Members." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 21, 2004.

within their schools, and school districts seeking to maintain authority over educators' professional domain. The place where the jurisdiction of parents and community ends and that of the school district begins has never been clear in American educational history. The parents, schools, communities, and storyline of each episode is unique; yet, studied together, Ocean Hill-Brownsville and PPS serve as powerful backdrops to one another.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

A quote posted on the screen of a computer within the A+ School office in the Crawford-Roberts Hill section of Pittsburgh reads: “Education is the Civil Rights Issue of the 21st Century”.

The Community Control Movement, in its efforts to improve education and increase the power of black families within the educational system, also attempted to make education part of the greater Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s. Unfortunately, even with the support of a mayor, the racially-conflicted power struggle between parents and teachers unions diverted attention from student-focused reform.

Family and community engagement is widely viewed today as essential to improving public education. Thanks to much empirically-grounded research, this is not a point that Parent Nation must contest with the school district. Unfortunately, just because family and community engagement is acknowledged as important to school success does not mean that parents do not have to continue to push hard to have their voices heard; this is one of the largest struggles facing Parent Nation. Parent Nation must find new ways to engage other parents to build their collective political voice, even while educating themselves on complex issues essential to transforming district policies.

PPS and Ocean Hill-Brownsville illuminate the need for stronger, school-initiated methods of community engagement, and serve as robust examples of the issues facing parents, communities, and schools. Parent engagement is a two-way street. Schools are required to engage families in the education of their children. Parents, in turn, must contribute to a school to make it great. When engagement is not present, there are usually causes. Schools may have trouble engaging parents effectively. Parents may have trouble getting a school to listen to their concerns. Many times this relationship is the result of a long cycle of each party feeling

neglected by the other. No matter the root of the problem, the consequences are life-lasting for students.

Education today garners the media attention that an issue of such importance should. Unfortunately, due to the heavily divided nature of recent educational discourse, especially surrounding charters and school choice, little communication across viewpoints has occurred. Talk continues to be talk, and has not stimulated systematic progression towards providing quality education for all students.

Perhaps, then, the most valuable insight the cases of Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Pittsburgh provide is the need for dialogue—parent-to-parent, parent-to-community, and parent/community-to-school. In both cases, local actors united over common school grievances and expressed their dissatisfaction to the district. In Ocean Hill-Brownsville, that dissatisfaction ballooned to district-paralyzing levels. In Pittsburgh, dissatisfaction with current district policies has motivated parents to organize in the hope that increased parent engagement can produce better and more equitable education for students.

If Parent Nation and groups like it across the nation are successful, perhaps education need **not** become the civil rights issue of the 21st century.

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