OAKLAND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Harnessing Faith for Political Reform and Renewal

JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER for Youth and Their Communities
The case study of Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) presented here is part of a larger research project conducted by the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University. The project studies the efforts of exemplary advocacy organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area that have successfully initiated change in policies that affect young people. This research is motivated by the lack of comprehensive information about such organizations despite their central importance in urban communities. Most existing material highlights “best practices” without more contextualized and detailed analysis of how such organizations may improve conditions for marginalized children and youth.

This case study considers how OCO relates to its local government and other community groups; how it mobilizes citizens to become advocates for their own rights; and how OCO both shapes and is shaped by the local context in which it works. Data for this study consist of interviews with OCO staff, board members, and involved citizens, as well as observations of numerous public events, rallies and internal meetings collected over a two-year period.

Although our focus here is on a single, highly effective organization, we believe that the advocacy strategies, tools, and challenges highlighted in this case study have relevance beyond Bay Area communities. We hope that our analysis will be useful to other advocacy groups, as well as to policy-makers, funders, government officials, and activists seeking to increase support for children and youth amid tough competition from the priorities of more established and powerful community interests.

We would like to thank staff and board members of Oakland Community Organizations for sharing their time and institutional memories with us and for keeping us informed about their many campaigns and events to better the lives of children and youth in the Bay Area.
In a call for reform of Oakland’s schools, over two thousand families assembled in front of Mayor Jerry Brown and State Senator Don Perata in May 2003, to influence the appointment of a new school administrator. Students, standing on stage, held posters spelling “Kids are the bottom line!” while teachers, community members and civic leaders joined parents in their rallying cry:

We are one community that share the same vision...we have seen hard times and how it’s affecting our children. Enough. We need to struggle together right now to make sure all of our children are treated with equality and respect.¹

This “Solidarity for Schools Action,” organized by Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), was the culmination of months of research and planning by community leaders to respond publicly to the school district’s bankruptcy and takeover by the state. Perata, Brown, and other officials listened to concerns about the problems facing young people, including inadequate schooling, violence, and the lack of after-school programs, and promised OCO and surrounding supporters that they would promote community-driven policies and remain accountable to all of their constituents, particularly politically voiceless youth excluded from policy decisions.

Like many child advocacy organizations, OCO plays an important role in securing public funds for children and their families in under-resourced communities. The growth of the advocacy sector since the 1970s has increased these organizations’ visibility to advocate for families’ basic rights.² Within the child advocacy arena, large professional advocacy organizations dominate and rely heavily on paid staff to affect policy change. While effective in political circles, they have done little to increase local citizen engagement and civic capacity.³ OCO’s model of political mobilization offers a different, grassroots advocacy approach. With a commitment to local leadership development, OCO’s organizers provide tools for predominantly poor residents to promote “issue” campaigns and work to persuade officials to enact specific policy changes. Activism of this sort encourages communities to engage in public debates and allows groups of every day citizens to pressure government to deliver equitable social policies.

This case study explores the organizing technique OCO employs to advance youth and family policy.⁴ OCO links residents from various neighborhoods and racial and economic backgrounds primarily through faith and a few school institutions. Like many local advocates, OCO seeks to make policy processes inclusive. Moreover, OCO is equally committed to building power through faith relationships to sustain community involvement, unlike many advocacy organizations exclusively concerned with funding or promoting reform of public institutions. OCO is as concerned about the ways things happen as about what happens, a stance that distinguishes them from other local advocates. Campaign objectives include not only safer streets and better schools, but more engaged community members.

**Advocacy in context: OCO’s role in Oakland and beyond**

OCO’s role as a faith-based organizer sets it apart from...
other community advocates: it develops both individual and collective social empowerment to affect a broad platform of issues. Organizers position community residents to address the concerns of local families, reflecting a core organizational commitment and belief: political influence comes from considerable community involvement. OCO is therefore not strictly a child advocacy organization; the organization does not speak on behalf of a specific constituency (e.g., children, the poor, or a political cause), and local organizing issues are not explicitly child-focused. Rather, OCO enables Oakland residents to become advocates for issues that affect the welfare of children and youth, including education, health care, and crime and safety.

It is within this larger advocacy framework that this case explores OCO’s ability to keep officials accountable to children and youth. Oakland’s local context makes OCO’s approach especially compelling. Geographically, Oakland’s “flatland” communities in East and West Oakland are economically marginalized from the affluent “hill communities.” Community residents have observed the deterioration of basic city services like youth programs and police protection and the development of an increasingly inequitable education system. Oakland, in contrast to other Bay Area communities, has a relatively large population of children (27.4% under the age of 19) with disproportionately high dropout and truancy rates, foster care placements, and juvenile crime. One former organizer suggests that, because of ongoing crime, violence, and drug use, “you can organize out of pain in Oakland twenty-four seven. There is a lot of it.” In the face of these challenges, OCO has been organizing across the city, through neighborhoods and churches, for over thirty years.

The organization’s influence is not only local. OCO has distinguished itself as a nationally recognized grassroots organization among a peer group of faith-based and other community advocates. In Oakland, OCO plays an important mediating function by bringing together residents and their governmental officials. These local and national relationships developed after key shifts in strategy. The decision to affiliate with the National PICO (Pacific Institute of Community Organizations) Network, for example, introduced to OCO new organizational structure and principles for organizing. Four components set PICO’s model apart: building a relational culture, holding public officials accountable, drawing power through networks, and developing leadership through faith. These themes, and OCO’s ability to bring together a diverse set of interests and faiths, will be discussed throughout the case.

The strategies and tactics OCO employs can contribute much to our understanding of local advocacy for children and youth. OCO may be particularly instructive in how it relates to local government and policy systems, how organizers rally citizens to voice their concerns, and how advocacy organizations can adapt strategically to changing policy climates. The next sections detail OCO’s organizing history and approach. We explore significant advocacy gains as well as underscore some of the organizational challenges and tactical trade-offs that arise in mobilizing both communities and government for children and youth.

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A Brief History of OCO

Origins

In 1972, Jesuit priests Father John Baumann and Father Jerry Helfrich organized a neighborhood group in Fruitvale, a mixed, but predominately African-American community in the Oakland flatlands. Using principles of community organizing learned in Chicago, Baumann expanded to other flatland communities—Elmhurst, West Oakland, and San Antonio—with the goal of improving economic conditions for local families. A new “organizing project” emerged to mobilize around issues of junkyards, zoning, crime, and vacant housing. Local leadership and organizing activity soon developed, through churches, merchant and civic groups. As city demographics changed and housing vacancies grew, the neighborhood projects joined forces and publicly launched a new organization, Oakland Community Organizations, in the spring of 1977. OCO incorporated as a 501(c)(3) organization soon after.

Gathered under the banner “The Future of Oakland... We Decide,” representatives from over 100 neighborhood organizations formed OCO’s first community action. The first major initiatives aimed to gain decent affordable housing.
Local meetings led to subsequent political hearings, broadening attention to issues of property taxes, sanitation, and truancy. OCO began to grow steadily, in both its constituency and breadth of issues, and expanded its agenda beyond individual neighborhood problems. Increased concern with residents’ personal interests, one staff member recalls, produced a more engaged and empowered citizenry: “When we created relationships, power came...we couldn’t make up the issues ourselves and expect a turnout.” Accordingly, new organizers were hired to recruit and train residents to become neighborhood leaders.

Still OCO was dependent on recruiting low-paid staff to coordinate neighborhood outreach, and organizing was staff-intensive work. Residents throughout Oakland, increasingly aware of social inequities experienced by those in the flatlands, started to participate in framing issues and organizing events. New concerns surfaced across Oakland and OCO exceeded its staff capacity to organize in neighborhoods. PICO lent support during this time and provided a new organizing method based upon the development of volunteer leaders in faith institutions. The new core group of leaders expanded OCO’s neighborhood reach through local churches.

Current features of OCO’s strategy—one-to-one conversations between organizers and congregation members, leadership development, research, and political actions—evolved over time, as did the organization’s structure. The modification of OCO’s organizing model and a change in its organizing target and partnership base represent two distinct shifts in OCO’s history that illustrate the organization’s firm commitment to institution building, by developing local leaders and facilitating relationships with institutional supporters.

Institution-based organizing
The shift in organizing model occurred during the 1980s when OCO established its first citywide campaign to combat drug use and crime. Leaders established new relationships with the police and created successful community policing efforts that gained national recognition. Until that time, support for OCO had spread, but participation across the city was uneven. Alliances within neighborhoods were weak, and with a growing and changing city demographic, social connections and individual membership were difficult to sustain. OCO looked to faith institutions to cross racial, economic, and neighborhood lines and to make “values and relationships the glue that holds organizations together,” not just issues or neighborhoods. OCO’s “institution-based model of organizing,” rooted in congregations, came in part because the old model had stagnated. The federation of congregations created a new network for residents to collectively tackle issues and make decisions across neighborhoods. By 1987, OCO launched its first citywide campaign with seven congregations.

New PICO membership required OCO to adhere to an organizing model in which issue generation—an organic process used to garner community input—was central to building an organizing focus. Consequently, the targets of OCO’s advocacy changed as the concerns of its constituency changed. Training local leaders, with the express purpose of creating a citizenry eager to address community issues, became the chief function of institution-based organizing. OCO’s new mode of recruitment not only helped extend its membership base and enlist new leaders, but, because of its attention to community voice and power, also accorded OCO greater legitimacy throughout the city.

A new partnership base for deeper system reform
In the early 1990s, schools became a primary target for reform in Oakland. OCO organizers began to hear similar concerns throughout the city about the lack of afterschool programs and youth employment opportunities. These issues prompted OCO to concentrate initially on school-to-career opportunities and later to examine the state of the schools, particularly the dilapidated facilities in overcrowded schools. Gradually, OCO reached out to schools by way of parent leaders and engaged a few teachers in organizing around afterschool programming and class size reduction. After a series of citywide actions, organizers reached their initial goal: OCO and the school district secured funding from the state to implement afterschool programs and later, with PICO affiliates in neighboring cities, mobilized a regional constituency of organizers and teachers to secure $50 million to support more school programs.
Nevertheless, the core problem remained: an antiquated school system. In 30 years, not one new school had been built, despite increased student demand and schools throughout the city experienced over-enrollment. As a result, in 1997, OCO turned its attention to whole school reform and began an initiative to create new small charter schools. The movement to create new small schools created tensions and unexpected alliances between OCO, the city and school district. This second shift to broader reform efforts and citywide issue campaigns brought OCO to the national spotlight for its leadership in Oakland’s small schools movement.

A former OCO organizer and small schools advocate noted that the transition came when OCO leaders sensed that bigger problems were not being solved. The multi-track year round schools created a school environment that was highly impersonal and chaotic as classrooms and classes were constantly switching. Organizers and parents together realized that this school structure fostered overused facilities and gave rise to students’ disruptive behavior: “Once OCO started to ask questions, there was an endless amount of energy...It started out with a focus on dirty bathrooms...And we were all learning how complicated the problem was.” The organizing framework promptly shifted from a localized concern—facilities use, to a larger scale problem—the overall flawed structure of the school itself.

As interest in school change grew, OCO found itself at a crossroads. For the organization to shift its attention from afterschool programs and dirty bathrooms to school district reform, OCO needed to formalize relationships with parents, teachers and the school district. To do so, OCO partnered with the nationally recognized school reform agency, Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES). Together they centered on “fixing the system” by implementing a district-wide small schools campaign. OCO retained its fundamental organizing model, but expanded its agenda to seek more extensive and deeper reform.

OCO’s position as “outsiders” soon changed as they actively sought out teachers to support school reform. A staff member recalls, “There was a tremendous response. There were eight year-round multi-track schools, and teachers were hungry for change.” In 1999, OCO recruited its first teacher to work with the OCO-BayCES partnership. This new organizing strategy bridged participation of faith and school leaders, and for the first time for OCO, as well as across PICO, non-faith institutional actors became active participants in the PICO model.

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OCO was deliberate in building other alliances as well. With mounting pressure from OCO and BayCES, district officials gradually became supportive of the small schools movement. The Superintendent at the time assured OCO that ending multi-track schools was a “number one priority.” In order to convert and create new small schools, however, the district needed to build them. In 1999, OCO grew its organizing portfolio once more by mobilizing local leaders around a facilities bond measure. OCO then “telescoped the issue” and, with help from PICO project leaders, led a campaign that culminated in a state commitment of $8.2 billion, providing matching bond money for local school construction. New construction and school building repair led all but one elementary school to eliminate the multi-track system and by 2000, OCO became known nationally as having developed one of the few successful community-driven school reform efforts in the US. In 2001, Oakland Unified School District passed the New Small Autonomous Schools (NSAS) Policy.
Organizational structure

Today OCO is made up of 40 congregations and allied community organizations representing 40,000 families.28 The organization’s staff of eleven includes an Executive Director, eight professional organizers, and administrators. Organizational governance consists of a board, including members from each active congregation, as well as an executive board, made up of a mixture of pastors, community leaders, and former organizers. OCO’s operating budget of $700,000 is supported mainly by foundations, a few corporate sponsors, and dues from member congregations.

Staff train local volunteer leaders and together they mobilize through core leadership teams known as Local Organizing Committees (LOCs). Much of the time, staff and community leaders are “doing the same things, reading and thinking, and all in response to what’s happening locally,” one staff member explains. Underscoring the importance of community leadership, she notes “decisions are made by the leaders. It is the organizer’s job to look at all the resources...to stretch people’s imagination of what’s possible.”29 Leaders conduct one-to-one conversations with other adults in their communities to uncover individual concerns. Leaders then address these concerns in LOC meetings and consider how to frame them within larger citywide issues around which other neighborhoods can unite.

National staff of PICO also provide organizational oversight. OCO’s entree into the PICO network was through mutual interest on the part of PICO leaders and established congregations.30 The relationship between PICO and OCO is contractual: OCO pays its dues, and in return receives technical assistance, a consulting director, and the ability to network with other PICO organizations. Although leaders representing different organizations gather for annual national trainings, PICO affiliates stay culturally and locally distinct. Accordingly, OCO remains dependent on community leadership and decisions are based locally in organizing committees.

OCO as a Mediating Institution

Building relational culture and “standing on the shoulders of success”

OCO’s position as a multi-issue community organization allows organizers to select issues that resonate with individual constituents’ concerns. As citywide advocates, however, OCO leaders recognize that a select group of organizers alone cannot carry out campaigns. Executive Director Ron Snyder suggests that third-party organizations need to be critical partners to community leaders and public officials.31 Thus, in some instances, OCO partners with the institutions that it seeks to change. These professional relations with city agencies and political leaders grant OCO legitimacy at the grassroots, while OCO lends “street credibility” to the policy makers with which it collaborates.32

OCO’s formal alliances with Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and BayCES exemplify this type of relationship. The partnership required direct communication between community leaders, a school reform agency, and the school district. Organizers built a “relational culture,” by facilitating policy discussion between leaders and school officials, and opposed a traditionally “top-down, efficiency driven system,” which, according to organizers, threatened their relationships and community trust.33

OCO’s partnership with BayCES was intentional: the organizing process needed research and consultation from a respected school reform leader to guide the small schools campaign. Based on this coalition of expertise and community support,
the Gates Foundation granted Oakland Schools over $9 million dollars as part of its nationwide funding initiative for new small schools. Although the money was channeled through BayCES, its staff recognized OCO’s ability to influence resource allocation and generate new sources of revenue. While OCO alone might not have gained national recognition among school reformers, similarly BayCES, without OCO’s endorsement, would not have been successful in their efforts. As one BayCES liaison explained, “partnership with OCO is a required element of our success....The reason we got Gates money is [that] we were working with OCO, and the will was generated by OCO.”

PICO’s organizing principles—people need power, power lies in relationships, and relationships are reciprocal—support the relational culture to which OCO subscribes. OCO’s “insider strategy” is collaborative in nature, with power brokers or government institutions. Although OCO challenges officials in large actions, they do so in a public meeting style, sharing questions in advance, and respecting the commitment of the leaders they confront. Through these relationships, OCO aims to “change the whole system” as well as the processes by which change occurs. Meetings and actions enable local residents to interact with policymakers. As one organizer explains, “People get excited when they meet the chief of police, mayor, and education board. They feel they have the power to give their testimony...and spread the word to others.”

Still, numerous struggles occurred as OCO built these relations and sought legitimacy with the district and teacher’s union. The work around the small schools was, as one organizer explained, a “result of high tension between parents, schools, and the superintendent.... We had to put out a credible threat about creating charter schools to be taken seriously.” The threat presented itself when OCO expanded relationships within the district. Organizers attended numerous school board meetings and in turn, invited board members to learn about small schools.

OCO’s ability to establish a working relationship clearly rested on showing the district that “OCO was around for the long haul...They were standing on the shoulders of success.” Previous political victories, including securing bond money for school construction, contributed to and augmented OCO’s visibility with school officials. OCO was known to city hall, but had only before worked with the school district to advocate for more resources for specific programs. Establishing a new relationship with the district required OCO to maintain a visible presence. Staff and leaders consistently attended education meetings, joined district education committees, and researched alternatives for reform prior to confronting school administrators.

PICO’s central tenet—no permanent allies, no permanent enemies—does not appear, however, to endorse a commitment to long-lasting partnerships. As issues change and officials’ terms expire, OCO’s relationships do not remain intact. Tension between the community and new state administrator, for example, exerted pressure on OCO’s existing relationships and the formalized partnership between OCO, BayCES, and OUSD has recently become strained. A staff member explains, “the problem is that our relationship is with the [school] board and they don’t have power…the bridge is broken for us.” Moreover, the state administrator has not embraced the relational culture OCO aims to cultivate. Many parents and teachers have openly criticized the administrator’s inattentiveness to community concerns about new school reforms and school closures. Snyder notes that the new district leadership “does not see parents [OCO leaders] as partners.” As a result, OCO is cautious about the allies it seeks but its stance suggests a willingness to build alliances and enter into long-term, if not permanent, partnerships.

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Political Accountability: “Attacking with intelligence” OCO holds public officials accountable for their policy choices. Political actions follow a typical format in which leaders welcome guest officials, explain the purpose of the meeting, share scripture or a faith reflection, and present ground rules to ensure a respectful gathering. The meeting is organized much like a hearing, and OCO leaders ask officials scripted questions. In customary PICO fashion, the questions and speaker names are printed clearly on the program.

These political events have attracted thousands of residents in the past and, with the help of media publicity, provoked
public promises from officials. One illustration of this came during the school action “Solidarity for Schools,” when a parent called out to the panel of public officials: “I have a 3rd grader in school and I represent parents that share a common concern. Are we united to protect our children? What are you going to do to preserve the leadership to maintain our schools?” Mayor Brown quickly ceded, “I meet with OCO all the time and they’re always trying to make me do things... I will do my best to identify candidates and you will all have local influence.” Other officials attempted to assuage community concerns: “I know that [State Superintendent] Jack O’Connell cares deeply about appropriate funding for schools. That is his priority.”

Verbal assurances of this kind are consistent with OCO’s advocacy strategy, as is research, used by organizers to present data to policymakers, inquire about alternatives, and propose policy solutions. Data exposing social inequities presented at staff meetings are then shared during LOC meetings and enable leaders to develop policy responses and monitor officials carefully. Organizers believe they keep political leaders accountable by “attacking them with intelligence.” Through this process, OCO has maintained legitimacy as a political player. Former OCO organizer and California PICO director Jim Keddy explains:

“It’s definitely policy research that enables us to put forward proposals.... The classic protest model is [that] you react to government and it’s negative, whereas if you walk in the door and say this is what we want to do and this is how you can fund it, you become a proactive player.”

To this end, OCO collaborated with high school students in West Oakland to research the root causes of truancy. The new endeavor formalized, for the first time, a youth-adult partnership that helped OCO carefully frame and pitch the issue, attracting the attention of county agencies including education, probation, and the District Attorney’s office. An OCO organizer explained the reasoning behind the partnership: “In order to get a better quality of life on campus youth are doing research to find out who is responsible [for unsafe schools and truant behavior]. They need to identify those adults responsible, and then gather those people in one room together.” The youth’s data, together with OCO’s prearranged action, proved to be a winning combination. Hundreds of parents were present at that action, at a school in which a lack of parental involvement and increased truancy has contributed to poor student achievement.

Turnout at events, an indicator of organizing success, is perhaps OCO’s most impressive accomplishment. Without OCO, the youth-led action would not have gathered an audience comparable to previous OCO-sponsored school actions. What is more, the youth alone could not have attained the publicity required for officials to respond to public pleas. As a result, OCO’s ability to draw large numbers to actions helps solidify its role in local decision-making and increases engagement among community activists.

Building power through networks
Unlike a political party or interest group, OCO members are not individuals. OCO attracts diverse community leadership through its broad institutional membership, comprising a range of congregations from different denominations and a few small schools. The mixture of ethnicities, faith traditions, and neighborhoods represented in OCO’s network supports OCO’s sustainability and political viability for two main reasons. First, organizational diversity allows OCO to speak more authentically about the needs of its community. Second, local and national networks allow advocacy to occur at multiple levels, from one local school to another and from schools...
to districts and state agencies. Ideas about issues, strategies, and tactics travel between local, regional and national groups and associations.

At the local level, the OCO and BayCES network yielded political power. OCO learned from BayCES about successful school reform models, while BayCES benefited from OCO’s sponsorship and established community base. One Oakland correspondent noted the mutual benefits:

The story of the small schools policy was...a complex marriage. Without BayCES, OCO didn’t have the expertise. And BayCES doesn’t have the popular power to give it the muscle. It’s a fascinating symbiotic relationship.49

The professional relationship established OCO and BayCES as a strong presence in both Oakland and national school reform circles and allowed them to put forward powerful policy proposals to district officials.

OCO’s other networks, the PICO national and state networks, provide a basic organizing model and stable institutional core. According to Snyder, organizations that want the power to affect change need the presence of a coherent model. Keddy similarly stresses a key benefit of the California PICO network: “People see their own community in the context of the state.... So this idea that their fates are mutually linked becomes pretty evident.”50 The network allows local organizers to share stories and organizing strategies to other PICO organizations. Still Snyder notes, “the absence of resources to support an advocacy issue is why coalitions... stay at the neighborhood level.”51

PICO’s membership model enables OCO to develop local power supported institutionally from above.

**Developing leadership through faith**

Both OCO and PICO comprise “a federation of faith-based organizations.”52 With the recent inclusion of member schools OCO now reaches beyond religious institutions to families and children without church affiliation. Still OCO uses religious stories and symbols to forge a link between individual faith and political participation. An excerpt from a position statement on crime and violence demonstrates the use of religious metaphor in political testaments:

The biblical prophet Ezekiel called on the people of his day to repair the breach in human relationships... Oakland Community Organizations call upon you to stand in the breach and to repair the gap of trust in this city.53

Even so, the work is political, not proselytizing.54 Faith acts as a decisive motivator for staff and church leaders. For many individual participants, “it’s strong faith values that drive them.”55 Others attend church out of habit or tradition, “on form rather than substance,” and the work of OCO transforms their faith experience. OCO recognizes that establishing an organizing base through congregations delivers the organization a large and readily accessible set of devoted supporters, something other professional advocates regularly seek. Yet it is the personally transformative nature of organizing that compels church members to act upon their faith outside of the church structure. The relationship between church membership and political organizing is, as Snyder describes, “symbiotic in many ways.”56

Church memberships therefore motivate leaders in several ways. First, religion helps organizers understand and justify political tension or conflict, inspiring activism. OCO leaders gather information on issues “that cause pain in the community,” and LOCs frame them in the broader political arena. OCO targets public officials to reflect its guiding belief that government should ensure economic and social justice for all people, regardless of income, culture, or political inclination: “Leaders share common values from our diverse faith, racial,
political, and social traditions. We bring these values into the public arena...to serve one another and to seek justice."  

Second, faith—as a set of values—acts as a bridge between traditionally divided institutions. For OCO leaders and their congregations, it is “faith that is inclusive,” and that allowed schools to become members of OCO. Snyder reasons why the two institutions relate: “Both schools and churches struggle with the same problems in low-income neighborhoods. The pitting of one issue against another is used to marginalize communities.”  

OCO organizers work to align values across the two institutions. Still, the interaction between churches and schools does “bring some strain in terms of teachers...and schools as public institutions,” a former organizer explains. But local anxiety about mixing religious rhetoric with school organizing occurs occasionally around institutional constraints, not around people's values or political motivations. For example, the LOC of new small school LIFE Academy can conduct “reflections,” not prayers, but “draws on the same element.”

Third, for OCO's central issues—schools, crime, and neighborhood safety—faith acts as a positive force that harnesses individual concerns into a united public voice. Organizers ask themselves, “How do you bring people together around hope and around a positive vision?” One former small schools organizer claims it depends on the context in which advocacy organizations operate: “When people enter the church they leave their attitudes and ugly behavior at the door.” Public meetings held in churches, for example, let organizers “act at our best...there are fewer conflicts within,” a context conducive to more cohesive and strong leadership. Churches are used as an “instrument of faith” to train diverse people to act and to “instill understanding and ownership.” An OCO board co-chair reflects upon her positive experiences within the church and with OCO. Her growing leadership gave her a new set of skills, and allowed her to translate them to other aspects of her life: “People like me are not extroverted and OCO has changed that for me...I would never have gotten involved with schools or politics....Now I am a more valuable person in church, in my family, and in my community.”

OCO must transform individual agendas into a collective platform of issues, posing some constraints on the faith-based model. With an all-embracing and, at times, neutral stance on certain issues, OCO does not take radical positions or align themselves with a certain party or candidate. Keddy acknowledges, “We’ve always been a big tent...and frankly we don’t even know what people’s political affiliation is. It never comes up.” Building a collective agenda also means attending to people's personal issues that do not always translate to broader city issues. Although OCO remains inclusive, the Board chair makes clear, “not everyone is concerned about the same things,” or about OCO's primary concerns.

Faith used as a political organizing tool—to inspire activism, to bridge individuals and institutions, to bring hope to depressed neighborhoods, and practically, to train and recruit leaders—may provide useful structural and procedural guidance for non-faith based advocacy or organizing groups. OCO constituents, faith-based or not, are able to benefit. Parents, pastors, and teachers align their advocacy work with core beliefs, and the skills they acquire become useful in their workplaces, families, and other community settings.

**Indicators of Success**

**Effective civic engagement for political accountability**

OCO's successful campaigns culminate when organizing translates into policymaking. Oakland's small school redesign initiative, now district policy, was a result of community
members’ concerted fight to convert local problems of over-crowded schools into district-wide reform. Today, OCO’s small schools work continues to serve a dual purpose: to pressure state and local politicians to support and sustain existing district policy and to raise public consciousness about the importance of investing in children, particularly at a time when social institutions face fierce competition for public resources.

OCO’s civic engagement around youth issues has led to other campaign successes, such as securing a site for a new school, Aviation High, and shaping the language of a neighborhood safety initiative, Measure Y, to balance the addition of police officers with funding for preventive measures such as youth programs. OCO has also recently increased its presence at the state level. Capitalizing on their local organizing visibility and strength, OCO and its sister organizations together fought to move forward state legislation for small schools, just a year after the state takeover of Oakland’s school district. The state policy passed even in the midst of California’s fiscal crisis affecting services to families and children. Nonetheless, while changed public policy is often taken as a sign of organizing success, the “hand off” to public agencies of a private reform agenda can also be a source of frustration. OCO does not control how policies are carried out, and to some degree, loses power during the implementation process. And often, as in the case of the state takeover of Oakland’s schools, the translation of the intent of the initiative is partial or undeveloped and brings in its wake additional questions about implementation and sustainability.

**Sustainability and survival**

OCO relies on organizational sustainability to keep pace with policy change and to secure footing in future policy discussions. Organizing efforts do not end with OCO’s campaigns; there are always new issues to address. Keddy notes that organizers “don’t go away. The classic thing about protest activity is that it flares up and dies. With organizing, consistency means a lot.” Consistency also means not disconnecting from local neighborhood issues. Even during large campaigns like the small schools movement or the effort to change crime and safety legislation, organizers must pay attention to individual LOC concerns such as obtaining a stop sign to improve pedestrian safety or securing funding for a neighborhood recreation center. Keddy explains, “The real key is to keep the local organizing process engine running....Any good PICO organization should be working on 12 different things at the same time.”

Nonetheless, OCO’s culture of sustainability through institution building—issue generation and leadership development—can limit the organization. The process of organizing follows convention, to allow for thoughtful recruitment and training, but does not readily allow OCO to venture into new realms of advocacy activity. As a membership organization, OCO is susceptible to placing too much emphasis on organizational survival. Snyder notes, “In our projects, we think more about building organization and building power for OCO.... There is a real tension between activity and development.” Organizers often consider the question, “at what point do social issues take precedence over maintaining organizing coalitions?” According to the PICO model, the answer is not simple. The organization faces a “productive tension” between moving forward with organizing activity and returning to the cycle of leadership development to sustain the organization.

OCO also now faces a balancing act: keeping a focus on local organizing while taking up opportunities to work with PICO in its National Initiative. OCO is exploring the possibility of taking the small schools campaign national. Although an exciting prospect, Snyder also admits, “We don’t know what we’re doing...It creates a lot of opportunity and a lot of strain.” It is uncharted territory and Snyder is cautious: “DC is a foreign land in terms of operating.” It is not where OCO’s work is typically implemented or where local issues are identified and resolved.

**Institution building**

OCO’s broadened reform agenda also poses some issues for leadership recruitment. For example, in the first six months of its focus on school reform, OCO put energy into one large campaign and held 80 actions alone. Snyder acknowledges, “There were consequences to the work.... The temptation is to think that success leads to more work which leads to more success...but it also creates the potential of a treadmill of responding to needs.” Organizing requires regular prioritization of issues and constant attention to organizational capacity. Organizers must be opportunistic and, at times, put tremendous amount of time into one large campaign. In the case of the small schools campaign, it paid off: “It strengthened the
public perception of OCO. It made OCO more legitimate and more inclusive of everybody, in part because of tackling a broad issue area that affects all—schools.” The high priority given to small schools, however, also put institution building at risk. With more city actions planned, organizers diverted attention away from building local power through faith institutions. Success in one area, Snyder explains, “does not equal a culture of development.” A PICO evaluation later revealed that, during OCO’s small schools campaign, one-to-one’s and LOC leadership development had fallen off.

Organizing of this sort is carefully calculated. OCO does not just demand that policies be changed, but plays an active role in designing new ones.

The PICO model also has the potential to become overly prescribed, dissuading organizers from experimenting with new advocacy strategies. The model by nature is slow when implemented: OCO concentrates its efforts on building lasting relationships with individual constituents through a process that requires leaders to research issues and deliberate over policy solutions. Organizing of this sort is carefully calculated. OCO does not just demand that policies be changed, but plays an active role in designing new ones. Yet the resulting achievement has been sustained local growth, and in the case of the small schools movement, escalation of organizing to the national level. Consequently, the internal conflict between local and national organizing “is no doubt necessary” according to Snyder, and may even contribute to new organizing opportunities. Similarly, the pressure to focus on large campaigns without losing sight of developing local leaders leaves OCO in a steady state of “healthy tension.” OCO is constrained “only by time” when organizing capacity falls short and issue campaigns take precedence. Tactics may change in the short run, but OCO stays faithful to the organizing model by returning to Oakland’s neighborhoods time after time, building individual relationships and a sustainable constituent force.

Training and research
The PICO network continues to grow, adding between one and three organizations a year. Keddy attributes the growth to the amount of non-affiliated organizations that have expressed interest to join: “People hear about what we’re doing and they want to be a part of it... it’s people coming to us, not us going to them.” With this expansion, the number of requests for training by OCO has also increased, indicating OCO’s influence even within the PICO network. OCO has trained prominent local youth advocates, and serves as a resource for other PICO organizations and their school reform efforts.

OCO has also taught other organizations how to build civic capacity to enact system-changing reform. The relational dynamic created by OCO’s organizing, for example, has had a big impact on whether and how schools in Oakland and elsewhere can create a more collaborative culture. While hard to measure and often overlooked by many reform efforts, OCO’s emphasis on facilitating relationships with diverse institutional supporters has been the subject of many studies by scholars, foundations, and others interested in school change. Recently, the Mott Foundation selected OCO to take part in a study of local organizing for school reform. Researchers interested in faith-based organizing have also analyzed OCO’s work.

OCO’s Distinctive Position in Oakland
OCO’s political organizing represents a particular, important form of mobilization: constituents, not bound by a particular sector or interest group, frame local issues, and associational membership allows for broad and diverse participation. Using this model, OCO addresses problems facing parents and others in less affluent areas, where families often have too little say in decisions affecting their lives. The goal of creating
participatory power, among local coalitions and city officials, reveals OCO’s unique emphasis on political processes, even in tough policy climates. Moreover, OCO’s commitment to change schools, districts, and city government from a “bureaucratic” to a “relational” culture suggests an even deeper transformation of democratic processes through deliberative relationships.

OCO also calls attention to the potential for advocacy organizations to promote better outcomes for youth through increased civic engagement. By substantially involving parents and youth, advocacy groups such as OCO have more credibility to represent communities and greater legitimacy with political officials. Communities then gain a stronger voice in policy so that politics functions as OCO believes it should, democratically and with the best interests of children in mind.
Endnotes

1 OCO political action “Solidarity for Schools,” St. Elizabeth School, Oakland, May 1, 2003.
2 Berry, 1984; Reid, 2001; Salamon, 1995.
3 Skocpol, 2003.
4 OCO is examined as part of a “population” of community organizations—organizations performing similar advocacy functions—as well as those organizations they attempt to influence. To understand how these organizations function, our study considers their organizational structure, how they define and frame campaign issues, what strategies they use to execute their campaigns, and how they assess the efficacy of their work. For this case, we have conducted 16 interviews with staff, leaders, city officials and other OCO affiliates, 8 meeting and action observations, and extensive document review [as of December 2004].
5 Interview with Executive Director Ron Snyder, November 10, 2004.
6 The organizations that advocate for children, like all advocacy organizations, are a diverse lot; they have different organizational structures, resources, and issues of concern, but most focus exclusively on young people. Some pursue broader interests. Advocacy strategies used include rallies and public actions, youth and parent organizing, political education, research and litigation, as well as private meetings with officials.
9 PICO is a national network of 50 faith-based community organizations that span across 150 cities and 16 states. Each community organization itself comprises a network of faith institutions and other grassroots organizations. PICO’s mission is “to assist in the building of community organizations with the power to improve the quality of life of families and neighborhoods” (PICO website). Its work is based on principles of “respect for human dignity; creation of a just society; and development of the whole person.” In California, sixteen organizations form the PICO California Project, which works to make changes at the state level on major issues relevant to local communities including education, health, housing, crime and safety, and more recently immigration.
11 Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
12 OCO’s publication: A 25th Anniversary Retrospective.
14 OCO was formally recognized by the White House for its citywide anti-drug campaign and community policing efforts.
16 PICO website, www.piconetwork.org/ab_history.asp.
17 Interview with Ron Snyder, January 31, 2003.
18 Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
19 Interview with Ron Snyder, January 31, 2003.
22 Ibid.
23 BayCES is part of a national school reform network, The Coalition of Essential Schools.
24 Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
30 Interview with Ron Snyder November 10, 2004.
31 Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
32 Interview with Renato Almanzor, April 9, 2004.
34 Interview with Renato Almanzor, April 9, 2004.
35 PICO principle, from interviews with Ron Snyder, Liz Sullivan, and Bea Bernstine.
36 Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
39 Ibid.
41 Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
42 Ibid.
43 Excerpts from researcher field notes, May 1, 2003.
44 Ibid.
51 Interview with Ron Snyder, May 16, 2003.
53 Excerpt from OCO’s “Position on Crime Prevention and Violence Reduction, May 10, 2004.”
54 Interview with Ron Snyder, May 16, 2003.
55 Ibid.
56 Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
57 OCO website, www.oaklandcommunity.org/about.html.
58 Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
Interview with Bea Bernstine, November 19, 2003.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Discussion at OCO Board Meeting, November 11, 2003,
Interview with Ron Snyder November 10, 2004.
Discussion at OCO Board Meeting, November 11, 2003.
Interview with Ron Snyder, March 12, 2004.
Ibid.
OCO Board Meeting, November 11, 2003.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Interview with Ron Snyder, November 10, 2004.
Ibid.
For example, EBAYC (East Bay Asian Youth Center), a local advocacy group, has been through PICO training.
References


