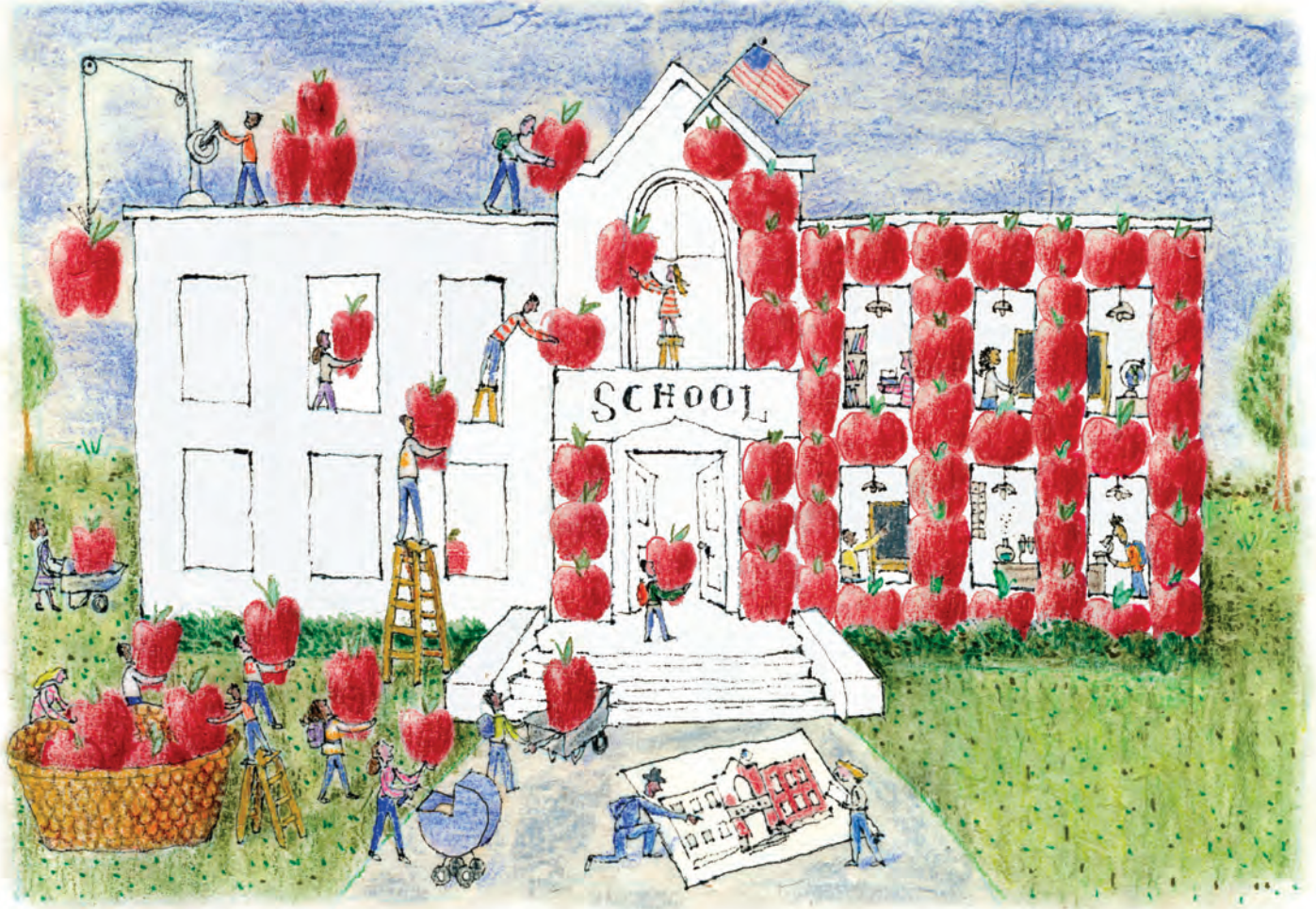


# Organizing for Equity

Most Policymakers Have Done Little for Our Poorest Schools—Can Parents Fill the Void?



BY MICHAEL B. FABRICANT

**A**t least since the civil rights movement, Americans have documented and decried—but done little to decrease—the achievement gap. This gulf, one of many that divide us by race and class, has festered in part because the larger question of inequitable investment in poor

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communities of color has long been neglected. Demonstration projects of various kinds have been tested in selected communities—but little has been made of the successes. Demonstration projects, if they work, are meant to be scaled up; however, a more ambitious, transformative investment in a cross section of poor communities across the nation has never been attempted.

The reticence to make such an investment has to do with the magnitude of resources required and a lack of political will. Presently, any call for such investment is undercut by both the recession and a political reluctance to tax even the wealthiest citizens. Income inequality in the United States is now at its highest level since the Census Bureau began tracking household income in 1967. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the “top 10 percent of the income distribution has claimed almost two-thirds of the gain to overall incomes since 1979, with the top 1 percent alone claiming 38.7 percent of overall gains.”<sup>1</sup> Child poverty is increasing, the middle class is disappearing, and the wealthy are becoming dramatically wealthier. In 1983, the net worth of the

wealthiest 1 percent of households was 131 times greater than the median family net worth. By 2007, it was 181 times greater—and by 2009, it was 225 times greater.<sup>2</sup> Such inequality is neither natural nor inevitable: the United States has the highest income disparity among Western industrialized nations.<sup>3</sup> And, as the article on page 5 demonstrates, income inequality is highly detrimental. Across whole societies (not just among the poor), income inequality is related to an array of social problems, including poorer health, more stress, higher crime, and lower academic achievement.

Our income inequality is mirrored in our nation's inequitable spending on public education. As the most recent *Quality Counts* report shows,<sup>4</sup> per-pupil spending (adjusted for regional cost differences) ranges from \$6,525 in Utah to \$17,114 in Wyoming. Within states, the average disparity in per-pupil spending (adjusted for regional costs) between districts at the 5th and 95th percentiles is \$4,286. In 43 out of the 49 states for which data are available, districts with higher property values tend to have higher education revenues (state and local combined) than districts with lower property values. Unlike teachers and administrators in nations that routinely perform well in international assessments—such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea—educators across the United States have vastly different resources at their fingertips. From per-pupil spending to instructional materials, student assessments to professional development, our educational systems are remarkably unequal.<sup>5</sup>

As a professor of social work with a long history of working with schools and communities in New York City, I see a very strong relationship between inequitable investment and academic performance. In our poorest communities, our school systems are overwhelmed with needy students and starved for more resources. Setting aside the family deterioration and community disinvestment that create the achievement gap before children even begin school, the struggles of public schools in inner-city neighborhoods are exacerbated by a lack of strategic investment in teachers, in physical infrastructure, and in rigorous academic programming backed by intensive interventions (such as lengthening the school day for students who are behind). Although encrusted bureaucratic or organizational cultures invariably contribute to listless innovation and anemic forms of practice, larger forces of inequality and underinvestment are having a much more powerful corrosive effect on our schools and communities.

Because the problems in our inner cities are not new, I see little reason to hope that any positive change will emerge from our nation's elite policymaking circles. When it comes to public education, our leaders are far too insulated from the consequences of their choices. Those closest to the disasters of growing inequality, long-standing underinvestment, and new recession-related disinvestment in public education must organize a counterbalancing power to challenge present policymaking trends. Those best able

to mount such a challenge are parents, students, and teachers.

The breakdowns in public systems of education in the poorest communities of color are best described not with cold numbers, but with the language of those who live with those failures daily. In District 9 of the South Bronx, a group of parents has long struggled with the many ways the system is failing their children. At a community meeting, one parent-turned-leader, Ocyntia Williams, a thoughtful and articulate critic of local schooling, talked about the reasons parents needed to organize: "We are doing what we have to do to change a situation that dooms our kids to failure. We have classes that are overcrowded, teachers that leave after a year or two because they don't get any kind of support, buildings that are breaking down, and not enough books. How can anyone in their right mind expect that our kids can

achieve in that situation? We need the city to give our kids what they deserve—investment that can make a difference!"<sup>6</sup>

In most high-performing countries, desperate parents need not be the drivers of educational improvements because equitable investments in skillful teaching, challenging curricula, and assessments that encourage ambitious learning among teachers and students are the norm. Perhaps most critically,

additional resources are directed to those schools and students where the needs are greatest—and the benefits of such investments show up in international assessments. As the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report on equity noted, "while most of the students who perform poorly in PISA are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, some peers from similar backgrounds excel in PISA, demonstrating that overcoming socio-economic barriers to achievement is possible."<sup>7</sup> The PISA report calls these low-socioeconomic status, high-achieving students "resilient" and defines them as coming from the bottom quarter of the distribution of socioeconomic background in their country, but scoring in the top quarter among students from all countries with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. In Finland, Japan, Canada, and Singapore, for example, between 39 and 48 percent of disadvantaged students are resilient. In Hong Kong and Shanghai, 72 and 76 percent are resilient, respectively.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in the United States, only 29 percent of disadvantaged students are resilient.<sup>9</sup> Across all countries in the PISA study, resilient students "are more prevalent in those education systems that PISA indicators show to be more equitable."<sup>10</sup>

The devastating impact of systematic inequity is not lost on parents in our poorest communities. Denise Moncrief, a parent leader who works alongside Ocyntia Williams in District 9 of the South Bronx, was very clear on this point when she noted, "We understand that districts with richer, whiter people wind up with more money for their schools. We understand that is the way it has worked. But we aren't prepared to accept that anymore. You see, as long as it keeps going the way it is going, our kids are just not getting what they need to succeed. We are giving up on generations of kids, poor kids, black kids. They call it policy; I call it a

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crime of willful neglect.”<sup>11</sup>

Willful neglect is an apt description of the major education reforms over the past decade. Instead of increasing equity, investing in high-quality prekindergarten through grade 12 curricula, developing more informative assessments, incorporating the most rigorous research findings into teacher education, or increasing support for new teachers, we have focused on testing students and blaming teachers. Responding to prominent reformers who mistakenly believe that incompetent teachers are the main cause of low student achievement, education historian Diane Ravitch wrote, “Our biggest problem is not getting rid of deadbeats, but recruiting, retaining, and supporting teachers. We have to replace 300,000 teachers (of nearly 4 million) every single year.”<sup>12</sup>

The powerful churning of teachers in the poorest urban school districts—where as many as half of new teachers leave within five years—is symptomatic of working conditions that are simply untenable. Large classes, lack of classroom support, few experienced teachers in the most demanding classroom environments, lack of high-quality, ongoing professional development, and the decay of physical facilities combine over time to cause young teachers to leave the profession. This migration undercuts the development of growing expertise and continuity of teachers in the classroom, and in turn, the academic achievement of students. Yet, this crisis is barely mentioned in the present policy environment, which Ravitch rightly points out is too often dedicated to teacher bashing and the most constricted understandings of accountability as a basis for both framing and remedying present breakdowns in public education.<sup>13</sup>

As a nation, we are faced with the proverbial fork in the road. But to take the route of transformative investment in public education will not be easy. It will require building the power necessary to change course. That power will not come from centralized policymaking circles, but instead must be built by those closest to the fallout of the present crisis: parents, students, teachers, and community members. We need local and national organizing campaigns to advance a new agenda for public schooling.

### Community Organizing to Improve Public Schooling

Relying on stakeholder organizing as the primary strategy for forcing increased investment and redistributive policies is fraught with dilemmas—and filled with potential. The best way to understand both is to get involved; second best is to learn from those involved. I had the honor of participating in and documenting the

work of Ocynthia Williams, Denise Moncrief, and other parent leaders who formed the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools (CC9). For the next few minutes I’d like you to use your imagination and visit the South Bronx with me.

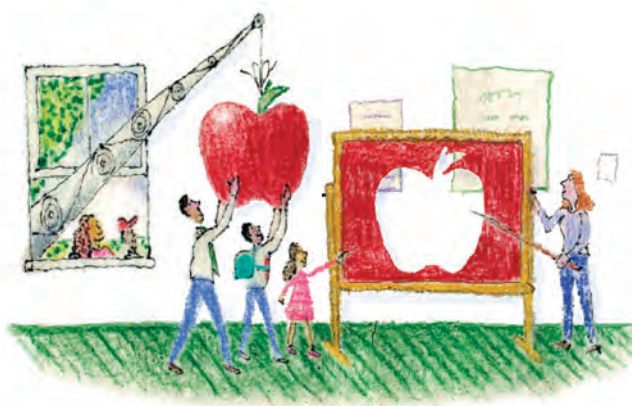


During the summer in the South Bronx, much of the life of the community is lived in public. In Mount Eden on a late afternoon in August 2003, for example, the heat radiating throughout the neighborhood was driving people out of their apartments and onto the streets. To cool off, hydrants were opened, and kids sat under and ran through the intense water streams. Rhythms circulated up and down the street from car radios passing through and boom boxes fixed to the curb. Bright fabrics of every color were worn and used to cover makeshift card tables. Kids ran and played their games while adults sat and played theirs. The sweltering heat seemed to catalyze a swirling kaleidoscope of color, games, and music that cohered into a spontaneously combusted carnival.

The public festival on the street provided a backdrop to a meeting occurring at New Settlement Apartments, a nonprofit agency with deep roots and substantial legitimacy in the community. The meeting was convened by CC9, a group of parents representing various community agencies committed to improving the learning environment and achievement outcomes in neighborhood schools. The informal conversation among seasoned leaders of the group focused exclusively on developing a campaign for the following year. As new parents entered the room, however, the conversation quickly shifted: leaders welcomed new parents, asked about the schools their children were attending, and guided them to the dinner. Stories of neighborhood events, mutual friends, and the failure of the schools were shared. Quickly, this informal conversation ended, and the meeting began. Parent leaders, not the professional organizers in the room, facilitated and led the conversation. Attention was paid to involving the neophyte and the reticent by both providing translation services to everyone in the room—about half of the parents did not speak English—and encouraging parents to speak up. Eliciting participation was not easy, but the safety of weighing in was palpable. When parents spoke, no matter their position, they were never rebuked. Disagreement was offered gently, and leaders consciously laced their comments with affirmation directed to others who had spoken earlier.

These group dynamics created a cascading formal discussion involving at one point or another all of the approximately 30 parents in the room, and a number of informal side conversations.

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Intensity and pain marked much of what parents shared with each other as they revealed the ways in which the local schools had failed their children. That part of the discussion segued into how the schools might be changed. Here, too, passion and energy were evident throughout the room. Parents talked about many needs, including safety, smaller classes, effective professional leadership, and investment in dilapidated buildings. A touchstone to which parents consistently returned, however, was the need to improve classroom instruction: teacher turnover was too high for improvement efforts to take hold. At the conclusion of the meeting, every parent in the room volunteered to work on committees, to begin to more sharply formulate the goals of the next campaign, and to get more parents involved in the organizing work.



What parents recognized throughout the meeting was the relationship between targeted investment in public education and increased achievement in the neighborhood schools serving very poor children of color. Their particular expertise is a product of witnessing daily the failures of local schools through the experiences of their children, yet it is systematically ignored by policymakers. Their voice is notably absent in the discourse about reforming public schools, which is monopolized by academics, policymakers, and politicians with greater power and access to media. The parents of CC9 are engaged in building organizing campaigns that both correct for the imbalance in power and in turn create seats at the table for grass-roots leadership in the negotiation of public school reform.

But, as this glimpse of CC9 hints at, sustained community organizing is tough. To begin with, parents, particularly those from the poorest communities, contend daily with multiple demands. Helping parents—typically single mothers—focus their scarce time on school reform represents a significant challenge for organizers. Equally important, many parents' experience with teachers and local schools has engendered both distrust and cynicism. Additionally, many parents have been divided by racial and ethnic differences. Surfacing these tensions, and staving off their self-destructive consequences, requires significant interpersonal skill and cultural competence, especially in the heat of a campaign.

Other issues that often interfere with mounting powerful organizing campaigns include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Sustaining parent participation after their initial engagement in a campaign. Parent migration back to earlier points of equilibrium after a campaign concludes is a natural tendency, but it undermines the long-term fate of the larger organizing work.
- Finding the funding and local organizational support necessary to sustain an organizing campaign in an increasingly hostile and conservative political environment. Support is particularly difficult to locate because recent policy hegemony has caused a cross section of foundations to disregard invest-

ment and organizing as a serious approach to resurrecting public education.

- Developing a cohort of organizers who remain with the work for an extended period of time. Organizers tend to turn over too rapidly because of low salaries, difficult working conditions, and frustration. As with teachers, their departure creates a tear in the fabric of expertise and continuity so critical to weaving effective campaigns over time.

This summary of dilemmas associated with organizing as a primary strategy for advancing a reform agenda, although realistic, is also chilling. Given the constraints and challenges, can we expect community organizing to offer a way out of the present

morass of misguided public education policymaking? Parents caught in the cross hairs of this struggle see that there is no other way. Ruby Santana, another parent leader of CC9, noted, "Look, we are trying to fix problems that have hurt the schools here for longer than I can remember. I went to the schools in this neighborhood, and now I am a parent sending my kids to the same schools. For years, I have watched and fumed as my kids haven't been given what they need to make it as students. I've tried to talk to the administrators to do it their way.

It hasn't worked—can't get it done by myself with no power. I have to join up with other parents in the same situation to change things. It's the only way. I know it's going to be a long fight, but what other choice do I have? How can I look my kids in the face if I don't give it my best shot? Organizing parents and building power is our best shot."<sup>14</sup>

Despite the challenges, educational organizing is growing across the nation, building an increasingly impressive body of work. The diversity of campaigns, their impact on education policy, and the expansive involvement of a cross section of community residents are hallmarks of this incipient movement.

The book *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools* provides details on perhaps the most comprehensive and rigorous research on the structure and impact of eight recent campaigns. At a variety of sites—Austin, Texas; the Bronx; Chicago; Eastern Pennsylvania; Los Angeles; Miami; Milwaukee; and Oakland, California—a team of researchers conducted over 1,000 interviews and surveys, as well as 75 observations of leadership development sessions, public actions, and negotiations.<sup>15</sup> The team also reviewed documents and articles in the local media, and examined district-level data on dropout rates, graduation rates, and demographics.

Discussing the results of their six-year study, the authors note that first, community organizing increased district officials' responsiveness to low-income parents of color. Second, once the organizing campaigns were in full swing, district resource allocations began to reflect the campaigns' calls to preserve or expand equity. These redistributive policies both reallocated existing resources and, in a number of places such as Los Angeles,

**These parents' expertise is a product of witnessing the failures of schools through the experiences of their children, yet it is ignored by policymakers.**

increased the size of the investment in public education. Third, over time, new district initiatives were increasingly consistent with the community groups' proposals. These platforms for change included, but were not limited to, the following: (a) teacher and principal development to increase parent engagement, (b) teacher recruitment and retention programming, (c) amendments to testing and student promotion policies, and (d) implementing a Direct Instruction literacy program. Although differences in approach and outcome exist across sites, the authors indicate that the findings consistently point to the impact of the organizing campaigns on addressing the needs of underserved, low-income communities of color and immigrants in their districts. In interviews, district leaders indicated that the campaigns provided needed political cover for them to increase equity.<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to school-level impacts, and especially student achievement, the effectiveness of the community organizing work is harder to judge. The researchers note that each site won commitments to fix problems, such as inadequate counseling or course scheduling, but the groups knew that their "sporadic and disconnected improvements are rarely powerful enough to stimulate broad improvement in the capacity of schools to support student learning."<sup>17</sup> The main barrier to broad improvement seemed to be the high turnover in school staff, but significant increases in student achievement were documented in Austin, Miami, and Oakland. These sites emphasized building teacher-parent partnerships, opportunities for greater community participation, and instructor capacity.

CC9, which also increased student achievement, had a similar focus. Concerned about the lack of instructional support, and the resulting high teacher turnover, the parents decided to campaign for an infusion of expert teachers into the poorest schools to mentor inexperienced teachers. That very strategic decision was informed by not just their concerns, but also their desire to build an alliance with the teachers' union and to capitalize on the district's stated objective to heighten investment in teacher capacity. Parents expected, and data suggested, that "lead teachers" (as the experts were called) would upgrade all teachers' expertise, decrease turnover, reward lead teachers with higher salaries, and result in higher test scores. In fact, the test scores in each of the 10 targeted schools jumped dramatically two years after the introduction of the lead teachers.<sup>18</sup> District leaders were so impressed that in 2005 they added lead teachers to 100 low-performing elementary schools across the city.

CC9 was able to accomplish all this because of its layered,

nuanced approach to organizing. CC9 emphasized multiple levels of internal organizing to build the power to launch an effective external campaign for educational justice. The threads of this internal organizing work included (a) building a collaborative of community-based agencies as a vehicle for enlarging parent power, (b) promoting university-community collaboration to increase fundraising and technical capacity, (c) establishing community ownership of the lead-teacher campaign through an invigorated democratic decision-making culture, (d) lowering barriers to participation by providing daycare, meals, language translation, and rigorous leadership development, and (e) forging alliances with teachers and their union around issues of common concern.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, the campaign was also strategically choreographed. On one hand, it featured a series of public events that announced the grass-roots muscle and powerful alliances supporting CC9's agenda. These packed rallies were a mélange of speeches by elected officials expressing commitment, exhortations by parent leaders to ignite passions, chanting at ever greater decibel levels by parents, and performances by students to exemplify what the fight was about. Each of these events increased the pressure on district officials to reach a settlement with the community. These public events occurred simultaneously with private negotiations between the district and parent leaders.<sup>20</sup>

For the parents of CC9, the success of the lead-teacher campaign

did not indicate that their work was done—it gave them the confidence to form more partnerships and take on greater challenges. First, they expanded to all of the Bronx, and then, in 2006, they joined with groups in two other boroughs to form a citywide collaborative called the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ).<sup>\*</sup> Just like the original CC9, CEJ is led by parents and supported by community groups (including the United Federation of Teachers). CEJ has developed a series of successful campaigns resulting in new investments in middle schools, the restoration of school budgets that were slashed, resistance to local school closings producing no clear benefits for affected students, and a new initiative to provide academic supports for struggling students. CEJ's task in the coming years is daunting. While CEJ has achieved substantial success and legitimacy, the crisis of public education has continued to deepen. The kind of redistributive investment and targeted programming necessary to produce system-wide results is far more substantial than what has been achieved to date. CEJ will need to increase its parent base, extend and deepen its alliances, and push state decision makers in ways that may chal-

*(Continued on page 47)*

<sup>\*</sup>To learn more about the New York City Coalition for Educational Justice, visit [www.nyccej.org](http://www.nyccej.org).

## Organizing increased districts' responsiveness to low-income parents of color. District leaders indicated that the campaigns provided political cover for increasing equity.





## Organizing for Equity

(Continued from page 40)

lunge historic relationships, if it is to make significant differences for the million-plus children attending New York City's schools.

**I**t is essential to excavate the deep experience of education organizing if we are to build on and share the lessons of specific campaigns. We know that for a campaign to influence academic outcomes, it must effectively promote strategic investments in the poorest schools, increase parents' power, and create new relationships between parents, teachers, and students that can transform learning culture. Clearly, promoting equitable investments is paramount. Presently, the education organizing literature etches broad contours of a number of campaigns but reveals little about what was most salient to building parent power, producing alliances, influencing issue selection, sustaining community involvement, or structuring campaign strategy.

As noted earlier, community organizing as a principal strategy for correcting inequitable investment in public schooling and increasing academic achievement is not without its profound dilemmas. We have no airtight strategies to assure a substantial redistribution of public dollars to the poorest school systems. This much is clear, however: the present policymaking establishment will not advance a redistributive agenda in the absence of significant grassroots pressure. Our long history of inequitable investments has stunted the academic achievement and life chances of the poorest students in America. Parents whose children are damaged every day by these inequitable policies are ready to fight. They need to be joined by parents in other communities, teachers who are also outraged by underfunded schools, politicians prepared to call for transformative investments, and the cross section of citizens who understand the fragile but essential relationship between strong schools and a robust democracy. □

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