

# *Rewriting the Rules of Engagement: Elaborating a Model of District- Community Collaboration*

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*In this ethnographic case study, Ann M. Ishimaru examines how a collaboration emerged and evolved between a low-income Latino parent organizing group and the leadership of a rapidly changing school district. Using civic capacity and community organizing theories, Ishimaru seeks to understand the role of parents, goals, strategies, and change processes that characterize a school district's collaboration with a community-based organization. Her findings suggest an emergent model of collaboration that engages parents as educational leaders, focuses on shared systemic goals, strategically builds capacity and relationships, and addresses educational change as political process. This emergent model stands in contrast to traditional partnerships between communities and school or district leadership that often reflect deficit conceptions of marginalized parents and families. By rewriting the rules of engagement, parents, families, and community members can contribute critical resources to enable districts and schools to educate all students more equitably.*

What is clear is that for any real meeting between the worlds of the professional and for the community to occur, especially when race and class also divide those worlds, then new rules of engagement that respect the lives of both parties need to be developed.

—Mary Erina Driscoll, *Professionalism versus Community:  
Themes from Recent School Reform Literature*

[Superintendent Husk] came in, from the beginning, saying, "I want to work with you. I want the parents' involvement. I want the community involvement. But we must change the rules of engagement."

—Eduardo Angulo, community organizer

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Partnerships between schools, families, and communities have long been a key strategy to improve student achievement through the coordination of student supports and the leveraging of resources for struggling schools (Crowson & Boyd, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Yet, deficit assumptions about students, families, and communities are often embedded within traditional forms of school partnerships with businesses, social service agencies, or parent-teacher associations. These assumptions have real consequences for the success of nondominant students, who have been historically marginalized by U.S. educational systems (Gutierrez, 2006; Perez Carreon, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005). Deficit conceptions root educational disparities in “deficiencies” in the skills, knowledge, culture, support, values, or engagement of students, families, and communities rather than in systems and societal inequities.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, students, parents, and communities in struggling educational systems are often seen as part of the problem, not as resources for change efforts (Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Despite relatively widespread scholarly recognition of these implications and a resurgence of interest in parent and community engagement, much educational practice at all levels of the system—from district leadership to classroom instruction—continues to reflect a deficit stance (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Skrla, 2001). Not surprisingly, then, traditional school-community partnerships and parent involvement efforts have not challenged the fundamental historical, cultural, and social divides between parents and their schools (Fine, 1993).

A community organizing approach stands in contrast to these traditional school-community partnerships. Community organizing seeks to actively engage parents and community members in advocating *for themselves* as the primary means of influencing decision makers in the institutions that affect their lives (Warren, Mapp, & the Community Organizing for School Reform Project, 2011). This approach to school reform challenges deficit conceptions of nondominant parents and communities by emphasizing and strengthening their capacity to exercise power and leadership in creating more equitable learning environments (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Warren, 2005). These organized reform efforts frame students, families, and communities as resources and collaborators in the hard work of improving educational systems. They seek to enact new roles, power dynamics, and interactions between families and educators—in essence, new rules of engagement that challenge deficit notions that shape the role of families and communities, the goals of reform, the change strategies employed, and the processes of reform within a political context. A growing number of community organizing groups, such as Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago, Oakland Community Organizations, and the Alliance Schools of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, to name a few, are using this strategy to transform the relationship between educators and parents in an effort to improve the education system, particularly for low-income students of color (Warren, 2010).

Although organizing approaches hold promise for educational improvement, the literature suggests that educational leadership plays a critical role in the success of organized reform (Auerbach, 2010; Ishimaru, 2013; Shirley, 1997). Moreover, district leadership plays a critical role in the success of educational reforms (Honig, 2003; Spillane, 1996); however, scant research focuses on the role of *district* leadership in community organizing approaches to education reform. Thus, in this study I illuminate the processes and possibilities for collaboration between the district leadership and a Latino parent organizing group in a midsized school district in Oregon. Though complex and not without tension, these dynamics challenge deficit conceptions of traditional district-community partnerships and suggest a promising approach for systemic reform. Through this research I aim to understand how district leadership and a community organizing group built a collaboration to improve education for low-income Latino students.

I begin with a critique of extant research and practice in traditional district- and school-community partnerships and discuss the use of civic capacity and community organizing theories as an initial theoretical framework for the study. After describing the research methods, I describe the collaboration between the Salem-Keizer Public Schools and the Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality (the Coalition). Four key findings from the case highlight (1) the *role* of low-income parents of color as experts on their children and communities and fellow educational leaders, (2) systemic *goals* within a culture of shared responsibility, (3) *strategies* that build capacity and relationships, and (4) education reform as *political process*. Collectively, these findings provide the foundation for a conceptual model of district-community collaboration that addresses political and relational dynamics and challenges the deficit-oriented rules of engagement that characterize traditional school-community partnerships.

### Traditional District-Community Partnerships

While a voluminous literature has firmly established the link between family engagement and student academic success (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002), most of this scholarship focuses on relationships at two levels: relations between individual parents and teachers and partnerships between schools and community organizations. A smaller body of literature examining district relationships with community organizations suggests that dynamics at the district level largely mirror those at the individual and school levels (Honig, 2004; Sanders, 2009). This study augments both literatures by focusing on district-community partnerships. Traditional approaches to partnerships at all three levels reflect Epstein's (2001) model of family involvement, which situates students within three spheres of influence—home, school, and community—and suggests that when there

is greater overlap between the spheres, students receive more coordinated support. This model was critical in first conceptualizing the potential synergies among home, community, and school. However, the application of this model within the context of race, class, and language divides has tended to reinforce educators' deficit orientations and constrain the authentic participation of members of nondominant communities (Hong, 2011). A robust literature maps and critiques the terrain of individual parent involvement and school-community partnerships (for instance, see Schutz, 2006). Building on this body of work, I highlight the deficit assumptions that underlie traditional school and district partnerships with nondominant parents and community members along four dimensions: the role of parents and communities, the goals pursued, the change strategies enacted, and the processes of education reform.

#### *Parents and Community Members as Clients*

An underlying assumption that characterizes traditional partnership approaches is that expertise resides in educators and other professionals, not in parents, families, or community members (Driscoll, 1998; Henig & Stone, 2008). Educators and other professionals—such as social service agency directors or business leaders—typically determine the needs of students or schools and the services or resources to be delivered (Cooper, 2009; Honig, 2004; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Thus, the roles of parents and community members in these scenarios are to passively receive services or resources as clients or beneficiaries. Adherents to traditional approaches often seek to train individual parents to better conform to existing educator expectations and school practices (Perez Carreon et al., 2005). When parents question educational practices, advocate for change, or otherwise do not conform to educators' expectations of passive support for the school's agenda, they may be framed as obstacles to their children's success (Cooper, 2009; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Olivos, 2006).

#### *Individualistic, Discrete Goals*

The goals of traditional partnerships tend to focus on providing discrete supports through special projects or interventions at the expense of coordinated, ongoing efforts to transform systems. In many of these instances, the problem of educational disparities is framed in terms of individual students or families, which can obscure the systemic roots of inequities (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007). For example, a community-school partnership might yield material resources, such as school supplies, or a social service agency might provide English classes to parents. Although these are important resources for schools and students, a focus on such goals and discrete interventions *alone* does not lead to systemic change and may reinforce "artificial and superficial" framings of the problem (McLaughlin, 1991, p. 153).

### *Technical Change Strategies*

Traditional district-community partnership strategies typically focus on technical fixes that rely on existing repertoires, capacity, and relationships to address disparities in educational success (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). In such approaches, work with parents and communities does not imply changes to the repertoire or nature of educators' work (Mapp & Hong, 2010). Instead, they focus on scaling up, which is primarily a matter of identifying and replicating existing best practices at multiple schools or sites (Stone, 2001). For instance, schools may attempt to improve family engagement by increasing the number of family events they hold each year rather than by addressing the adaptive challenge of redesigning those events or building educator capacity to collaborate effectively with families.

### *Apolitical Processes of Education Reform*

Traditional partnership approaches also operate under the assumption that improving student achievement and schools is an apolitical process that can (and should) avoid issues of race, class, power, and privilege in the broader community. Such political processes are generally avoided in educational change efforts (Oakes & Rogers, 2006), and reformers often seek to change schools with little recognition of the broader communities and the context within which they are embedded (Crowson & Boyd, 2001). In this same vein, educational leaders often frame their decision making about school closures as objective and data driven while overlooking marginalized parent and community voices of resistance that highlight the importance of the school in the community (Khalifa, Jennings, Briscoe, Oleszweski, & Abdi, 2013).

## Theoretical Framework: Civic Capacity and Community Organizing Theories

In this study I draw on concepts from civic capacity (Stone, 2001) and from community organizing for education reform (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2005) as lenses for understanding district-community relationships. *Civic capacity* refers to "the mobilization of varied stakeholders in support of a communitywide cause" (Stone, 2001, p. 15). *Community organizing* for education emphasizes the development of individual capacity and relationships to enable collective action. Bringing these concepts together helps illuminate the multi-level processes and mechanisms through which a district-community collaboration may be enacted.

Civic capacity for educational improvement implies two interrelated elements: *participation*, in terms of contribution to the cause, and *understanding* "a shared responsibility to act on their common concern" (Stone, 2001, p. 15). Participation brings attention to the role of stakeholders in the common effort, the resources they bring, and the need for cooperation among them. Through the lens of civic capacity, low-income parents of color are seen as

able to contribute to and participate in education reform alongside educators and professionals (Stone, 2001). As experts on their children's native language, culture, community context, and learning needs, parents can play key decision-making, design, and implementation roles in education reform efforts (Ishimaru, 2013; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). The second key element of civic capacity, understanding, highlights the importance of collective vision and goals as well as a sense of shared responsibility (Henig & Stone, 2008). Moreover, this sense of shared responsibility to act implies the need to build both the capacity of stakeholders to engage in educational change work and the interdependent relationships among a broad range of stakeholders.

The literature on community organizing for education reform illuminates *individual*, *interpersonal*, and *interorganizational* dynamics in district-community relationships (Warren et al., 2011). These distinctions are helpful in understanding how a district-community collaboration might build capacity in the context of relationships. At the individual level, Warren and colleagues' (2011) study of community organizing processes suggests that building the capacity of both nondominant parents and educators is foundational for developing broader civic capacity. For instance, nondominant parents can benefit from opportunities to learn more about educational systems, how decisions are made in schools, and how to speak publicly, and educators can benefit from opportunities to learn about their students' families and cultures and how to engage and share leadership with families. At the interpersonal level, building social capital is a key strategy for community transformation (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2011). Although the concept of social capital has been variously defined, I use the concept to focus on the relationships between individuals and networks, norms, and resources (Coleman, 1989). Both *bonding* social capital, ties between individuals from similar backgrounds (Putnam, 2000, p. 23), and *bridging* social capital, ties between individuals from different backgrounds, may be critical elements in building civic capacity for broad-scale education reform (Cheng, Chung, Dryden-Peterson, & Tieken, 2007). For example, bonding relational ties among low-income Latino parents can provide a sense of solidarity and mutual support around common challenges with the educational system, and bridging social capital between immigrant parents and educational leaders can provide access to institutional resources and knowledge critical to change (Monkman, Ronald, & Th eram ene, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). At the interorganizational level, civic capacity is similar to social capital but more public in nature and specific to a particular issue or civic problem (Stone, 1998). Thus sustainable reform through the lens of civic capacity requires more than building new relationships; ultimately, building the capacity for educational improvement has to do with changing relationships and interactions to create the political context needed to institute and sustain new practices (Stone, 2001).

These lenses of civic capacity and community organizing theories provide a conceptual framework for this study of one district-community collabora-



tion. I analyze participation by examining the roles of parents and community members in the reform. I examine the understanding of a shared responsibility to act by focusing on the goals and norms of the collaboration and the strategies for developing individual capacity and social capital. I focus on civic capacity by attending to the relationship between the work of educational change and the broader community context. While these theoretical concepts were a starting point for my analysis, my findings suggest a conceptual model that elaborates *how* the assets of parents and communities might be cultivated and enacted in district-community collaborations in the pursuit of educational equity.

### Research Design and Methods

This single-case ethnographic exploratory study is part of a larger mixed-methods study on the processes, strategies, and impacts of the collaboration between the Salem-Keizer school district and the Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality.<sup>2</sup> I conducted the research for this case study between the summer of 2008 and the spring of 2010, and I take the collaboration between the district and the Coalition as my primary unit of analysis (Yin, 2003). I chose a single case design to focus deeply on the Salem-Keizer collaboration with the hope of learning from the single school or district “outlier” that constitutes a departure from typical dynamics (Hilliard, Perry, & Steele, 2004). As Payne (2008) asserts, “We need to know more about what *can* happen, not what ordinarily *does* happen. One success . . . tells us more than a thousand failures: one success tells us what is possible” (p. 7).

I chose to focus on the Salem-Keizer collaboration for several reasons. First, although the literature acknowledges the importance of organizing groups’ engagement with districts, examples of long-term collaborations between districts and community organizing groups are few. This site provided the opportunity to study one such collaboration. Second, while this district site provided a case of collaboration in a “typical” new immigrant destination community that has experienced rapid growth among its Latino student population (Yin, 2003). It also represents a case of district collaboration where organizing may better be able to realize its potential than in less cooperative contexts.

### Data

This research draws on forty-eight interviews of forty-four educators, parents, community organizers, and community members involved in the district-Coalition collaboration. I identified interviewees through snowball sampling and selected them based on their participation in the district-Coalition relationship. Interviews were 45–75 minutes long and were semistructured with a protocol tailored to each role. Additionally, I conducted over one hundred hours of direct and participant observation of district, Coalition, and school meetings and events related to this collaboration. I focused particularly on

activities where parents and school or district leaders were interacting, as well as on the Coalition's training and organizing activities. Finally, I collected documents that referenced the collaboration, such as newspaper articles, meeting agendas and minutes, Coalition training documents and grant reports, and school and district publications.

### *Analyses*

After recording and transcribing interviews and writing observation field notes, I performed a close reading of the data to identify descriptive patterns and inductive codes that emerged from participants' words and concepts (Maxwell, 2005). I then coded the data using a two-level scheme of broad categories and deductive codes based on components of the theoretical framework, such as bonding and bridging social capital, resources, and expertise (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, using both inductive and deductive codes, I conducted a second round of coding by analyzing documents, transcripts, and field notes to understand how the district-community organizing group collaboration was enacted. Throughout, I wrote analytic memos and used data displays, such as timelines and conceptual maps, to collate evidence, reflect on emerging themes, and further develop key theoretical propositions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To address threats to validity and enhance the trustworthiness of my claims and conclusions, I triangulated my data from multiple sources, which included interviews with district administrators, school board members, parents, and community members, as well as my own observations. I considered and reported on discrepant data and conducted "member checks" by sharing my preliminary interpretations with Coalition organizers and district leaders to correct or refine misinterpretations (Maxwell, 2005). Finally, I shared my field notes, interview excerpts, codes, displays, and memos with an interpretive community of five other researchers to account for my biases, to obtain feedback, and to examine alternative analyses.

### *Setting*

#### — Salem-Keizer Public Schools

The Salem-Keizer Public School District is the second-largest district in the state of Oregon, with just over 40,000 students enrolled in its sixty-seven schools. Over the past two decades, this school district has experienced rapid demographic change in its student population. In 1997, 12 percent of the students in the district identified as Latino, compared to 36 percent in 2010. With 18 percent English language learners (ELLs), the vast majority of whom are Latino, the Salem-Keizer district has the largest ELL population in the state. Additionally, more than half the student population qualifies for federal free and reduced-price lunch (Salem-Keizer Public Schools, 2009). Metropolitan areas with previously minimal immigration but now fast-growing immi-



grant populations, like Salem (and neighboring Keizer), represent a new key policy context for immigration (Singer, 2004).

— Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality

The Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality is a community-based organization (comprising primarily members of the Latino community) dedicated to equity and social justice for children in the Salem-Keizer district and throughout Oregon. In 1999, a sense of crisis about Latino students' experiences in the schools motivated a group of community organizations to come together around a common vision of social justice and equality for their children. Eduardo Angulo was named chair of the Coalition, and the board of directors was made up of representatives from several of the original organizations who joined together. A number of these board members were grassroots leaders who had cut their teeth in the civil rights, farm workers, and Chicano movements. At the time, Angulo, a Puerto Rican most recently from Los Angeles, had just finished his studies in political science at a local college and was working in Salem as an aide for the Oregon Commission on Hispanic Affairs. Though local school district leaders dismissively described him as a "radical" for his attempts to "expose the crisis" of Latino youth in Salem, he had come to be known and respected as a fiery and charismatic activist among local community leaders of color. Angulo eventually became the executive director of the Coalition and hired three staff organizers as well as two other program staff as the work grew, but the majority of the Coalition parents were volunteers, some of whom were paid small stipends to facilitate workshops and train other parents.

## Findings

Across the country, many low-income Latino parents experience their children's public schools as alienating and disempowering contexts (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Olivos, 2006). Yet in Salem-Keizer, parents and leaders of the Coalition developed a relationship with the district leadership that appeared to be shifting the practice and culture of schooling, particularly for the growing population of ELL students. My findings illuminate the processes through which this district-community collaboration worked to catalyze systemic educational change within a changing community. I begin by describing the context of that community, including the traditional deficit approaches that constituted the first response of the Salem district and community to changes in their student populations. I then describe the founding of the Coalition and the emergence, enactment, and evolution of the district-community collaboration as they relate to four key dimensions of roles, goals, strategies, and context. These findings regarding the promise and inevitable challenges of the Salem-Keizer collaboration offer insights about how educational and community leadership might work together to create more equitable schools.

*A Changing Community: Traditional Approaches, Deficit Conceptions*

A blanket of lush green covers the fertile, volcanic Willamette Valley just outside of Salem, Oregon; but inside the city limits, strip malls and sagging big-box retail stores line the wide, busy streets. To the northeast, long stretches of industrial warehouses are interrupted by a scattering of taquerías, money transfer shops, and the occasional beauty salon or bakery with advertising in Spanish. Laughing neighborhood children call out to one another in Spanish as they play in a park known for shootings, gang violence, and drug deals. Like a growing number of metropolitan “new immigrant” destinations with recent and rapidly growing immigrant populations (Singer, 2004), Salem is relatively new to these dynamics. Between 1998 and 2008, the schools experienced a rapid influx of Latino immigrants that increased the number of ELLs tenfold.

Although some Salemites saw this increasing diversity as a strength, the changes occurred so quickly that a sizable group of longtime residents did not believe or want to accept that their community had changed. “Our community is changing and changing at a fairly rapid rate,” explained a district administrator, “and the community at large has not really recognized or embraced that image.” Both district and community leaders used the same term for the reaction of a number of white Salemites: “demographic denial.” For many Latino community leaders, this denial maintained a status quo of inequity and enabled Salemites to shirk their responsibility for providing resources and support for immigrant students and families.

By the late 1990s, the district’s lack of academic supports for the growing population of Latino ELLs converged with parents’ experiences of alienation in their children’s schools. Latino students and parents were routinely mistreated in schools, and many felt that the district’s inability to address their needs and concerns was not benign neglect or ignorance but outright racism. Maritza Martinez, a mother of three children in the district, drew a happy face on a piece of paper and explained how her young children started the year eager to go to school. She crumpled the paper into a ball and opened it again as she told how, after a while, her children—and the children of the parents she was addressing—began crying and pleading to not go to school: “This is the face of my kids. Your kids. They get so frustrated, and we say, ‘Oh no, my child doesn’t want to go to school!’” Many parents tried to talk to teachers and principals but were brushed off, ignored, or sometimes treated with hostility.

Conversely, district leaders felt they had neither the technical expertise nor sufficient relational trust from members of the Latino community to effectively educate ELL students. “We weren’t meeting the needs of our Latino and minority students,” explained school board member Karen Lyman. “I think there was great fear by some teachers and administrators that they didn’t know how to meet the needs.” A defining moment occurred at Holbrooke Elementary, a school with one of the highest Latino student populations in the district, when a child on his way to school was hit and killed by the side-view mirror of a passing truck. The district assumed no responsibility, pointing out

that it was the city's job to manage the roads, while the city argued that the district should never have built a school at that site. Amidst the finger pointing, parents whose children attended the school were left out of the conversation. According to one parent, this incident left the Latino community feeling that "nobody—nobody, not even the school district, not the city of Salem—cares."

*"We had to take action": New Roles for Parents in the Formation of the Coalition*

In the early days of the Coalition, its work consisted of what Angulo and Coalition board members referred to as "top-down advocacy in high places" conducted almost exclusively by Angulo and his wife, Annalivia Pazzo-Angulo, a white Salemite and a former teacher. The pair advocated for district accountability in heated testimony at school board meetings and in appearances in local media, demanding cultural competency training for staff, a review of disciplinary practices, and an accounting of how the district spent designated federal funds to support ELL students. While this top-down model targeted the district leadership on behalf of the Latino community, it also illustrates how the initial leadership of the Coalition was concentrated in two individuals. Consistent with traditional models of community engagement, this individualistic enactment of leadership meant that Angulo and Pazzo-Angulo represented and advocated *for* other parents, whose roles were limited at the outset.

By 2002, influenced by community and union organizers on its board, the Coalition began to supplement its top-down advocacy strategy with a bottom-up approach. Inspired by Freirean approaches to popular education, the Coalition actively validated the parents' own ways of knowing, engaged them in active learning from one another, and improved their capacity to advocate for themselves and their children. Angulo and several immigrant Latino parents provided training programs in Spanish to help parents build their individual capacities and relationships. These programs helped parents understand their rights and the public education system, as well as strengthen their relationships with other parents and educators. They also helped parents develop skills in advocating for their children and promoted leadership in organizing other parents and participating in school decision making. One outgrowth of these workshops was a series of gatherings, trainings, and district advocacy events called the Parent Organizing Project (POP). Through the POP, a growing group of parent leaders began to advocate at school board meetings, district hearings, and key decision-making meetings, particularly for supports and resources for ELL students.

The Coalition's new top-down/bottom-up approach called for a different kind of leadership, one shared more broadly across the organization with other parents. "I'm not the boss and you follow me," explained Angulo to a group of parents at a training session. "We have to balance the dynamics of power." Coalition board member Ana Ceballos stated, "In the Coalition, it's not dependent on one leader, but it's more like the ducks flying south, where people are always rotating the leadership." At the same time, Angulo, with his

charismatic personality, was often at the front of the charge, the first to speak in public events or the spokesperson framing an issue for the media. Thus, despite the emphasis on leadership development, the Coalition's ideal was difficult to achieve in reality because Angulo remained a visible symbol of the Coalition in the broader community.

However, more subtle changes in how the Coalition was perceived by those close to the organization were also evident. In particular, involvement in the POP led to a new sense of empowerment for many parents, particularly women, and a core group of volunteer parent leaders emerged. Among them were two women who had been timid and afraid to talk in the group prior to the training programs. These women were from indigenous Mexican communities where Spanish was their second language and they had little formal education. After participating in the workshops and the POP sessions over several years, they began facilitating workshops for other parents, and several of the POP parents talked about them as being among the most confident facilitators in the group and particularly skilled at encouraging other parents to find their voices. The POP parents outside the core leadership team also noticed that the group of parent leaders, including but not limited to these two women, had become more active and prominent in the Coalition. For instance, POP parent Juan Jose Torres referred to them as "las directoras de la Coalition" (the *female* directors of the Coalition). Angulo was no longer the singular voice or contact point for the majority of the POP parents.

These changes created complex and sometimes challenging gender dynamics, both within the group and within families. A mother of three, Amparo Meza described becoming aware of this dynamic before it dawned on her husband: "Dice mi esposo, 'Veo que tú has cambiado muchísimo!' y digo, 'O, ya te diste cuenta'" (My husband says, "I see that you have changed so much," and I say, "Oh, you finally noticed."). A Coalition father of five children spoke explicitly of the problem he had with his wife's (also a Coalition leader) new ideas about her role, particularly at home, as a result of her participation in the Coalition. This sentiment was common enough that one senior organizer talked of forming a father's group within the Coalition to support men in adapting to these changes.

The Coalition's capacity-building approach also played a key role in addressing the power imbalances that typically prevent parents from being "at the table" with school personnel with formal authority. For instance, Coalition parent leaders always met ahead of time as a group to plan their questions, priorities, and input before participating in district feedback events or meeting with members of the district leadership team. At the superintendent's annual School Summit Talk, where Angulo was not present, a group of ten Coalition parent leaders queried the superintendent and a board member with prepared questions. Their questions about ELLs dominated the discussion, comprising about half of the questions asked from the audience of roughly two hundred attendees. Jorge Ruiz, a parent organizer, described the parents'

questions as a form of collective advocacy that pushed the district to recognize and respond to their concerns.

So when all these questions come [from parents], the principals and administrators have to move a bit more because the people are asking to let us into the school. The parents are not happy with what is happening in the school, they want more. So in a manner, they are advocating in the district.

The combination of leadership training and experiences such as these introduced Coalition parents to a sense of nascent political power for transforming the broader educational institution. Guillermo Gomez, a parent leader, explained that the trainings brought him to a new level of commitment to changing the system through political pressure.

There are lots of factors, trainings, workshops that have nurtured and fortified my confidence and my commitment for this reform of the education system. I believe that uniting together as parents of families, we can realize what the priority needs are and let the system know. I think that we as parents have yet to pressure enough so that the superintendent can externalize it to her coworkers, so that they would worry and occupy themselves in what our needs are.

Though this sense of political engagement was highest in the core leadership group, the parents were being trained to engage in the top-down advocacy that had formerly been the domain of only a few.

Thus, through the top-down/bottom-up workshops, the POP, and district advocacy, the Coalition worked to build and leverage power in its interactions with the district. The strategy hit a roadblock when, around 2004, the Holbrooke Elementary principal instituted an English-only literacy curriculum and refused to engage with the Coalition. While Coalition parents sought the removal of the principal, the Coalition board continued to demand “accountability” from district leadership about the allocation of ELL state funds. School board member Karen Lyman recounted, “Their style was pretty fire and brimstone and demanding and scary. Very scary.” During the Coalition’s early interactions with the district, board members felt that such an “assertive” and “demanding” initial approach was the only way to get people’s attention and force change, particularly in a town with as much demographic denial as Salem. Eduardo put it succinctly to parents in a familiar idiom: *Él que no llora, no mama* (the baby that doesn’t cry doesn’t get the mother’s milk). Superintendent Patricia Bryan did not appreciate the public exposure of the district’s shortcomings, and tensions between the district and the Coalition escalated until she refused to engage further with the Coalition. This break with the district set off a series of reactions that eventually created more conducive conditions for collaboration.

The break with the district forced the Coalition to rely on new avenues for the top-down part of its agenda. One political strategy Angulo used was to leverage his relationship with Susan Castillo, the state superintendent of



schools. When Castillo formed her Under-Represented Minority Student Academic Achievement Taskforce (UMSAAT), she named Angulo to it. Angulo's appointment at the state level gave the Coalition newfound legitimacy and influence in shaping family engagement policies for Oregon. The Coalition's board also cultivated a relationship with the National Council of La Raza, which it used to gain national recognition of and financial support for its agenda. Finally, the president of the school board and two school board members met with the Coalition board monthly to listen to its concerns and stay tapped into the community's needs and issues. These actions led to the Coalition's growing power, resources, and interest in sharing responsibility for improving conditions in schools and created a context for collaboration with new district leadership.

*A Collaboration Emerges: Shared, Systemic Goals and Responsibility*

In 2005, with an unprecedented turnout of about eight hundred Latino parents, the Coalition launched the first No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Parent Conference in the district. The event strategically leveraged federal policy and built the Coalition's power by demonstrating its credibility and political capital as a contributor with strong ties in the community. Coalition parent leader Amparo Meza explained that "with the Coalition's presence and parent education, the teachers see the interest that we have as a community." Other educators also began to see that a relationship with the Coalition was beneficial. The district's elementary director reflected that his relationship with the Coalition emerged from a need to learn about the community: "I didn't know virtually anything about ELLs, but I knew I could be a learner, and I needed to learn about the community's needs." District leaders saw in the Coalition an opportunity to partner, communicate with, and learn from members of the Latino community.

Likewise, the Coalition, having seen the limits of adversarial organizing at Holbrooke Elementary, undertook a more collaborative approach in its work with educators and district leaders. In a workshop, Coalition mother Maritza Martinez emphasized that parent engagement is "not about being against the schools; it's about being *with* them. Change isn't going to happen at the district with just the teachers." The Coalition's efforts to raise the issues of ELL performance, build key relationships, and develop parent capacity positioned the Coalition to participate in selecting a new superintendent who would engage with the Latino community. When it was time to hire, Angulo, representing the Coalition, was named to the selection committee. However, because of the ongoing meetings with school board members, he was not alone in championing the candidate with experience leading a district in a changing demographic context. "I think that the positive attitude of the Coalition and the kinds of cooperative strands that we'd developed helped create an environment that allowed us to get a superintendent like Sandy [Husk]," explained school board chair Simon Chapman.



Recognizing shared reform priorities, the Coalition supported the new superintendent, Sandy Husk, as she assembled a leadership team that included more Latino/a administrators and educators experienced working with ELL populations, crafted a strategic plan that explicitly highlighted ELL instructional improvement, and shifted resources to the department focused on ELL support. The Coalition strategy shifted to holding the district accountable to its own strategic plan and providing political “cover” for the district’s efforts to improve teaching for ELLs by speaking out about the need to invest limited funding in professional development. At the same time, the Coalition cultivated the engagement and advocacy of low-income Latino parents, and the district provided resources, legitimacy, and support to these efforts. For example, the NCLB Parent Conference, once a Coalition event, became a product of the collaboration. Former state administrator David Jorgenson explained, “That conference is a good symbol of the collaboration. It started out with the Coalition doing it by themselves and then gradually the school district joined in a little bit, more and more. Now the conference is pretty much a total partnership that you see.”

In recognition of the mutual benefits gained from working together, Husk included Angulo as part of a district leadership team for a high-profile, off-site professional learning institute, and low-income Latino parents became key players in educational change efforts.

*“Let the wind blow in”: Shared Responsibility for Systemic Strategies*

The district and the Coalition focused on shared, systemic goals to build capacity and relationships as key strategies for improving schooling for English language learners. District administrator Paul Reza pointed to shared goals as a key element of their collaboration: “We both believe in the same mission and the same vision and goals for our district.” The Coalition shifted from demanding accountability of the district to calls for “mutual accountability” of parents and community along with educators for the educational success of ELLs and other students. That is, it maintained that both the district and the community were responsible for and should be held accountable for the education of ELL students. Organizer Sonia Vasquez explained:

We’re not going to just point fingers at the school district and pat ourselves on the back; we did everything that we needed to do. We hold parents accountable just as much as we hold the school district accountable. I would say that’s part of our strategy, and it’s been a part of our strategy all along, to have that fifty-fifty partnership.

The Coalition’s call for mutual accountability aligned with Superintendent Husk’s efforts to build a culture of shared responsibility for those goals by challenging the notion that ELLs and Latino children could be considered the responsibility of another sector, another school, or another educator. Husk emphasized that they are “all our children” and therefore a district

*and* community responsibility. Her speeches to parents and community leaders consistently emphasized the need for parents to support their children's learning, for communities to support and build the capacity of parents and schools to partner, and for district employees to take up their responsibility for ELL students' success. Although the district discourse about the importance of parents and community in supporting student success differed little from traditional partnership approaches, the call for shared responsibility within the district itself heralded the greatest change. District administrator Ana Ceballos said:

We're moving into the whole district. Before it used to be "Oh, that's the ELA [English Language Acquisition] department" or "Those kids don't belong to us because they're bilingual kids." We weren't concerned if [Holbrooke] was failing. It was that principal's problem and that community's problem, and the [other] schools didn't care. But with this new superintendent, all English language learners have become a districtwide challenge that we all have to address. So right now in our district, we're responsible for all of the kids. All of the kids in the whole district are going to be served.

Likewise, the Coalition also focused most of its organizing energy at the district level. Founding Coalition board member Jared Michaels argued:

If they change one school, what percentage of our kids are they actually helping? Well, you've got sixty-six other schools with 30 percent minority students floating around that aren't getting any help . . . Because if you start focusing just on that school and that school gets better, if we take a year or two or five years to focus on this school, then it's going to be five years on the next school and five years on the next school and five years on the next school. No. You got to get it districtwide.

Thus, both the district and the Coalition sought to cultivate a culture of shared responsibility within which to enact systemic change work. They focused on three key, coordinated initiatives to transform the system as a whole, and each stakeholder leveraged its own strengths and resources to enact capacity and relationship-building strategies. First, district leaders prioritized improving classroom instruction for ELLs systemwide. The district provided professional development for differentiating instruction for ELLs and offered all teachers the opportunity to obtain their English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement at the district's expense. The number of English language acquisition instructional coaches deployed in schools increased ("more than double, from seven to fifteen, amidst a \$26 million budget deficit," pointed out one senior administrator), and the district trained principals on ELL versions of classroom strategies and asked them to adapt them on their own for native English speakers. Thus, the district moved teacher and staff capacity building for ELL instruction and support to the center of its improvement work. The second collaborative strategy consisted of the Coalition's "parent professional development" activities. The workshops—hosted in the six schools with the

highest Latino student populations, but open to parents from across the district—built the skills, knowledge, and confidence of low-income Latino parents primarily around more traditional forms of parent involvement in the schools. For example, they encouraged parents to attend parent-teacher conferences, ask questions about their child's progress, attend parent meetings and open houses, and learn how to support their child at home.

The Coalition's workshops enabled parents to overcome their feelings of intimidation and alienation from schools by building their confidence in navigating schools. Parents who had been through the workshops often joined the POP activities, such as advocacy at district events, cultural gatherings, parent conference planning and participation, and periodic training sessions on district budget and ELL issues. In 2008, the Coalition launched an extensive leadership development training effort with a subset of twelve longtime POP parents from across the district. These parent leaders eventually formed a cadre of Coalition organizers (including the two staff organizers, who were fellow immigrant parents) and revised and facilitated the workshops, built extensive networks of parents, cultivated relationships with school and district leaders, trained parents and educators in other districts, and developed their own initiatives (e.g., a support group for parents with gang-involved youth). The parent workshops became a *vehicle* for parent empowerment and more meaningful engagement through the POP and the parent leadership team.

Finally, in the third collaborative strategy, new and different relationships were forged through a jointly led civic engagement initiative called the Marshall Area Coalition for School Success (MACSS). The MACSS sought to engage the primarily white civic, faith, business, and union leaders of the city in improving student achievement in high-poverty, high-ELL-population schools. Spearheaded by Angulo and influential used-car salesman Herb Waters, the MACSS aimed to bring resources, political clout, and volunteerism to support students in the Marshall feeder schools and to provide visible civic leadership to challenge demographic denial in the broader Salem community. Waters, an outspoken white conservative with deep roots in Salem and influential connections with the business community, saw the MACSS as part of his own and his fellow citizens' responsibility to the schools.

The citizenry are the ones that are sitting on the sidelines. They're in the bleachers, kicking and moaning, and whining and whimpering because the players aren't doing what they're supposed to do. Well, they should be in the field playing themselves, and that's been my big thrust—getting people engaged, the citizenry engaged. The citizenry are the ones that are responsible for the schools, not the superintendent, not the school board, not the teachers. It's the citizenry.

Waters' vision of the responsibility of the citizens aligned with the Coalition's call for mutual accountability, and Superintendent Husk framed the MACSS as part of the community engagement piece of the strategic plan, urg-

ing local principals to help Waters realize his investment in getting the broader community engaged with schools: “We have to help him open the door wider and let the wind blow through.”

Although the MACSS mobilized 122 volunteers who contributed 1,251 hours to schools in one year, the group may have been even more significant as a conduit for strategic communications with the broader community about the changing demographics of the schools and the need for new educational approaches. District administrator Paul Reza explained that the work to improve ELL education was contentious because of the broader political context in the city:

There's a lot of tension in this community. Salem is a fairly conservative community. And, unfortunately, this gets tied to immigration issues and immigration reforms. And some members of the community think that certain student groups are a drain on our schools and resources. So, there are some political issues and political dynamics associated with this.

As the group of district and community leaders met regularly throughout the year, the MACSS became a key stakeholder group for the district to address this broader political context. For instance, an exchange at one MACSS Leadership Team meeting highlights how Husk worked to educate MACSS leaders as “ambassadors” who could tell the story of the district’s priorities and progress. After Waters asked whether student achievement was improving, the MACSS staff member pointed out that the job of the MACSS was to “support the good work of the district” but that Waters could not yet tell that story. That is, Waters needed a better understanding of the educational improvements in the district to be an effective communicator with the broader community. Husk spent the rest of the meeting educating the MACSS about the academic gains in the district grade by grade, subject by subject. She distributed a draft report on ELLs in the district and explained, “If we can put a shot into the English language learner student population, this [pointing to test scores] will soar.” Thus, through the MACSS, the collaboration built the knowledge and understanding of the civic and business communities, and, as a result, a broad range of stakeholders began to coalesce around a shared vision for educational change.

Even more concretely, school board chair Simon Chambers attributed the passage of a \$242 million school bond measure to the key support of MACSS leadership team members:

You get [Herb Waters] involved, you get a very strong conservative business voice supportive of what you're doing and all of his friends. The Coalition was a real partner in the passage of the bond measure as was the Chamber of Commerce. We couldn't have done it without either one, I'm sure. And if you consider a bond measure passing last November [when] the recession was in full bore, and we passed it by almost 60 percent, it's pretty impressive.

Thus, as a third collaborative strategy, the MACSS projected the notion of community accountability for student success onto an even larger stage and provided the district an opportunity to proactively engage with the broader community around district progress and the implications of changing demographics for the schools and the future of Salem.

As a result of these collaborative efforts within the context of a culture of shared responsibility, both Coalition leaders and district administrators were clear that something profound had changed, as summed up by one senior district leader: "I think what you see is a partnership that was very adversarial three years ago and is now really a hands-together partnership." These capacity- and relationship-building strategies began to yield changes in the system, including a shift in the power between Latino parents and the district leadership. The collaboration entered new territory as the political process of educational reform led to tensions between the district and the Coalition.

*Navigating Insecure Ground: Political Processes of Change as the Honeymoon Ends*

Although members of both organizations recognized that the nature of the partnership had changed, some Coalition board members raised concerns that the Coalition was in danger of becoming beholden to the district. After the economic downturn, the Coalition sought and received a district contract to subsidize the parent workshops. This meant the Coalition had to seek permission to make changes to the contract and report to the district on its workshops, something it never had to do before. This new dynamic, fueled by concern about impending staff changes on the senior district leadership team, drove the Coalition to call an end to "the honeymoon." It shifted to demanding an assessment of ELL student progress (in the form of test scores) and fiscal accountability for ELL resource allocation. By 2010, tensions had grown between the Coalition and the district over differing expectations about the pace and magnitude of change. Both Coalition members and district leaders referenced an increase in the previous year from 5 to 18 percent of Holbrooke Elementary students passing statewide tests. Parent leader Maritza Martinez explained, "We're working with the parents, getting them involved—the schools need to make changes, really make it happen faster. The superintendent knows. We've met with her. She understands. It's just not happening. Our kids need to be doing better. It's better, but that's not good enough."

Many parents and Coalition board members agreed with Martinez and felt there had been too little progress made in closing the academic performance disparities between ELLs and other students. Meanwhile, district leaders perceived the same standardized test results as promising evidence of movement in the right direction: "It takes time to see tangible progress. The most important thing is that we are making gains. Even if you go from 5 to 18, that is significant gains." Tensions became so high that the district leadership team and the Coalition board agreed to mediation by a local lawyer who had been a

strong supporter of the collaboration. As a result, both parties remained publicly cordial and collaborative, though subsequent interactions between the district and the Coalition required cautious renegotiation of the relationship and roles.

This conflict marked a turning point and exposed differing notions of the role of politics and tension in the collaboration. District leaders saw public tension as “delicate” and something to be avoided in a partnership; whereas conflict and political tension were instrumental to the Coalition’s larger strategy and foundation as an independent community voice. As Angulo described it, “The key to the success of the whole thing is for us to stay at the table as watchdogs forcing the healthy tension concept at all times.” While the Coalition felt that its assertion of independent power merely activated the “healthy tension” that propelled its work with the district, the district perceived the Coalition as moving from “positive problem solving” to an “adversarial political” approach.

Stakeholders inside and outside the district reported that four years of collaborative efforts between the Coalition and the Salem-Keizer district appeared to be impacting schooling for English language learners, including relationships between and among parents and schools. District leaders pointed to increases in overall and ELL student performance on state standardized tests as a testament to the collaboration. For instance, by 2010, the district reported a three-year trend of gains across all grades in its reading and writing and math achievement scores (Salem-Keizer School District, 2010), and the MACSS reported steady academic improvement at most grade levels in both reading and math in the seven schools with the highest concentrations of low-income ELLs. At the elementary school that the Coalition deemed most symbolic of the collaboration, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state benchmarks increased by 5–15 percent (depending on grade) in reading and by 19–23 percent in math (depending on grade) (MACSS, 2010). Additionally, findings (Ishimaru, 2014) link more positive parent-school relations with the district-Coalition collaboration. Further, Coalition parents expressed confidence in their ability to support their children’s learning and in having built strong relationships with other Latino parents, and they felt a growing sense of leadership and influence in partnering with educators to make the system more responsive to their children’s collective needs and interests.

District administrators, like Teresa Cooper, also felt that their collaborative work had spurred real changes in the schools:

There are so many things that the Coalition is doing for or with the district. I can say that without the work and support and partnership of the Coalition . . . many of the achievements that we have made at the local level—with schools and students—wouldn’t be possible.

Additionally, both district and Coalition leaders talked about the dynamics in schools as a “microcosm” of the response to the demographic shifts in



Salem. District leaders saw the collaborative work as a way to address demographic denial in the broader community. Paul Reza explained, “As school leaders we have a responsibility to help educate the community to help them understand this change, help them embrace it and support it.”

## Discussion

### *A Conceptual Model of District-Community Collaboration*

Faced with the limited change brought about by traditional approaches to partnerships, scholars have argued that “we need a new model for how educators, parents and community leaders can work together to tap research-based expertise as well as their own knowledge and capacity to create deep and lasting change” (Warren et al., 2011, p. 378). The collaboration between the Salem-Keizer district leadership and the Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality provides key insights into how such relationships might be enacted. The elaborated conceptual model that emerged from my analyses of the Salem-Keizer case focuses on the roles, goals, strategies, and processes of district-organizing group collaboration. As summarized in figure 1, these dimensions of district-community collaboration contrast with assumptions of traditional district-community partnerships.

Traditional district-community partnership approaches contrast with collaborations in the roles for parents and educators, their goals, strategies, and relationship to their broader context. First, in traditional partnerships, parents are primarily viewed from a deficit lens as roadblocks or the source of academic disparities among nondominant students; in collaborations, some degree of parity exists between parents and educators, such that nondominant

FIGURE 1 *Contrasting rules of engagement in district-community relationships*

<i>Traditional Partnerships</i>	<i>Collaborations</i>
<b>Parent Role:</b> Nondominant parents are seen as clients and beneficiaries; professionals set the agenda	<b>Parent Role:</b> Nondominant parents are seen as educational leaders who contribute and help shape the agenda
<b>Goals:</b> Material resources and discrete aims within a culture of denial or implicit blame	<b>Goals:</b> Systemic change within a culture of shared responsibility
<b>Strategies:</b> Reliance on technical change such as scaling existing practices or leveraging existing relationships	<b>Strategies:</b> Adaptive change to build capacity and relationships of a broad range of stakeholders
<b>Process:</b> Apolitical approach focused on the work of schools in isolation from broader issues in the community	<b>Process:</b> Reform as a political process that addresses broader issues in the community

parents are recognized as possessing expertise on their own children and community and have resources and power to participate in shaping the system as fellow leaders. Second, traditional partnerships tend to emphasize individualistic goals and interventions to remedy perceived deficiencies in students, families, or communities, whereas collaborations emphasize systemic goals and coordinated change within a culture of shared responsibility. Third, traditional partnerships are characterized by technical change strategies (which imply no change to existing repertoires or interactions), while collaborations build the capacity and relationships of parents, families, community members, and educators to engage in adaptive educational change work (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Finally, traditional approaches to school-family partnerships tend to avoid politics and tension and focus on schools as isolated from their larger context; in contrast, collaborations recognize education reform as an essentially political process that attends to change in schools as part of addressing pressing issues in the broader community.

#### — Roles: Parent Participation as Educational Leaders

According to civic capacity theory, *participation* requires mutual recognition of the assets and resources that each stakeholder contributes to the effort (Stone, 2001). In the Salem-Keizer case, low-income immigrant parents were engaged not just as beneficiaries whose needs should be considered and understood but, ultimately, as educational leaders and collaborators with expertise and resources of their own to contribute to improving the educational system. Through strategies such as the NCLB conference and the parent workshops, the collaboration challenged the notion that educators and professionals had the sole claim to expertise on the needs of students and families. The district benefited from working with the community organizing group when it recognized the valuable resources—cultural knowledge, credibility and trust with the Latino community, political and social capital—that organized, low-income Latino parents brought to the table as legitimate representatives of affected parents and families.

#### — Goals: Understanding Systemic Aims as Shared Responsibility

Civic capacity also entails stakeholders' *understanding* of "a shared responsibility to act on their common concern" (Stone, 1998, p. 15). The Salem-Keizer case highlighted two intertwined goals within this notion of understanding for civic capacity: a shared systemic focus embedded within intentional efforts to shift the district culture from blame or denial to collective responsibility and mutual accountability. The Salem-Keizer district and Coalition were both focused on improving the system's ability to better educate Latino ELLs, rather than on the more discrete interventions for individual students, families, or communities that had prevailed in earlier district efforts to address "the problem" of ELLs. Beyond the goals themselves, systemic education reform "must involve the spread of underlying beliefs, norms, and principles" (Coburn,

2003, p. 8), and the Coalition's mantra of "mutual accountability" merged with the new superintendent's reframing of district priorities to initiate a shift from a culture of denial and implicit blame to one of explicitly shared responsibility for the success of all students, particularly ELLs.

— Strategies: Building Capacity and Relationships

The primary change strategies in the Salem-Keizer collaboration focused on building the capacity and relationships of the people throughout the system to address systemic change as an adaptive, rather than technical, challenge (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) in order to build civic capacity. In the Salem-Keizer case, the collaborative strategies invested in the human and social capital of the adults in the system by building the capacity of educators and parents to contribute to the shared goal of improving ELL education and then cultivating social capital within and across groups. For example, the district and the Coalition implemented complementary strategies to build the capacity of the adults in their organizations to foster ELL student learning. While the district focused on improving ELL instruction (and, to a lesser extent, school staff interactions with parents), the Coalition helped Latino parents develop their capacity to advocate for their children through the districtwide parent conference, parent workshops, participation in advocacy activities at the district level, and advanced leadership training for a smaller cadre of parents.

The Salem-Keizer collaboration also worked to build and transform relationships within and across stakeholder groups. We see this in the interactions between and among district leaders, Coalition leaders, educators, and the business and civic leaders in the MACSS. Although research suggests that bridging relationships between schools' low-income constituents and individuals with the power to initiate change from the top are often challenging to build (Putnam, 2000), the strong bonding social capital of the Coalition parent leadership team helped to counter the power imbalances that often inhibit the building of bridging relationships with members of more powerful groups. As a group, the Coalition parents built relationships with the district leadership team and school board members, "institutional agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) who had access to important knowledge and resources. Relationships between nondominant parents and educational leaders were vital to ensuring that decisions did not result in unintended negative consequences for the very students and families they were designed to benefit.

At the interorganizational level, the collaboration required not just creating but also shifting existing relationships and people's understanding of its work. For instance, business leaders formed relationships with Coalition parents and educators in schools that led to a collaborative effort to communicate about the need for educational change to the broader community. This shift in relationships and work was also evident in the district's approach to parents as an internal, rather than external, constituency. For example, the Salem-Keizer 2008–2009 strategic plan called for greater permeability across

traditional boundaries by including parents as an internal constituency, along with staff, for whom they needed to create an engagement plan. And as was evident in the MACSS, the district and Coalition shifted relationships among parents, educators, elected officials, unions, higher educators, and business leaders to enable them to move from outsiders to key players in the process of educational transformation.

— Process: Education Reform as Political Process

Finally, the Salem-Keizer case highlights the inherently *political* process of engaging a broad range of stakeholders and organizations in building civic capacity for education reform. Both district and community leaders understood school reform as an exercise in political and civic engagement to address urgent issues in the broader community. As Stone (2001) notes, “Educational reform does not take place in a political vacuum. Reform has to come to terms with a wider set of relationships that encompass a city’s schools” (p. 20). From this perspective, the Salem-Keizer schools were stages on which the larger political dynamics in the community played out.

This case highlights how the broader political context both shapes and may be shaped by collaborative education reform efforts. First, the influx of ELLs and Latino students that marked Salem’s transition to a new immigrant destination shaped district and community priorities and responses. Concern about this political context triggered the formation of the Coalition, which, eventually in collaboration with the district, sought not only to improve ELL academic achievement but also to challenge the legitimacy of demographic denial. Second, other studies of education organizing (e.g., Mediratta et al., 2009) find that a conducive political climate and shared priorities are key conditions for collaboration with a district. This case confirms that finding. But rather than waiting for the climate and priorities to converge, the Coalition leveraged key local, state, and national relationships to *create* the political climate and priorities that fostered the collaboration. Third, the MACSS initiative sought to shape the broader political context of school improvement as the district and the Coalition began to build a broad base of stakeholders to sustain political will to improve the schools with the most Latino ELLs. Though still nascent, the collaboration brought together union leaders, business leaders, and higher educators along with educators and Latino parent leaders around a common vision for change. Finally, the collaboration was influenced by organizational differences in dealing with this context. Whereas educators sought to avoid potentially contentious political encounters, the Coalition sought to use reform as a vehicle for addressing broader concerns beyond schools. Thus, the model of collaboration suggested by this case reflects a belief that what happens inside of schools cannot be separated from the broader political and social context outside the educational system.

Collectively, these four findings operationalize the rules of engagement for district-community collaborations, which depart from traditional partnership

approaches to participation, understanding, capacity, and relationships within education reform. This conceptual model highlights contrasting approaches to the interactions between district and communities and provides a useful lens for understanding these increasingly common interorganizational relationships.

## Conclusions and Implications

As part of a growing movement for community-oriented school reform, this study of the Salem-Keizer partnership contributes to our knowledge about the potential and challenges for collaborations between districts and community organizing groups and, more broadly, for equitable relations between school systems and their communities. While collaborations between districts and organizing groups are not a silver bullet for the complex challenges of struggling schools, the rules of engagement identified in this study may position both districts and organizing groups to better leverage their respective resources and efforts in collaborating to improve educational systems. Not all districts will have a strong organizing group with which to collaborate, and not all organizing groups will have districts whose leadership sees the benefits of collaborating with them. However, more districts are undertaking work with communities in their efforts to improve student achievement, and an estimated five hundred organizing groups focused on education suggests a growing movement across the country (Warren, 2010).

In this study I provide evidence to suggest that if districts and community organizations undertake joint work consistent with the conception of collaborations described here, considerable benefits are possible: voices of non-dominant parents in reform efforts, enhanced community participation and understanding of the education system, political support for equity-based reforms, greater trust between schools and communities, more inclusive district and school climates, improved student outcomes, and, ultimately, systemic transformation within a more equitable society.

For school and district leaders, these rules of engagement may constitute a sea change in the typical approach to parent involvement that necessitates a redesign of the school-centric practices on which educators have relied for decades. Educational leaders may benefit from a deeper understanding of community-based approaches to educational change that can challenge the notion that greater power for organized parents constitutes a loss of power for district and school leaders. Efforts to map community resources and build relationships with nondominant community leaders can begin to leverage the social and intellectual resources of parents and community members (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

For their part, organizing groups can create windows of political opportunity by building their in-depth knowledge about education reform policy and cultivating key relationships inside and outside of districts. And while sus-

tained school-level organizing may still be necessary to fully realize change in parent-school relations, district-level organizing affords opportunities to influence teachers and schools throughout the system, rather than at one school at a time. In addition, community organizations seeking to build nondominant parent leadership may need to begin by cultivating relationships among parents and building their knowledge and skills at navigating the existing system. This foundation can then be built upon with strategies for developing capacity, skills, and leadership in systemic change efforts.

This single case invites a conversation with the extant school-community relations literature. At the same time, future research might explore the extent to which this model of collaboration generalizes to other district-community relationships, particularly in other new immigrant destinations. The role of principals also merits further study in understanding the joint work of districts and communities, particularly how principals engage and develop teachers as key players and leaders in such collaborations.

As our communities become more diverse and the ranks of new Americans swell, the dramas that play out on the stage of our public schools hold both promise and peril. Particularly in rapidly changing communities like Salem, the stakeholders around schools can play a critical role in helping the community channel its energies toward productive integration and democratic participation for its newest arrivals. This model of collaboration can be a powerful catalyst for considering the role every individual and organization might play in building schools capable of educating all students and moving beyond demographic denial to an equitable society.

## Notes

1. Gutierrez (2006) argues that this population of students includes, but is not exclusive to, those marginalized by race, class, home language, or ability.
2. All individuals and schools are pseudonyms, with the exception of the Coalition director and district superintendent, who agreed to have their names used in this research.

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