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The Grassroots of Brick City

A History of Community Organizing for School Reform in Newark, New Jersey, 1960s - 2010s

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Abstract

Newark, New Jersey has been at the forefront of school reform from the civil rights era through more recent efforts to resist neoliberal school reform approaches during the 2010s. Drawing on interviews with activists, policymakers, and school reformers, this paper documents the history of community organizing as a strategy to improve conditions in Newark's schools. The paper concludes that community organizing in Newark has (1) increased representation for people of color in positions of institutional authority, and (2) achieved intermediate reforms that improved conditions in schools. However, community organizers in Newark have often come up against a power structure that resists broader challenges to class inequality and policymakers that prefer market-based approaches to school reform.

Introduction: 'Which Way, New Jersey?'

On March 20, 2013, an event hosted by New Jersey Public Radio allowed the community in Newark, New Jersey, and several key players in Newark education to debate current school reform issues. The forum, *Which way, NJ? School Reform in Newark*, drew over five hundred attendees and included protests both inside and outside of a venue that is seen as a symbol of Newark's renaissance, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. The panel consisted of the city's then mayor Cory Booker, Superintendent of Newark Public Schools Cami Anderson, an elementary school principal, the CEO of the Newark Charter School Fund, the vice president of the Newark Teachers Union, and prominent parent and activist, Sharon Smith.

Tensions ran high throughout the evening as the discussion moved from one contested topic to another, including charter school expansion, community control of schools, and a sizable $100 million donation to Newark Public Schools by Meta CEO, Mark Zuckerberg. The audience was vocal and energetic, cheering and heckling depending on who was speaking and the content of the discussion. The tone of the forum and lively responses from the audience were indicative of the tension that has existed around issues of educational justice in Newark for decades.

Interestingly, forum panelists with vastly different political orientations invoked a similar strategy of connecting their approach to school reform to civil rights history. In her introductory remarks at the forum, for example, Superintendent Anderson echoed many national education figures when she argued that educational equity is the "civil rights issue of our generation" and added that "the charter community can be part of that conversation." On the other hand, Sharon Smith, the parent activist attending the forum, linked civil rights to her opposition to efforts to expand charter schools in Newark. Smith made national headlines just two months earlier when she organized members of the Newark community to participate in the Journey for Justice movement, a coalition of parents and activists across twenty-one cities who chartered buses to the nation's capital and filed Title VI civil rights complaints against their cities for the school closings that they argued were related to charter school expansion.

In her remarks at *Which Way N.J.*, Smith pushed back on Anderson by arguing that outside influence, notably Mark Zuckerberg's $100 million donation, had steered Newark education in the wrong direction. Smith later suggested that "where the money goes is important"; and she speculated that most of the Zuckerberg money was earmarked for school closings that were intended to make room for Newark's growing charter sector (S. Smith, interview, April 2, 2013). The school closings that precede the opening of charter schools, Smith argued, typically occur in high poverty and minority communities and threaten vital public institutions upon which those communities rely. According to Smith, proponents of charter school expansion who invoke civil rights history, as Anderson did at the community forum, are using a strategy akin to "bamboozling." Commenting on school closings, Smith said, "What we have now is not reform. It's destruction" (S. Smith, interview, April 2, 2013).

Smith's skepticism toward mainstream school reformers in Newark and her belief that public schools were under siege were sentiments shared by others at the "Which Way N.J." forum. During the forum, a small but vocal group of Newark high school students made their voices heard. Rising from their balcony seats, they energetically chanted: "No more corporate charters! No more state control! No more Cami! No more Cory! No more Christie! Take back our schools!" Their chants targeted Superintendent Anderson, Mayor Booker, and Governor Chris Christie, whom they viewed as detrimental outsiders to Newark. This vocal protest at the forum was pivotal in forming

the Newark Student Union (NSU). Just one month following the event, NSU successfully organized a school walkout, establishing the student group as a major political player in the city (Arena, 2023).

I begin this paper with an account of the *Which Way N.J.* forum because it provides a useful starting point for examining the complex interplay of racial politics and political economy that has shaped struggles over school reform in Newark. Newark is a city with a long history of underinvestment, neglect, and exploitation by groups that can be characterized as "outsiders" to the Newark community (Anyon, 1997; Curvin, 2014). Community members in Newark, during the time period covered in this paper, fiercely criticized neoliberal reforms as policies pushed by outsiders that would exacerbate, not improve, conditions in the city's schools. Smith, for example, believed that charter school advocates in the city and the "outside groups" that funded them would destroy public schools if allowed to succeed. Additionally, Newark activist Lawrence Hamm believed that simply having "black faces in high places" was not enough to improve education because the problem of educational failure is deeply rooted in the political economy of the city. Hamm argued that a "radical redistribution of wealth and power" was necessary to improve conditions in schools, which could be achieved only through grassroots struggles for educational and economic justice.

In this paper, I document the history of grassroots organizing for school reform in Newark focusing on how grassroots activists and community members like Smith and Hamm challenged patterns of underinvestment, disinvestment, and dispossession in the city and its public schools. My analysis is informed by scholarship that examines the intersection of racial politics and political economy in contemporary struggles for educational and economic justice. For instance, Jean Anyon (1997) argues that extreme racial isolation and concentrated poverty have been important drivers of school failure in Newark, conditions that have been exacerbated by state and federal policies, a lack of corporate responsibility, and pervasive political corruption. Fabricant and Fine (2012) build on Anyon's insights by suggesting that Newark exemplifies how neoliberal reforms fail to address the root causes of school failure, as these reforms do not call for increased public investments in areas such as jobs, housing, or healthcare (p. 112). Neoliberal reforms have been pushed in Newark by powerful individuals such as Governor Christie and Mayor Booker, and funded by "outsiders" like Zuckerberg. However, Newark has a rich history of grassroots movements that pushed for stronger public investment and robust support of public schools.

The charter school movement in Newark provides an example of how neoliberal urban restructuring often leads to public disinvestment and community displacement (Lipman, 2013). When applied to school reform, Lipman warns, this process can "destabilize communities, siphon off funds from public schools, increase student mobility and danger, and, in some cases, even cause spikes in violence" (p. 54). Similarly, Fabricant and Fine (2012) identify a "racialized geography of educational failure" associated with the charter school movement, noting that school closures disproportionately impact African American and Latino/a communities where issues like pushouts, dropouts, and negative police interactions are most prevalent (p. 102). They argue that to counteract school failure in cities like Newark, "progressive coalitions of educators, parents, youth, and community" must advance a reform agenda that addresses underinvestment, structural racism, and inequality. Similarly, Anyon and Lipman assert that social movements and grassroots organizing are essential for driving these progressive reforms in Newark and similar urban areas.

My research is based primarily on public speeches, biographies, and interviews from eight veteran Newark activists, school reformers, and policymakers: Jean Anyon, Ras Baraka, Robert

Curvin, Steve Block, Norm Fruchter, Lawrence Hamm, Pedro Noguera, Sharon Smith, and Junius Williams. The selection of prominent career organizers and policymakers as subjects for analysis was intentional, because they possess a deep understanding of the systemic issues in Newark and its schools over the course of several decades due to their prolonged and deep engagement with education in the city. These individuals also help to illustrate the manner in which access to social and economic capital helped to sustain grassroots resistance to neoliberal education reforms in Newark (Danley & Rubin, 2019).

Participants were chosen based on their significant involvement in Newark's education and activism landscapes, as well as their roles in shaping or resisting education reform efforts. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by questions that explored their experiences with school reform, the challenges they faced, and their perspectives on systemic issues such as racial inequality and economic disinvestment. I employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, insights, and strategies across the interviews, providing a framework for understanding the broader political and economic dynamics at play. While the majority of the research was conducted in 2013, the current paper provides a unique perspective on the role of political economy on school reform in Newark and highlights the work that grassroots activists' have used to fight for better schools.

I acknowledge certain limitations of the study, particularly given my heavy reliance on Anyon's (1997) and Mumford's (2008) work for historiographic context and the emphasis on interview data from a relatively small group of activists. While the analysis provides valuable insights into the broader dynamics of urban history in Newark, it does not fully capture the unique sociopolitical and cultural specificity of Newark as a place. Additionally, the selection of eight activists, though intentional and focused on individuals with deep ties to the city, represents only a portion of the broader network of stakeholders involved in Newark's education reform efforts. Future research could benefit from incorporating a wider array of historiographic sources to better contextualize the interviews as part of a broader tapestry of Newark's history. Despite these limitations, the study aims to provide a valuable entry point into understanding the broader historical context of Newark's grassroots resistance to corporate school reform.

Newark is a city that was touched by the civil rights movement, a black Power city, and one of several American urban centers that Martin Luther King, Jr., described as "powder kegs" when he predicted the urban uprisings of the 1960s. Just four years after Newark exploded into open rebellion in 1967, the *New York Times* reported the city's first black mayor, Kenneth Gibson, as saying, "Wherever the central cities are going, Newark is going to get there first" (Cook, 1971). The organizing efforts of Smith, Hamm, and others are evidence that Newarkers were seeking to return to a focus on community organizing as the new phase of civil rights struggle. The history I present in the following sections sheds light on the challenges of grassroots organizing in Newark and provides insights into community organizing as a school reform strategy.

The Grassroots of Brick City
Community Organizing, 1960s to 2010s

How is the history of grassroots organizing in Newark beginning in the 1960s relevant to understanding the city's current politics around educational issues? How did the politics of community organizing during the 1960s and 1970s, and education organizing in particular, shape the education struggles that would follow? How should we understand the relevance of civil rights

history to contemporary debates over school reform? Several strands of civil rights-era grassroots organizing come together on the political stage in Newark beginning in the early 1960s that contribute to the civic culture in the city and influence the direction of education organizing.

Veteran Newark activist, Junius Williams, suggests of the movement's roots: "The civil rights movement began in earnest here in 1963 when CORE started taking on some of the issues around police brutality, urban renewal, things like that. Then NCUP came and started working with landlords, tenants" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). The Newark chapter of The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Newark Community Union Project (NCUP) are two grassroots organizations that unearthed a sense of political agency among community members in Newark. Both groups, however, faced significant challenges as they developed class-based organizing strategies to improve the quality of life in Newark. Despite these challenges, CORE and NCUP raised a generation of community leaders and set roots for future grassroots struggles for economic access, educational equity, and community control of schools.

CORE and NCUP: The Limits of Class-based Organizing

During the first half of the 1960s, the Newark chapter of CORE expanded its racially diverse membership and shifted its focus from support of Southern initiatives to direct action on local issues. The primary issues motivating CORE actions were employment and police brutality. The direction taken by CORE in Newark can be attributed in part to the charismatic leadership of Robert Curvin. While many important CORE actions were aimed at undoing racial discrimination in employment, Curvin's vision as a grassroots leader was to develop these local struggles in a way that would challenge class inequality in Newark and beyond. Curvin also believed that poor people, both black and white, could participate in this movement to challenge class inequality. Curvin remained attuned to the strategic advantages of this integrationist philosophy throughout his work in Newark.

CORE actions included pickets of majority white construction crews at Barringer High School and Rutgers University, sit-ins at White Castle in Newark and West Orange to dispute racist practices in hiring and service, and teaming up with the NAACP in a campaign against Newark Bell Telephone for failing to hire and promote blacks. Curvin (2014) recalled that that the protest at Barringer High School was "the first display of mass civil disobedience in the city, and it signaled a profound shift in the tenor and tactics of civil rights activity in Newark and New Jersey" (p. 75). As CORE built a record of success in opening employment opportunities for blacks in and around Newark, Curvin would eventually describe the average CORE member as "the emerging professional." As a result of these successes, most of CORE's base had left Newark for the suburbs by the 1970s. At the same time, the group did little to change impoverished conditions for the majority of black Newarkers trapped in the underclass. As Mumford (2008) points out, the group's focus on employment "prevented a more complete transition to grassroots community organizing" and "hindered the development of a class-based social movement" (p. 84). CORE effectively became a movement of the emerging black middle class and did little to ameliorate the conditions faced by the majority of residents in Newark's impoverished Central Ward.

At the same time as CORE rose and fell in prominence, several mostly white members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) moved into black neighborhoods in Newark and founded the Newark Community Union Project (NCUP). NCUP was the Newark version of the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), a national effort to develop an adult organizing contingent

of SDS. ERAP recruited recent graduates from campus chapters across the country and trained them in the ERAP vision of class-based activism (Breines, 1989). Junius Williams recalls that before he joined NCUP, he had already worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the South on voter registration drives. When Williams was considering returning to his work in the South, SDS leader Tom Hayden convinced him to stay in the North to deal with "a harder set of problems based on class as well as race." Hayden convinced Williams that what was previously understood as "civil rights" as the basis of a national movement was already over, with the passing of civil rights legislation on the horizon and the defeat of Jim Crow segregation laws. Williams recalls Hayden's analysis that "he was a smart man [because] he forecast what was going to happen" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013).

The vision of NCUP, for Hayden, was to use the methods of SNCC to tackle poverty in northern cities. NCUP organizers in Newark organized actions that included picketing the homes of the city's slum landlords, boycotting food stores that discriminated against black residents, and pressuring the city to install a traffic light at a dangerous intersection. The group also worked to make the neighborhood antipoverty program more effective and democratic, essentially taking over governance of the government-financed initiative (Curvin, 2014, p. 88). NCUP maintained a strong grassroots base, but the group had limited success in its grassroots campaigns and effectively disbanded shortly after the rebellion in 1967. Williams recalled that the rise of Black Power and the racial polarization that accompanied it meant that it would be impossible for whites to work alongside blacks in challenging class inequality (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). After the rebellion of 1967, what Hayden and others in Newark envisioned as an "interracial movement of the poor" went into sharp decline just as soon as it seemed to be gaining momentum.

CORE and NCUP as Context for Education Organizing

Despite the inability of CORE and NCUP to achieve the broader structural change they sought, the activity of these groups in the early 1960s was characterized by interracial unity and a synergy of grassroots organizing tactics that laid the foundation for several key organizing currents that would follow. CORE and NCUP shared a focus on building grassroots power through tackling local issues that mattered to Newark residents. CORE adapted a grassroots strategy that was characteristic of the time: Engaging, as Curvin put it, "people that you know, that are involved in the issue" (Mumford, 2008, p. 83). NCUP used a block organizing strategy that included the spadework of door knocking, one-on-one conversations, and neighborhood meetings. As Mumford (2008) suggests, "the white volunteers learned from black volunteers, and vice versa, and in the process created an interracial public sphere that rejected much of the polite civility of the 1950s" (p. 77).

The organizing work of CORE and NCUP successfully politicized members of the community and developed community leaders who were equipped to tackle local issues. NCUP organizer Norm Fruchter recalled, for example, that a primary success of these organizing groups was "the level of leadership capacity they were able to unearth." (N. Fruchter, interview, February 20, 2013). Likewise, Williams suggested that "NCUP developed some very good leaders. People were politicized through NCUP, including me" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). CORE and NCUP were also successful in developing relationships and collaboration across initiatives. Grassroots organizers during this early period were well networked and a call to action on a community issue could quickly produce a rally of community members across groups.

Although Newark was a majority black city by 1966, the political structure was predominantly white. Fruchter suggested that during this period, "Newark was a colony controlled by predominantly Italian Democrats with a captive black vote that they didn't have to work very hard to sustain" (N. Fruchter, interview, February 20, 2013). In addition, the schools in Newark reflected the white dominated political structure of the city. By 1967, the schools in Newark were highly segregated—with most of them majority black. Most teachers in Newark, however, were Italian and Jewish, and there were no black principals (Anyon, 1997). As organizers in CORE and NCUP continued to develop grassroots initiatives to tackle local issues, these disparities in representation in the schools and municipal government increasingly became a point of focus. Lawrence Hamm, a youth activist in Newark during this early period, recalled, "the belief was that if black people could control the political, the economic, the social institutions of our community, we would make things better" (Hamm, 2013). This belief eventually became the driving force for the movement for municipal representation and community control of schools.

The Community vs. the Board of Education: Roots of Local Control

The movement for community control of schools in Newark began with the struggle to change the racial composition of the board of education in the early 1960s. During this period, the school board consisted of a white majority appointed by Mayor Addonizio. The corruption and incompetence of this appointed school board led to disarray and dysfunction at the board offices. In 1969, the business community of Newark, through the Chamber of Commerce, planned a study of operations of the school board. The seven-volume report produced by the Chamber of Commerce documented disarray in almost all aspects of the board's operations, including payroll, construction, maintenance, and administrative organization (Anyon, 1997).

Anyon points out: "The inept and corrupt leadership at the board of education was challenged at every board meeting by representatives of parent groups, community organizations, unions, and teacher groups, as well as by individual parents and religious leaders" (p. 117). Since education was an issue that spanned all sectors of the community, members of the NAACP, CORE, NCUP, and the Black Man's Liberation Army were in attendance at many of these meetings (Mumford, 2008). The community challenge to the school board, therefore, was in part the culmination of the work of organizers who politicized the community and developed a cadre of community leaders skilled in grassroots organizing tactics. Newarkers who participated in the board meetings were part of a newly politicized and expanding public sphere who had set their sights on achieving community control of political, social, and educational institutions in Newark.

Just two weeks before the 1967 rebellion, tensions surrounding the composition and functioning of the school board exploded into full blown revolt when Mayor Addonizio attempted to appoint William Callaghan to the powerful position of board secretary. By 1963, appointments to the school board by Addonizio were a majority; and Arnold Hess held the powerful position of board secretary. When Secretary Hess announced his retirement in 1967, Mayor Addonizio attempted to replace Hess with Callaghan, a white man. The black community perceived Callaghan as someone who was under qualified (he never completed high school) and was willing to follow along with Addonizio's pattern of patronage and corruption. The NAACP countered by backing Wilbur Parker, a respected black accountant, for the position of secretary.

The school board took up the issue of Secretary Hess' replacement at a meeting on June 26, 1967. The meeting began at 5pm and there were 70 speakers scheduled (Anyon, 1997).

According to Curvin's account, the meeting was forced to adjourn when "the foot stomping and heckling became so abusive and control of the meeting was lost" (Mumford, 2008, p. 105). Many elements of the community were unified in their call for change to the board, and the meeting was effectively shut down as a result of the inter-organizational participation, community support, and the degree of outrage that was expressed. Seeking to quell this community unrest, the school board did not appoint Callaghan to the position of board secretary. However, the board did not fully concede to the demands of the organizers and community members, and the tensions increased. Anyon (1997) suggests: "The final decision by the board was, rather than to appoint Wilbur Parker, to keep Mr. Hess in his job for another year. This decision was a trigger for the Newark riots two weeks later" (p. 15).

With the community challenge to the Callaghan appointment, education had become a priority on the agenda for activists seeking empowerment for the black community in Newark. Black representation on the school board also became a proxy for the larger struggle for municipal representation that was associated with both civil rights and Black Power in the city. Hamm suggested that after the 1967 rebellion, the movement for community control had fully begun:

> When that rebellion happened in 1967 it set off all kinds of stuff. One of the things it set off was the movement for community control of schools. Now this happened all over the United States. The biggest community control was Ocean Hill-Brownsville in NYC. But in every urban area this was repeating itself because you had black populations that had no control whatsoever of the economic, social, and political institutions that effect their everyday lives… And that manifested itself through the Black Power movement. Since the city was predominantly black, let's get a predominantly black board of education (Hamm, 2013).

Curvin and CORE responded to calls for black Power, black representation in the city's political structure, and organizers' increased focus on educational issues. Collaborating with black nationalists and channeling the frustrations of parents, CORE demanded the school board make changes, including the hiring of blacks to the board, the issuing of reports on the hiring and firing of blacks and whites in schools, and adopting curricula to reflect Afrocentric culture and history. Norm Fruchter suggested that during the early years of NCUP and CORE, "ironically, the thing we paid least attention to was education" (N. Fruchter, interview, February 20, 2013). However, after the controversy over Mayor Addonizio's school board appointment, the 1967 rebellion, and the rise of Black Power politics in the city, education became a primary focus of grassroots organizers seeking to uplift the community.

The Peshine Parents Committee: Roots of Abbott

With the community's challenge to the school board, the struggle for community control of schools had set its roots. At the same time, the early 1960s saw NCUP organizer, Steve Block, set roots of what would become a prolonged struggle for equitable funding to Newark's schools, a movement that includes legal battles surrounding New Jersey's Abbott districts and their grassroots counterparts in Newark. The state funding formula in New Jersey since 1881 placed most of the responsibility for school funding on municipal governments that would raise property taxes to cover school expenditures. This meant that districts like Newark, which suffered from a declining tax base as a result of the flight of industry and the white middle class to the suburbs, had less to spend on education. In Newark, a larger portion of the meager funds available for schools was

funneled by commissioners to their constituents. As a result, the schools in black neighborhoods received less support than schools in white, Italian, and Jewish neighborhoods. The politics of school funding, in this manner, were at the root of the impoverished conditions in schools serving Newark's black residents.

NCUP during this time employed a block club model of organizing in which organizers met with neighborhood members to discuss whatever issues they felt were important to address. For many NCUP organizers, this meant poor housing conditions would be a central focus of their organizing efforts. NCUP organizers knew that conditions in Newark schools were also very poor, but they knew very little about what could be done to improve the schools. Fruchter pointed out that NCUP organizers knew that in Newark schools "the kids weren't getting what they needed, but we just sort of took it for granted. Except for Steve, the rest of us were not very informed about what was actually going on" (N. Fruchter, interview, February 20, 2013). Steve Block was unique among NCUP organizers in this manner. Block fashioned himself as an organizer specializing in issues of educational equity through organizing block clubs and working directly with one Newark public school.

In his early efforts at community organizing, Block employed the organizing tactics that characterized much of the grassroots work of that period. He knocked on doors around the neighborhood and had hundreds of face-to-face conversations with residents about neighborhood issues. Through these conversations, Block began to learn about the impoverished conditions that plagued schools in Newark's black community. However, education still had not become a central focus of his work. After a year of organizing, Block decided that he needed a paying job to make organizing in the community more sustainable. So, in the summer of 1966, Block took a six-week course at Newark State College and received state certification to work in Newark Public Schools. The following Fall, he became a 7th grade teacher at Peshine Avenue School.

As a teacher at Peshine Avenue School, Block did what was natural for him after his experience working with NCUP: he visited students' homes and had conversations with parents about the quality of education in the neighborhood. Block, in this manner, augmented his classroom teaching with the community organizing tactics he learned through NCUP. During these home visits, Block discussed with parents the problem of overcrowding at Peshine Avenue School and the administration's use of staggered schedules to compensate for overcrowding. In the "split session" method of staggering schedules, some teachers would come in 2-3 hours earlier and leave earlier in the school day, and others would come later and leave later. Block recalls that many in the community expressed that the split sessions were an "awful experience…the parents knew it, the kids knew it, the teachers knew it." No one in the school knew how to make the split sessions work and the school was unable to overcome the feeling that it was "bursting at the seams" as a result (S. Block, interview, March 2, 2013).

Block leveraged his experience with NCUP and assumed a lead role in organizing parents to challenge the overcrowding at Peshine Avenue School. He also employed his own creative and disruptive tactics in his organizing strategy, including attaching a speaker system to the top of a car to create a mobile PA system. These actions made him a controversial figure among staff at Peshine. By Spring of his first year teaching at the school, he received a notice that his contract would not be renewed for the following year. Despite effectively being fired, Block continued to organize around educational issues in the community, and his work eventually resulted in the formation of the Peshine Parent Committee. On the night of July 12th, 1967, which would become infamous as the night the rebellion began in Newark, Block attended a meeting of the Peshine

Parent Committee that included over 300 participants. Block recalled that he had never attended an NCUP meeting prior to Peshine that had been that well attended: "I didn't remember any time we had 300 parents at an NCUP meeting. I was excited" (S. Block, interview, March 2, 2013).

At the July 12th meeting, Block and the Peshine Parent Committee decided to boycott the school to protest the district's reluctance to address overcrowding. This strategy threatened the school's existence since, Block knew, schools were funded on the basis of average daily attendance rather than enrollment; and the school would be forced to close without the children attending in Fall. In response to this pressure, the school board decided to renovate unused space in a nearby factory to alleviate overcrowding at Peshine; and three years later the city completed construction of a new school to serve students in the neighborhood. Block's work with the Peshine Parent Committee is important because it provides evidence of the effectiveness of community organizing as a school reform strategy. Despite that NCUP was not able to change the broader conditions of class inequality and poverty in Newark, Block's community organizing efforts were effective in achieving intermediate reforms that improved conditions at Peshine.

Block's work on the Peshine campaign is also important because it is an historical antecedent to the larger movement that emerged to challenge inequities in school funding. Later in his career, Block worked for the Education Law Center and organized plaintiffs for the first *Abbott* case that challenged inequities in New Jersey's school funding formula. The campaign to address overcrowding at Peshine, in this manner, was an important grassroots struggle in Newark that set roots of the *Abbott* struggle that followed. Moreover, throughout his work on the Peshine campaign, Block continued to attend NCUP meetings and found that the community organizing tactics he learned there could be translated to the domain of urban school reform with positive results. In the decades that followed, community organizing would emerge as an urban school reform strategy with documented successes in achieving intermediate reforms in cities across the country (Shirley, 1997; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Fabricant, 2010; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Black Power and Municipal Representation

In 1970, Kenneth Gibson was narrowly elected mayor of Newark after assembling a multiracial coalition of blacks, Puerto Ricans, and whites. Hamm pointed out that Gibson's victory represented a major win in achieving municipal representation for blacks: "Gibson becomes the first black mayor of a major East Coast city… This in turn leads him to appoint blacks to the Newark board of education. There were already several blacks on the board who had been appointed by Addonizio. Gibson appoints some more" (Hamm, 2013). However, the schools in Newark were still dominated by white teachers who lived in neighboring suburbs and who were perceived by the community as unable to understand and respond to the needs of the black children they served. The next phase of struggle took on this issue, beginning with the new school board provoking two city-wide teachers' strikes, the second of which shut down most of the city's schools for 11 weeks.

The two strikes initiated by the Newark Teachers Union, in 1970 and 1971, resulted from the school board rescinding provisions of the previous teachers' contract, the most controversial of which were a provision exempting teachers from so-called "nonprofessional chores" and another concerning arbitration for grievances. The new board members challenged the teachers union on the basis of these provisions, although it was common sense that retracting provisions

won in a previous contract would result in a strike (Cook, 1971). The old board members supported the new board members, and the community backed them. A black leader said in a 1971 *New York Times* article that the heart of the problem in the eyes of the community was "that too many of Newark's teachers live in the suburbs; this is just a 9-3 job for them, and they are not concerned with the problems of black ghetto children" (Cook, 1971). Therefore, while provisions in the teachers' contract were a point of contention, these issues were a proxy for the racial tensions that had emerged around the struggle for community control of schools.

At the time of the strike of 1971, Lawrence Hamm was a senior at Arts High School. After experiencing a troubled youth, Hamm was transformed by the political currents of the time: He imbibed the spirit of the civil rights movement through watching sit-ins, marches, and other demonstrations on television. As the strike escalated and showed no sign of letting up, Hamm and other students were told that the strike would make it impossible for them to graduate high school on time. In response to this concern, Hamm led several hundred students in a sit-in of two floors of the Gateway Hotel in the downtown section of Newark. Hamm recalled that the students did not take sides in the fight between the school board and the teachers union: "We didn't take the board's side. We didn't take the teachers' side. We were just trying to take the students' side at that time. All we knew is we wanted to graduate" (Hamm, 2013). The student action resulted in a promise from Mayor Gibson that he would resolve the strike, and the students disbanded.

In recognition of Hamm's role as a student leader, Mayor Gibson later offered Hamm a seat on the board of education. Hamm recalled that at 17 years old he had no idea what he was in for: "I had no idea, absolutely none whatsoever, of what this was going to involve because the Newark school system at that time was still reeling from all the energy that had been released" (Hamm, 2013). Hamm learned from his experience as a student leader in Newark that "to understand urban education, you really have to understand how the vectors of race, class, poverty, and urbanization all come together to produce the situation that we have in urban schools today." In other words, changing the racial composition of the school board turned out to be not enough to bring about economic and educational justice. Hamm recalled, "we thought simply by putting black faces in high places...we could make an improvement. But we found that there were deeper roots to these problems, that these problems were socioeconomic in nature" (Hamm, 2013).

People United for Better Schools

In the early 1980s, former NCUP organizer Junius Williams shifted his focus to education and participated in forming People United for Better Schools (PUBS), which Williams later recalled as "the last great united front in Newark (Williams, 2014, p. 338). Through PUBS, Williams worked to organize a challenge to Mayor Gibson's appointed school board. Unlike the Newark school board today, which functions only in an advisory capacity to the state, the school board in the early 1980s had decision-making power, including the hiring of the superintendent. The goal of PUBS was to channel the community's desire for greater control of the school board by pressuring the city to change to an elected board from a mayoral appointed board and thus gain greater control of the school system. Hamm recalls that Gibson put a lot of money and resources behind stopping the transition to an elected school board, but "the PUBS movement petitioned, put a referendum on the ballot, and Gibson was defeated" (Hamm, 2013).

Jean Anyon, who worked as a teacher, school reformer, and researcher in Newark beginning in the 1970s, recalled that "in the 1970s and 1980s there wasn't much parent

involvement in organizing for better schools. It might have been because finally blacks had taken charge of the schools which had been the goal" (J. Anyon, interview, March 13, 2013). While the 1960s and 1970s in Newark included surges in community organizing and grassroots power, the PUBS movement of the 1980s was primarily an electoral organization. The core membership of PUBS was small, approximately 25 people, but the members had a wide breadth of people they could mobilize in elections. Williams recalled that the leaders in PUBS "had thousands of people that they could touch" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). In two election cycles, PUBS was able to elect four new members to the school board. However, the movement was not successful in mobilizing a broad base of community activists to push for substantial school reforms.

Williams recalled that once the new school board members had won their elected positions, they were no longer interested in engaging with the community members who had initially stood behind them, partially because the community members were pushing for real change in Newark schools. Some of the early proponents of the PUBS movement were change agents seeking real reforms, including substantial investments in schools and more black history and culture in school curricula (Curvin, 2014). However, these goals proved to be elusive for a movement that lacked the kind of grassroots power that was characteristic of organizing in the 1960s and 1970s. Williams added, "We got pushed out because we were raising questions about school reform and it was easier not to have to deal with school reform when you can just pass your contract and get your membership some more money… Why would they sully their hands with folks who wanted something that was really going to take some work?" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013).

Thus, while PUBS succeeded in increasing institutional representation, it failed to produce meaningful change for Newark schools. As Hamm put it: "Again, people learned that just changing the composition of the governing body is not enough." Like in the larger struggle for municipal empowerment, having African Americans elected to the school board did not bring about a significant change to schools serving poor children in Newark. Many community leaders and activists working in Newark, including those interviewed for this study, learned that the conditions of class inequality and poverty impact schools in ways that reformers had yet to figure out how to address. Fruchter argued, for example, that "the disparities in American society that produce the disparities that kids bring with them to the schoolhouse are far too great to be addressed by any of the kinds of changes that the past reformers launched" (N. Fruchter, interview, February 20, 2013).

School Funding Battles and the Abbott Leadership Institute

New Jersey's school funding battles began in 1973 with *Robinson v. Cahill*. Spanning from 1973 through 2011, there have been numerous major court cases concerning New Jersey school funding, each of which has resulted in court decisions that aimed to correct unconstitutional disparities in school funding and program offerings across New Jersey. Despite the court ruling in *Robinson v. Cahill* which held the state responsible for ensuring equitable educational opportunity, the Education Law Center filed a second lawsuit in 1981, *Abbott v. Burke*, on behalf of students in New Jersey's low-income districts. The ongoing litigation that followed the first *Abbott* case resulted in a 1990 decision mandating that the state provide additional funding to "poorer, urban" districts to account for the needs of students in those districts, and a 2011 decision in which the court called on the state to adequately fund the 31 "Abbott districts" in New Jersey's poorest communities, including Newark.

The 1990 and 2011 court decisions in *Abbott v. Burke* declared that adequate funding for New Jersey's most disadvantaged districts must be achieved and guaranteed by the state. The decisions affirmed that school funding could not solely depend on the tax base of local districts but must be supplemented by the state to a degree that would account for the additional educational needs of low-income, disadvantaged students. Hamm likened the significance of the *Abbott* ruling to *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas*: "That Abbott v. Burke case was our Brown vs. Topeka Kansas. It really was. Those white folks, those white state legislators were so upset. They wanted to amend the constitution of the state of New Jersey" (Hamm, 2013). Hamm recalled that some white legislatures were so disappointed in the court decision that they wanted to amend the state constitution to remove the clause guaranteeing a "thorough and efficient education" for all of New Jersey's children.

After the *Abbott* ruling in 1990, poorer districts in New Jersey did not see additional funds until the late 1990s. Although the court decision outlined a redistributive funding policy for the state, many people in poorer districts did not understand the full extent of the legal battle that had taken place or what poorer districts were entitled to based on the court decision (Yaffe, 2007). Williams recalled, "People never really understood the struggle that went on and the rationale for having *Abbott*. It was just another entitlement program as far as the average person was concerned… There was no organization to interpret that victory to the people" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). For this reason, Williams founded the Abbott Leadership Institute (ALI) in 2003, an organization based at Rutgers University-Newark, which would interpret the victory of *Abbott* for low-income districts and ensure that underprivileged districts received the benefits they were entitled to under the court decision.

Since its founding, ALI has broadened its focus to include additional parent engagement efforts. Williams describes its work as "an information based approach to parent engagement." (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). ALI hosts weekly classes for parents and community members on a variety of local school reform issues. According to Williams, "what we do is supply them with the information and we give them an opportunity to listen to the debate and to take that information and go back and do something else with it." Williams described the work of ALI as like the work of NCUP in the 1960s: "We got some folks who have come out of the Abbott Leadership experience who have gone on to become the current crop of leaders that we now see. ALI is kind of like what NCUP was. We train leaders who now do other things" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). Williams, for example, credits ALI with producing several of Newark's current activists and organizers, including Sharon Smith who founded Parents Unified for Local School Education (PULSE), and Leah Owens who founded the Newark Education Workers Caucus, the social justice caucus of the Newark Teachers Union.

Despite this important work of ALI, Williams agreed with Anyon's assertion above regarding the lack of community coordination and grassroots power in Newark from the 1980s to the present. Regarding this lack of grassroots power, Williams argued that "there are strong efforts but there is no one single group that has been able to bring everybody together as we did in the 1960s and 1970s, to make a loud noise as opposed to several little noises going off periodically" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). As a challenge created by the rise of former grassroots leaders in the occupational and political hierarchies, community organizing and grassroots power waned throughout the years of legal battles over the New Jersey's school funding formula. As a result, the *Abbott* struggle was a movement led by institutional authorities who identified with the civil rights movement, but who lacked a strong grassroots base.

Neoliberal Reforms and the Newark Global Village School Zone

Newark experienced a decline in grassroots power after many veteran activists won positions of institutional authority in the city's schools and municipal government in the 1970s and beyond. For example, several of the activists interviewed for this study have careers that progressed from grassroots organizing to later operating *within* institutions. Former NCUP activist Steve Block went to work at the Education Law Center and organized plaintiffs for the first *Abbott* case; Junius Williams, who also worked with NCUP in the 1960s, later became the head of the Abbott Leadership Institute; and Ras Baraka, the son of Newark activist Amiri Baraka, began his career as an organizer, later became the principal of Central High school, and finally was elected mayor of Newark in 2014. During the critical decades in Newark's history outlined above, Newark was home to a grassroots movement that mobilized a broad base of grassroots activists in pursuit of municipal representation, economic access, educational equity, and community control of schools. These grassroots movements were successful in attaining municipal representation for the city's African American community and achieving local control of schools. However, economic access and educational equity proved to be more elusive goals.

The decline in grassroots power in Newark had important implications for how school reform would play out in the decades that followed. In place of fundamental changes to the political economy of the city, political and educational elites in Newark adopted neoliberal reforms as a solution for the city's economic and educational problems. Cory Booker, for example, began his first term as mayor in 2006 and helped to establish the Newark Charter School Fund that aided a nearly fourfold increase in charter school enrollment. Booker's successor, Mayor Ras Baraka, faced criticism for collaborating with his former opponents in the neoliberal camp and overseeing a continued expansion of charter schools in Newark (Arena, 2023). Baraka capitalized on a surge of grassroots resistance to neoliberalism to win election for mayor of Newark in 2014 and eventually called for a pause to charter school expansion in 2018. However, Arena (2023) contends Baraka ultimately accepted the constraints inherent in managing the neoliberal city and collaborated with elite players in corporate school reform.

Neoliberal reforms in cities like Newark reveal a complex interplay of race and class dynamics. As Keith Benson (2023) observes, these reforms have driven systemic changes in urban education nationwide, including school closures and the expansion of corporate charter schools. Benson (2023) also critiques how neoliberal reforms are often framed in race-neutral language which obscures their racially targeted impacts – such as the displacement of Black and Latino communities, exclusion of these communities from decision-making processes, weakening of democratic governance, and reinforcement of racial and class hierarchies. Moreover, Benson (2019) underscores how the 'No Excuses' charter school model perpetuates a racialized narrative of discipline and control, treating Black and Latino students as problems to be managed rather than individuals to be empowered. This dynamic is evident in Newark's adoption of similar models, reflecting a broader national pattern of educational inequity under neoliberal governance.

The Newark Global Village School Zone (NGVSZ) was one prominent initiative to resist the neoliberal reform movement in Newark. When the launch of the NGVSZ was announced in 2010, it was referred to by parents and educators as "the most ambitious reform to be tried [in Newark] in decades." (Neufeld, 2012). Located in the Central Ward of Newark, the reform effort joined Central High School and its six feeder elementary schools together to form an autonomous school zone. Though the NGVSZ galvanized support from several local stakeholders, the vision

for the NGVSZ was that of Pedro Noguera, a professor at New York University. As conceived by Noguera, the NGVSZ embodied a four-pronged strategy of improving school practices, building comprehensive services for schools by partnering with local organizations, improving the economic conditions in the community, and building parent engagement. This vision of the NGVSZ embodied the spirit of both the *Abbott* and community control movements of decades prior. The termination of the NGVSZ after only a few short years of existence illustrates some of the obstacles in the way of organizing for economic and educational justice today.

The holistic approach of the NGVSZ prompted Ras Baraka, then principal of the NGVSZ's Central High School, to describe the NGVSZ as a reform that embodied the spirit of the *Abbott* ruling. Baraka argued, "all of the things that *Abbott* wanted to do are the things that we wanted to emulate in the Global Village School Zone." (R. Baraka, interview, March 5, 2013). The effort brought together a coalition of community groups and local organizations to improve school outcomes by comprehensively addressing the in-school and out-of-school needs of students in Central Ward schools. In addition to addressing student needs, the NGVSZ outlined a long-term goal to revitalize the local economy. It was the NGVSZ's deep and progressive approach to addressing inequality and poverty that established it as a reform movement in the spirit of *Abbott*.

As the heart of the project's community engagement strategy, another goal of the NGVSZ was to shift the paradigm of accountability in urban schools so that school staff, educators, and administrators were accountable to students and families. Noguera recalled, "One of the critical elements was the idea that schools have to be accountable to the communities they serve... If you think about it, schools in suburban communities, because the parents are organized and empowered and entitled, the schools feel they have to be responsive to them and make sure they serve their children well. And that dynamic really needs to be in place in urban areas as well" (P. Noguera, interview, February 15, 2013). This focus on community engagement and accountability situates the NGVSZ as a reform movement in the spirit of the movement for community control of schools.

To realize this progressive vision of school reform, leaders of the NGVSZ met with parent activist Sharon Smith to formulate a policy of school governance based on Chicago's school leadership councils (SLCs). Smith had formerly been trained as a community organizer alongside community leaders in Chicago and learned of Chicago's SLCs from an activist named Jitu Brown. Smith later drew on the Chicago model in formulating a policy that she hoped would transform school accountability in New Jersey. Smith founded Parents Unified for Local School Education (PULSE) to organize parents in the community and pressure policymakers to embrace increased parent involvement in school governance. Smith gained further influence in Newark when she began collaborating with leaders from the NGVSZ. After collaborating with NGVSZ director Lauren Wells, Smith presented a model to the six school administrators in the NGVSZ. Smith recalls of working with Wells, "she began to create some kind of governance structure for the Global Zone and so I was part of that" (S. Smith, interview, April 2, 2013).

Though the NGVSZ was only in existence for a short time, there were signs that the reform was making progress because of its broad vision of economic and educational justice. Two schools, including Central High School led by Baraka, saw substantial improvements in their standardized exam scores. In addition, the NGVSZ achieved substantial community support, which it was able to sustain over its short lifetime. However, just a few short years after its establishment the NGZSZ was unraveled, largely due to changes in the political climate at the city and state level. Noguera explained, "Everything shifted because Cliff Janey was the superintendent and he was very supportive…But then, Christie replaced Corzine, the Facebook money came in, Cliff Janey was

removed, Cami Anderson was put in, and suddenly we were dealing with a whole new array of political leadership with a very different vision about school reform" (P. Noguera, interview, February 15, 2013).

The new political and educational elite in Newark that Noguera described were uninterested in the approach of the NGVSZ. Their vision for school reform was one of top-down accountability, one in which schools are shut down when they do not perform and then reopened, often as charter schools (P. Noguera, interview, February 15, 2013). While the new political elite in Newark were inclined to speak about education as the "civil rights issue of our generation," it became increasingly evident that their strategy for achieving economic and educational justice was quite different from those of the historical struggles of *Abbott* and community control in Newark. Newark's new political elite during the early 2010s viewed school reform in the logic of the market. As Baraka argued, their philosophy was a "Milton Friedman concept of libertarianism that says that all of our social ills can be solved in the marketplace. So, they believe if you give parents some dollars and they take their dollars to the market that they should be able to buy a quality education." Baraka went on to argue that despite the promises of these new reformers, the effect of their strategy was simply to "destabilize public education, decentralize it" without addressing the underlying socioeconomic issues and racial inequities that doom urban schools to failure (R. Baraka, interview, March 5, 2013).

Discussion

Research on community organizing for school reform has demonstrated the potential of this strategy to improve conditions in urban schools and enhance the quality of life in historically underserved communities (Shirley, 1997; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Fabricant, 2010; Warren & Mapp, 2011). However, examining the history of community organizing in Newark highlights its effectiveness in a distinct way that non-historical scholarship often overlooks. Newark's context illustrates how education organizing is shaped by the city's civic culture and political economy, which create significant obstacles to building a unified movement for educational justice.

Educational inequity in Newark has long reflected the city's economic deprivation (Anyon, 1997). Education organizers in Newark often confront a power structure that is receptive to a "civil rights" agenda focused on representation but resists efforts to challenge racialized inequities in resource distribution and opportunity. As Hamm observed, "in the 1960s that was one of the prisms through which we saw all the problems, black versus white. But it's deeper than that because it's not just inequality between races, it's class inequality" (Hamm, 2013). Newark's political and economic elites were willing to accept a civil rights agenda that placed African Americans in institutional positions of power but resisted any challenges to the underlying class structure. This complex interplay of race and class dynamics caused grassroots organizing aimed at improving education for Newark's most impoverished residents to falter.

The history of grassroots organizing in Newark aligns with Barlow's (2003) argument that the civil rights movement's institutional achievements often came at the expense of grassroots power. Barlow writes:

> The greatest achievement of the civil rights movement over the past twenty years is its activists' institutional positioning… The problem, however, is that these civil rights activists rarely have much independent power within their institutions or

> access to significant community-based, grassroots power and that the community-based programs rarely have much influence over government programs. As a result, the power of the civil rights activists is primarily shaped and constrained by the institutions in which they are located. Most civil rights movement activists, having devoted the last twenty or thirty years getting into positions of institutional authority, have lost the capacity to mobilize power autonomous from state power... (p. 180-181).

Newark's history reflects this trajectory, beginning with early civil rights activists and New Left community organizers before the 1967 uprising and continuing through the Black Power coalitions of the 1970s. These movements successfully integrated African Americans into Newark's power structure but struggled to address structural racism, economic deprivation, and inequitable access to quality education. By the 1980s, grassroots power had receded, even as progress was made in achieving municipal representation for people of color.

Williams explicitly linked the acceleration of the neoliberal reform agenda in Newark during the 2010s to this decline in grassroots power. Reflecting on the closure of Roseville Avenue School in 2013, Williams remarked, "It would not have happened if we had strong political leadership at the top and at the bottom" (J. Williams, interview, April 12, 2013). Initiating the next phase of the civil rights movement in cities like Newark, therefore, will require reorienting the role of people in positions of power to the work of grassroots organizing. Barlow (2003) argues that this shift involves learning how to use institutional positions not for service provision but for community empowerment. Newark's activists, including Baraka and Smith, echoed this sentiment. Baraka remarked, "we have to rally, we can't give that up…We have to be on the ground" (R. Baraka, interview, March 5, 2013). Similarly, Smith noted, "we have to unite the way we did in the sixties" (S. Smith, interview, April 2, 2013).

This rejuvenation of grassroots organizing should counter the neoliberal reform movement and connect local struggles for educational justice to a broader national movement for racial and economic justice. Newark's history of grassroots resistance underscores the limitations of neoliberal reforms in addressing structural inequities in urban education. As Benson (2019, 2023) highlights, these reforms often prioritize market-driven solutions over community empowerment, leading to further marginalization of the very populations they claim to serve. Instead, Benson (2019) calls for investing resources in existing communities and schools rather than redirecting them toward attracting outsiders. This approach was exemplified by the Newark Global Village School Zone, which countered the charter school movement in Newark with a vision of school reform that prioritized community empowerment within existing public schools.

Finally, Newark's activists face the difficult task of dismantling the racialized class hierarchies that have persisted despite decades of community organizing. Groups such as the People's Organization for Progress, Parents Unified for Local School Education, Newark Education Workers Caucus, and the Newark Student Union continue to build the coalitions necessary to advance economic and educational justice. The current political and social terrain presents challenges, including the contested meaning of "civil rights" and forms of "outsider" status that undermine solidarity. Despite these challenges, Newark remains at the forefront of efforts to address persistent racial and economic and injustice in American cities.

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