

# “Very Powerful Voices”: The Influence of Youth Organizing on Educational Policy in Philadelphia

Educational Policy

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## Abstract

Nationally, youth organizing groups have been gaining traction in their push for education reform; however, little research has considered how policy-makers view their efforts. This study examines how 30 civic leaders in one under-resourced urban school district perceive the influence of a youth organizing group on educational policy decision making over a 15 year period. Results indicate that the group is widely recognized for having accomplished significant policy changes at school and district levels, including influencing the policy process in four key ways: insisting on accountability, elevating the role of student voice, shaping the agenda, and asserting themselves as powerful political actors.

## Keywords

bottom-up reform, urban schools, educational policy, youth organizing, student voice

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Power has long been considered a critical dimension of educational policy formation and implementation (Lowi, 1969; Murphy, 1971; Schneider & Ingram, 1993); however, only recently have “power considerations led to the entry of new actors—advocacy organizations and coalitions—into the policy process throughout the policy system” (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 217). These actors, whom McLaughlin refers to as “nonsystem actors” because of their status outside the formal educational policy system, play a critical role in influencing political deliberations and decision making, shaping both local will to demand and local capacity to implement specific policy priorities. Nevertheless, traditional educational policy research has paid limited attention to these groups (McLaughlin, Scott, Deschenes, Hopkins, & Newman, 2009).

This study adds to a small but growing field of literature (Christens & Dollan, 2011; Delgado & Staples, 2008; Kirshner, 2009; Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008) focused on one particular type of non-system actor: youth organizers. Drawing on a case study of the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU), one of the most well-known contemporary youth organizing groups, we explore how youth organizing groups impact the policy landscape. We ask the following question: How has PSU affected educational policymaking in Philadelphia over the past 15 years, and to what ends? Rather than allow PSU organizers to answer this question, we present the perspectives of adult civic leaders in Philadelphia, many of whom have been the targets of PSU’s work. Their accounts reveal PSU’s perceived power and shed light on the nature and extent of the group’s influence on policy discourse and decision making in the School District of Philadelphia.

### *Community Organizing for School Reform*

The last two decades have witnessed a surge of activity in the area of community organizing for school reform. Although the tradition of community organizing in America extends back to the 1930s and the seminal efforts of Saul Alinsky in Chicago, it is only since the 1990s that community organizers have taken up the cause of educational reform (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Warren et al., 2011). Community organizing refers to efforts to unite a group of people around a common vision for social and political change and to empower them to press for these changes. According to Schutz and Sandy (2011), the overarching goal of community organizing is to “*alter the relations of power* between the groups who have traditionally controlled our society and the residents of marginalized communities” (p. 12). Recent research on community organizing for school reform has documented the impressive victories and important contributions of these

groups. In a six-year, multisite national study, Mediratta et al. (2009) found that organizing campaigns were successful in securing new resources for schools, ensuring their equitable distribution, and introducing “new policy to improve curriculum, school organization, teacher recruitment and preparation, and parent engagement” (p. 11). Other studies describe the influence of community organizing campaigns on school climate and infrastructure (Mediratta, Fruchter, & Lewis, 2002), district-wide redesign plans (Mira, Nikundiwe, & Wadhaw, 2011), and state-level legal proceedings and educational settlements (Oakes & Rogers, 2006). In addition to identifying the effects of these campaigns, researchers have begun to construct powerful explanations for how community organizing works to achieve education reform (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002; Mediratta, 2004; Shirley, 1997; Warren et al., 2011).

Reviewing the literature, Renee and McAlister (2011) identify four common strategies used by effective educational organizing groups: working at multiple levels, working through alliances and coalitions, using data and research, and balancing collaboration and pressure. Overall, community organizing represents a unique strategy for school reform because unlike reform models that are crafted elsewhere and imposed on schools through top-down mechanisms, the reforms called for by community organizing groups respond to specific local needs and incorporate local knowledge and expertise. Furthermore, these efforts build what Renee and McAlister (2011) refer to as “democratic capacity to sustain meaningful reform over the long term” by directly engaging those who have the greatest stake in the core work of schools: teachers, parents, and, increasingly, students.

### *Youth Organizing*

Emerging from the community organizing tradition, youth organizing is a strategy that builds the collective capacity of youth to challenge and transform the institutions in their communities to promote social and economic justice (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Listen Inc., 2002). Like community organizing, it seeks “to alter power relations, create meaningful institutional change, and develop leaders” (Youth Action, 1998, p. 13). Unlike community organizing, however, youth organizing draws heavily on the field of youth development (Innovation Center, 2003; Listen Inc., 2002). Youth development, which emerged in the late 1980s and gained traction during the 1990s (Pittman, 2000), champions an asset-based view of young people and emphasizes the provision of key supports that will help youth build skills and competencies in various developmental domains. Because of this grounding

in youth development, youth organizing groups attend to the holistic development of the individual participants (HoSang, 2003) and often offer academic assistance, such as tutoring, and engage youth in identity work and cultural expression (Weiss, 2003).

As Christens and Dolan (2011) note, most studies of contemporary youth organizing have tended to focus on the benefits that accrue to individual participants; however, youth organizers have achieved meaningful educational reforms at school, district and state levels as well. Youth have led and won campaigns to save public vouchers that provide free transportation to and from school (Moore, 2011), to reduce school overcrowding (Mediratta et al., 2009), to increase access to college preparatory coursework (Ishihara, 2007; Shah, 2011), and to design and implement small schools (Carlo, Powell, Vazquez, Daniels, & Smith, 2005; Suess & Lewis, 2007). A growing number of case studies have documented how youth organizing groups have achieved both political and institutional change (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Kwon, 2006; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Shah & Mediratta, 2008; Warren et al., 2008). Zeldin, Petrokubi, and Camino (2008), for example, document how two youth organizing groups operating in different cities have succeeded in shifting institutional relations between youth and adults, shaping the civic agenda to reflect youth voice, and spurring educational systems to become more responsive to students' needs.

The victories these youth organizers have won are particularly noteworthy in light of the tremendous barriers youth must overcome in trying to effect change. In addition to the challenges with which adult community organizers must contend, such as administrative turnover, policy churn, competing priorities from multiple constituencies, vague terminology, and entrenched bureaucratic structures, which limit access and accountability (Kamber, 2002; Mediratta et al., 2002; Renee & McAlister, 2011; Schutz, 2007; Warren et al., 2011), youth organizers face several additional hurdles to accomplishing their work.

First, youth organizers must confront the challenge of adultism, which manifests as the view, often used to dismiss them, that they are naïve, inexperienced, or incompetent (Delgado & Staples, 2008.) In their study of community organizing for school reform, McAlister, Mediratta, and Shah (2009a) found that some educators discredit youth organizers because of their "insufficient knowledge of pressures facing the school" and their impatience with political processes (p. 21). Because most youth organizers are also low-income students of color, the dynamics of race and class add further layers to this deficit perspective (Mediratta, Cohen & Shah, 2007; Taines, 2011).

The viewpoint that youth are unprepared to assume important decision-making responsibility is further instantiated in policies that restrict youth from voting until they are 18 and that make schooling compulsory until that age. Such policies limit youths' access to the instruments and institutions of power. Not only do they lack a formal political means for making their voices heard, but they also have little connection to professional networks and organizations (such as unions) or to traditional broadcast media. Even in schools and educational systems, the dominant hierarchical structure typically precludes youths' voices from being heard (Kahne, Honig, & McLaughlin, 1998; Mediratta et al., 2007; Mitra, 2008).

So entrenched are adults' low expectations and paternalistic views of youth that to change their perspectives and encourage them to partner productively with youth requires adults to engage in substantial "unlearning." Adults must be prepared, even trained, to be able to listen to youth voice. Such training demands more than interest or willingness; it necessitates time and investment as well (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002).

A final challenge particular to youth organizing is the transitory nature of its participants. Youth only remain youth for a finite period of time. Therefore, the leadership base these organizations establish always remains ephemeral. The most experienced youth organizers inevitably "age out," taking with them important institutional memories (Carlo et al., 2005; Delgado & Staples, 2008; Weiss, 2003). The bounded nature of "youth" results in high organizational turnover and a constantly revolving door of core members.

At the same time that youth are aging out of youth organizing, they are transitioning into adulthood, with stronger commitments to social justice and with greater capacity to advance change (Conner, 2011; Delgado & Staples, 2008; Shah, 2011). Part of the value of youth organizing, then, lies not only in its power to address the immediate developmental needs of young people, many of whom are low-income youth of color who have been poorly served by our educational institutions, but also in its ability to build what Ginwright (2010) refers to as "a leadership pipeline": an evergrowing corps of active, engaged citizens, who care deeply about educational reform. Because this pipeline has been under construction for nearly two decades, it is now long enough for researchers to study its reach. Qualitative studies have begun to explore the medium and long-term effects of participation in youth organizing on individuals as they have moved through the pipeline (Conner, 2011); however, little work has examined the influence of sustained youth organizing work on educational systems over time. Although case studies of specific campaigns illustrate how youth organizers have achieved significant victories or wins, less is known about how these efforts add up over the years in one

particular setting: How do the various campaigns a youth organizing group undertakes build on each other to influence political processes, policy discourse, and decision making? Because the oldest of the contemporary youth organizing groups are now well into their second decade, longitudinal studies of the impact of youth organizing on systems change are now possible.

## Method

This study addresses the following research question: How do various civic leaders involved in Philadelphia's educational system perceive the influence of PSU on educational policy decision making over a 15-year period, from 1995 to 2010?

To address this question, we relied on exploratory qualitative case study methodology and based our data collection and analysis around a threefold process: First, we selected knowledgeable participants; next, we conducted semistructured interviews, maintaining a consistent set of questions while allowing participants to pursue conversational strands they deemed important; and finally, we engaged in rigorous open and axial coding to create a final schema. Although results of this process are not generalizable, our methods allowed us to identify relevant commonalities in participants' responses.

*Site selection.* We selected PSU as the focus of our study because it is one of the oldest and most established youth organizing groups in the country. Founded in 1995 by a dozen students incensed by educational inequities in Philadelphia, the organization has gradually expanded to include members from middle and high schools around the city (PSU, 2010). The organization's focus is on building young people's collective efficacy and empowering youth to effect change within their communities. However, PSU simultaneously emphasizes the development of individuals' social, academic, and leadership potential, recognizing that broad social change requires both collective initiative and individual leadership development (Rosen, 2011).

Although a small number of paid adults play a role in building the group's capacity and maintaining PSU's structural memory, the organization is youth-led; youth identify, organize, and enact campaigns. There are no prerequisites for membership within the organization, and members come from both magnet and neighborhood schools from diverse areas of the city (PSU, 2010). As a result, the organization's campaigns have traditionally focused on educational equity issues at both the school and district levels. These campaigns have addressed issues ranging from privatization and school funding to nonviolence.

Scholars of educational policy insist that “context matters” to policy design and implementation (Honig, 2006; McLaughlin 1991, 2006). Similarly, those who study community organizing highlight the salience of context (Mediratta et al., 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). These researchers argue that organizing approaches and strategies are responsive to and shaped by local community conditions. As Warren et al. (2011) observe, “Organizing is not a one-size-fits-all strategy that can be applied everywhere in the same way with the same result . . . . We cannot fully grasp how organizing works without attention to context” (p. 22). Therefore, it is critical that we provide a brief overview of the Philadelphia educational context.

Philadelphia’s contemporary educational landscape has been shaped by half a century of economic decline and racial and cultural tension. In their overview of Philadelphia’s educational history, McAlister, Mediratta, and Shah (2009b) suggest that the city’s economic woes stem from post–World War II job losses. These losses, combined with a housing shortage, incited rapid population decline among the middle-class white population. The African-American and growing immigrant populations left behind in the wake of white flight settled around long-standing factories, many of which closed in the next few years, devastating the neighborhoods that had sprouted up around them. Racial tension rose, particularly during the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s, and the city remains racially and economically segregated today (Christman & Rhodes, 2002; Corcoran & Christman, 2002; McAlister et al., 2009b).

Philadelphia schools have mirrored the inequities and tensions at the city level. Within the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), 70% of students fall below the poverty line; roughly two-thirds of these students are African American (Gill, Zimmer, Christman, & Blanc 2007). Moreover, not unlike other large urban districts, SDP has consistently performed lower than any other district on state tests. In 1993, the state froze state funding to the district, and in 1998, it passed a law allowing for a state takeover of a district suffering from fiscal mismanagement and poor performance on state tests (Brandt, 2007). Finally, in 2002, despite widespread public and political outcry, the state took control of the district. It replaced the School Board, whose members were appointed by the mayor, with a School Reform Commission (SRC), whose uncertain tenure continues today. Two of the five members are locally appointed; the remaining three are selected by the governor (Gill, Zimmer, Christman, & Blanc 2007).

Various superintendents have played pivotal roles in the times leading up to and following the state takeover. David Hornbeck, who began service in 1994, just after the funding freeze, increased accountability and decentralized

decision making in an attempt to ward off the state. Despite Hornbeck's popularity and fiscal gains for the city—he won 50 million dollars in grant money—he lacked the resources to successfully implement his far-reaching vision. Hornbeck resigned in 2000, citing lack of financial support from the state (Travers, 2003). In contrast, his successor, Paul Vallas, was selected as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) because his values aligned with those of the SRC. He supported its diverse provider model, increasing funding for students in schools created by independent for-profit and nonprofit providers (Bulkley, Mundell, & Riffer, 2004). However, like Hornbeck, he was unable to stave off financial difficulties, and he left after being strongly encouraged to do so by the very group that had wooed him 6 years earlier (Mezzacappa, 2008).

The most recent CEO, Arlene Ackerman, who was bought out of her contract in August, 2011 for close to a million dollars, was known during her 3-year tenure for her top-down managerial approach. Although test scores rose steadily during her 3 years as superintendent—as they did under Vallas and Hornbeck—Ackerman's notorious refusal to share decision-making responsibilities alienated her from many city educational stakeholders, including Mayor Michael Nutter, who ultimately pushed for her buyout. During her relatively short tenure, however, Ackerman initiated several strong reform measures. Like Vallas, she supported diverse providers. Consistent with this vision, she mandated “turnarounds” in some of the district's lowest performing schools. These turnaround schools, known variously as “Renaissance Schools,” “Promise Academies,” “Innovation Schools,” may involve staff layoffs or transfers, leadership replacements, and private takeovers by educational management organizations. These reform measures have outraged many community members (Mezzacappa, 2011).

Although it is not unusual for urban districts to struggle financially or to have controversial, high-profile superintendents, who do not remain in their positions for more than 4 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2010), a 2011 report issued by the Philadelphia mayor's Chief Integrity Officer suggests “that things are different here” (Markman, 2011, p. 15) with respect to the city's educational politics. This report, widely publicized in local newspapers, documents backroom dealings, acute political pressure, and scenes reminiscent of the movie *The Godfather* (Markman, 2011, p. 11). The report paints a portrait of Philadelphia educational policy as a ring in which a few political heavyweights flex their muscles, exercise what they see as their prerogatives, and privately showcase their power.

**Data sources.** To gauge perceptions of PSU, we conducted semistructured interviews with 30 individuals who had considerable knowledge of

Philadelphia's educational landscape but did not have direct ties to PSU. We selected these individuals based on an idea that is best articulated by Saul Alinsky (1987, 1946): "The first rule of power tactics" is that "power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have" (p. 126). To understand PSU's power, we must turn to those who are targeted by PSU's work, for their descriptions and accounts of PSU can best reveal the group's perceived level of influence.

To identify relevant and knowledgeable potential participants, we first mapped Philadelphia's educational landscape, relying on various sources to provide information on those individuals and organizations with notable influence on local educational politics. We then refined and organized our list into eight institutional categories: community organizing groups; journalism; academe and think tanks; foundations and philanthropic organizations; educational advocacy and intermediary organizations; city and state level political offices; the school district; and individual schools within the district. (Our list parallels the various stakeholder groups identified in Kamber's [2002] research as targets or allies of community organizers for school reform.) We ensured that we had three respondents within each category, and we oversampled at the district and school levels, believing that these individuals had the most direct influence over and knowledge of education in Philadelphia (see Table 1). Finally, we were careful to select individuals with a broad range of stances toward PSU: Although some were professed skeptics and others avid fans of the organization, most were neutral. All had lived within the city for at least 6 years, and most had spent their entire lives in the area, giving them a unique historical perspective on Philadelphia's educational terrain.

Interviews were digitally record and transcribed. Overall, we had more than 33 hours of interview data.

*Analytic approach.* We based our analysis on "grounded theory" conventions (Charmaz, 1983; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We thickened interview transcripts and engaged in iterative open and axial coding. We met regularly to compare and refine our interpretations, and after using constant-comparison across all transcripts, we finalized a coding schema. Two researchers applied this schema to each of the interview transcripts. We then wrote analytic memoranda (Charmaz, 1983) where we laid out our propositions and dismissed rival interpretations (Yin, 2003).

## Results

This study was designed to elicit Philadelphia civic leaders' perspectives on the influence of a youth organizing group, the Philadelphia Student Union, on

**Table 1.** Interview Respondents.

| Number | Position   |
|--------|--|
| 3      | Prominent community organizers (from groups other than PSU and YUC)  |
| 3      | Journalists who cover education  |
| 3      | Academics who study Philadelphia and school reform or educational policy   |
| 4      | Foundation executives and program officers involved in educational policy  |
| 4      | Executives in education advocacy and intermediary organizations  |
| 4      | City and state level educational policymakers  |
| 6      | Teacher leaders & principals from PSU chapter schools  |
| 10     | Current and former high-level district administrators (including 1 Superintendent & 4 School Reform Commissioners) |

Note: The total number exceeds 30 because some individuals moved from positions within the district to other positions within the educational field in Philadelphia. PSU = Philadelphia Student Union; YUC = Youth United for Change.

educational policy over a 15 year period. One of the most direct ways to measure “influence” is to identify campaign victories: The tangible outcomes of organizing efforts, such as greater funding for schools, an increase in the number of counselors, or more books. However, within the field of community organizing, what counts as a “win” or an effective campaign has been hotly debated. Although it is important for grassroots groups to claim victories to assert their progress and sustain their momentum, it is also important to understand the accomplishments that others, outside the organization, ascribe to them, for such ascriptions illuminate the political power these groups wield and reveal their influence on policy discourse and decision making.

Our findings indicate that PSU is widely recognized as a significant player in Philadelphia educational policy. As one respondent, a former district insider, explained:

They influence the sort of the inner circle. In all cities, there are 50 people who sort of are the movers and shakers in any policy area, whether that be environmental or juvenile justice or [another area]. There’s always a group of people [whose] full time job is working on this issue. And I think that the youth organizers in education have a lot of impact on the 50 people inside the city who push and are the opinion leaders on education policy.

Indeed, our data bear witness to this claim, demonstrating that many members of Philadelphia's "inner circle" credit PSU with advancing important policy discussions and accomplishing key policy changes at both the school and district levels over the last 15 years. Overall, the organization is widely viewed as having an "important" and "strong voice," which influences educational policy in the city.

Our data do, however, indicate some variation in the respondents' levels of familiarity with the work of PSU. Some of our respondents were more acquainted with PSU's school-level initiatives, whereas others had greater knowledge of its city-wide campaigns. A handful of respondents made misattributions, crediting PSU with accomplishments that had been achieved by its sister organization, Youth United for Change (YUC), and approximately half of the sample mentioned that they found it difficult to distinguish PSU from YUC. These two organizations have collaborated on a number of campaigns and joined forces through various coalitions, so it is easy to understand how their efforts could be confused or conflated over time by civic leaders. A third of the respondents also questioned PSU's degree of power on various political stages; some felt it had more influence at the city level, and others felt it had greater influence at the local school or community level. Only two respondents believed that it had lost any power it once had; these two respondents, who admitted that their familiarity with the organization was limited, stand as outliers in our data. As indicated above, the vast majority of respondents felt that PSU plays a "prominent" and "instrumental role" in shaping Philadelphia educational policy.

In what follows, we review the programmatic and policy changes with which PSU is credited at the school and district levels, as well as the ways in which it is believed to have impacted the process of policymaking in the district.

### *School-Level Programs and Policies*

At the school level, PSU is recognized for several major accomplishments, including designing and implementing professional development workshops for teachers at Gratz High School; developing and running youth-led trainings with the school police at Sayre High School; and helping to improve relations between Black and Asian students at South Philadelphia High School in the wake of episodes of school violence that attracted national media attention.

Many respondents also noted PSU's efforts fighting for and winning a new school building and a small school design for West Philadelphia High School. As one former district insider said, "Part of why there's a new West Philly

High is because of Student Union advocacy.” Their 9-year advocacy, which spanned the reigns of three superintendents, began in 2002 under the Vallas administration and culminated in the opening of a US\$66 million new high school in 2011. An intermediary in the district explained how PSU students “did a lot of research about” Paul Vallas, when they learned that he would be the new superintendent in 2002, and “as a part of their research they realized that he likes to do capital stuff and there’s probably going to be a capital campaign here.” When Vallas announced a capital campaign weeks into his tenure, the PSU students made sure that West High School was “on his list” and they “orchestrated this whole thing and had to agree which partners they were going to work with.” These partners included the architect and other stakeholders who would have a say in the design and location of the new school. According to this respondent, “It’s important to tell that story because I do think that it’s easy for many people to overlook the role the student groups played in bringing that about . . . People would think the youth groups were the last group brought in, as opposed to how it really happened.”

When Arlene Ackerman became superintendent in 2008, respondents recalled that she dismissed the work the committee had done around designing and planning for a new school and removed West from the list of high schools that would get a new facility. One funder recalled, “When Dr. Ackerman was going to say, ‘Oh never mind. We’re not going to build West Philadelphia,’ which those kids had been working on forever and ever, it was they who made Dr. Ackerman put it right back on the list. I mean, they weren’t going to stand for it.” A former district insider similarly remembered, “West Philly High was in the capital plan, and then it was out of it. If it hadn’t been for Student Union and [its leaders], it never would have gotten back in the capital plan.” Ultimately, according to another former high-level district administrator, PSU’s “campaign was able to influence the location and some of the design elements of the new high school.” A teacher leader at West acknowledged, “They organized to get West a new building, they organized for a career academy, and we’re going to get all of them.” In September of 2011, with an array of local dignitaries in attendance, the new West Philadelphia High School opened its doors for the first time.

Some respondents recognized this work as only a partial victory because, as one member of the school advisory committee noted, “It’s not being built on the site that we and our consulting architects picked . . . and we’re not getting the building we wanted either.” Nonetheless, many respondents observed that without PSU’s advocacy and persistence, West High School would probably not have been targeted for infrastructure improvements at all, and some speculated that it would have been slated for a corporate or charter takeover.

Although PSU's work with respect to West High School was the most commonly cited school-level accomplishment in our data, respondents also attributed seemingly smaller school site successes to PSU, such as ensuring that student bathrooms at Furness High School are more regularly cleaned and restocked. As one former district administrator put it, "They influence things back at their own schools because they have caused heating systems to get fixed, books to be delivered on time." Another remarked on the "specific campaigns and particular victories" at the "neighborhood schools," saying, "Some of them might be things that look smaller in the scheme of things about the needs of particular schools, but for the kids that go to those schools, they're not small at all." For example, at one neighborhood school, PSU members were able to document instances and then demand the end of corporal punishment for late students.

### *District- and State-Level Polices*

At the district and state level, respondents widely credited PSU with three major victories: helping to block an effort to turn over most of the Philadelphia schools to an education management organization (EMO), Edison Schools, Inc., in 2002; helping to advocate for and secure a state budget that significantly increased funding for Philadelphia schools in 2008; and designing and then demanding that the School District implement Student Success Centers, which provide support services to students and aim to increase college access.

Several respondents shared vivid memories of PSU's work around anti-privatization in Philadelphia. They recalled how the students would "show up and block entrances," "form a human chain around the central office" and "march out in front of" the school district building to call attention to what they saw as an untenable policy proposal: allowing then CEO of Edison Schools, "Chris Whittle [to seize] the Philadelphia School District—privatizing it," as one academic researcher remembered the situation. A prominent organizer at the time asserted, "There's no doubt that the work that the young people [of PSU] did around privatization was just absolutely defining. So I think that they had a huge influence during that time." A former teacher echoed, "If hadn't been for their energy and what they did to organize a lot of other organizations to get behind [the anti-privatization push], I'm sure that Edison would have gotten more schools." One respondent referred to PSU as "the fire behind that [effort]" and another declared that PSU "did play an instrumental role" in "blocking" Edison.

PSU's attention to privatization and accountability issues continues today, according to some respondents. A former district insider recalled that during

discussions with former Superintendent Arlene Ackerman about her strategic plan and her intentions for underperforming schools, PSU students

were very concerned that the whole renaissance school thing, any turn-around strategy, was just going to be an opportunity for Edison Schools to get more money from the district. And they raised that question, and . . . the late head of charter schools, said, “Why do you keep mentioning Edison Schools?” as though he had been living under a rock for his last seven years. But they were very vigilant. That EMO thing was a big deal to them.

Although many of the young people who were involved in the protests and actions of 2002 have moved on from PSU, the organization has remained committed to standing guard on this issue.

In addition to organizing others to prevent policy choices that they did not like, PSU was credited by respondents with helping to advance proposals that they do like, such as increasing funding for Philadelphia schools. One city policymaker acknowledged that PSU had “a voice in the work that was done across the state to get a better funding formula in place,” and a former superintendent for the district noted that “they have been an important part of a very large effort that has gone on now all these years, around increasing the state share of spending.” Respondents commented on PSU’s trips to Harrisburg, their work mobilizing youth around the state, and their relentless attention to issues of educational equity and adequacy as important contributions.

Student Success Centers represent another effective policy that respondents attributed to PSU. These centers, which were piloted in ten Philadelphia high schools, were expanded in 2010 to all high-need schools. One respondent within the school district acknowledged, “The Philadelphia Student Union is actually the reason why these Success Centers exist now . . . It was their idea. They did the research, came up with this sort of design, and said this is something that’s needed in public high schools.” A foundation executive echoed, “having Student Success Centers in a large chunk of the comprehensive high schools would not have happened without Student Union conceiving of them and designing what they should look like and then promoting that and selling it, and fighting for it. It wouldn’t have happened.” According to district data, the Success Centers have provided services to 14,124 youth in the district since their inception (School District of Philadelphia, 2011).

Other district-level policy impacts mentioned by respondents emphasized PSU’s influence on various conversations around small schools, teacher policy, and district-sponsored trainings for school police officers. For example, the

head of the region's major youth advocacy group asserted, "They have been one of the voices that has really advanced the notion of smaller, more responsive schools," and a district insider agreed: "I think they did impact policy because you, in fact, saw a move toward smaller schools. This is the district that went from about 42 comprehensive high schools to now we're in the 60s." Some respondents highlighted PSU's ongoing Teacher Effectiveness Campaign for having "had influence on at least two different teacher contracts," with respect to "school-based hiring, a reduction in seniority transfer system, and more rigorous criteria for evaluating teachers." Finally, a high-level district administrator explained that because the training session PSU provided for police officers at Sayre High School was regarded as "one of the best professional development of school police officers ever," the district has "actually incorporated it [the PSU model] into our trainings" throughout the district.

### *District-Level Processes*

In addition to pointing out concrete changes in policy and programming, respondents acknowledged that PSU has changed the processes by which district policies are made and enacted. Their accounts call attention to four primary ways in which PSU has altered educational policy deliberation, decision making, and implementation in the school district: by holding adults accountable; by engaging in agenda setting and problem definition; by asserting their authority so that students' ideas and opinions are invited and taken seriously; and by positioning themselves as powerful potential adversaries or allies who must be addressed.

*Adult accountability.* Several respondents credited PSU with holding those in positions of power accountable and demanding greater transparency in district decision making. For example, a leading child and youth advocate in the district explained:

They have pushed hard for transparency and for more open decision making, and have called officials to task when that [decision making] happened in [the dark], and I think that they have, therefore, opened up many doors—even though, because they are students, they are at risk of having those doors slammed shut.

Several respondents recalled PSU's "window-washing action," in which the young people "did a demonstration in front of the school district building and cleaned the windows, underscoring the need for transparency and not for officials making decisions behind closed doors." One former district insider

noted, “They’ve been very effective in bringing to public attention the need for greater transparency,” and another recalled,

When Dr. Ackerman first announced that she was identifying schools [in need of being turned-around], and they’d be put in these categories, The Philadelphia Student Union wanted to know how was it going to be—how was this going to be done, how were schools going to be identified?

By asking hard questions, demanding information, and insisting on their right to know, “The Philadelphia Student Union has absolutely advanced the transparency of the district,” in the minds of many of our respondents.

Some respondents also felt that PSU has also held the district to its promises. One former superintendent described their greatest “achievement” as “having created over these years a vehicle for young people, in the high schools especially, to have a way to contribute to keeping the administration honest, both in those individual high schools and on a citywide basis.” With respect to their advocacy around the need for a new school building for West Philadelphia High School, one policymaker in the city explained, “It wouldn’t have happened if they hadn’t kept pushing . . . It was a promise that was made that they made the district keep.” PSU’s vigilance on particular issues and the fact that it “has shown by its staying power” that it is not the kind of organization “that you hear from once and then they sort of disperse” led some respondents to see it as a “watchdog” organization for the district, what one academic called a “thorn in the side of power.” In these ways, PSU impacts how the policymakers go about doing their business.

*Agenda setting and problem framing.* Respondents described how PSU brought issues to the table that “might otherwise be missed,” such as equity concerns and zero tolerance policies. Their vigilance on these issues helped to influence policymakers’ agendas by forcing these concerns to enter into policy discourse and deliberations. As one former district insider noted, “They’ve done a lot in terms of shining the spotlight on equity issues.” Similarly, an intermediary observed that PSU is “particularly concerned about what’s happening at the neighborhood schools. They do help to make sure that people remember that that is a focus we need to always come back to.” In Philadelphia, neighborhood schools are distinguished from magnet and other “selective admission” schools. The neighborhood schools tend to be less well-resourced, to have fewer veteran and highly qualified teachers, to have greater teacher turnover, and to have more low-income students, students of color, and special needs students than the selective admission schools

(Gold et al., 2010). By forcing policymakers to attend specifically to what goes on in these schools, PSU students ensured that the rights and needs of the students traditionally underserved by the district's public schools received consideration. A former superintendent recalled that although PSU sometimes caused challenges for him, "on balance, it is way more helpful than distracting, if the administration's objective is to improve education conditions for the kids that have historically been left out." By constantly drawing policymakers' attention back to the ways in which these students are impacted by their schools' practices and policies, a journalist believed that PSU "forced the terms of the debate to change somewhat, and the focus of the debate to keep on the students." Similarly, an academic who attended several SRC and reform committee meetings observed: "The adults could be blabbering and arguing [about] their ridiculous agendas . . . and then they [PSU youth] could kind of bring you back to reality—back to what really was important."

In addition to bringing certain issues to the fore and maintaining adults' focus on the needs of students, PSU was credited with influencing policymakers' understanding of particular policies and problems. In this way, they participated not only in agenda-setting, but also in problem-defining, both key aspects of the policy process (McCombs, 2004; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Stone, 2001). They spend a lot of time "just slowly educating policy makers and the district officials," according to one foundation executive. A high-level district administrator acknowledged, for example, that although the district continues to have a zero-tolerance policy, PSU's advocacy has prompted "internal discussions" around what the policy looks like, how it is affecting young people, and how it might be changed. Similarly, a School Reform Commissioner noted that "there are many times when I learned things from [students' testimonies] that I file away and I believe will influence how I act." A former SRC chairperson recalled that PSU students brought information and ideas "to the table that [were] enlightening, that I had not seen or heard from other sources . . . and [that] added information to the debate [around small schools]." These comments are suggestive of the ways in which PSU has been able to impact policymakers' thinking around particular policies.

Finally, PSU was credited by some respondents with reframing issues, as when it recast school violence as structural violence and repositioned youth as responsible change agents in a public action flash mob. In this particular public action in the spring of 2010, PSU youth gathered quietly in Rittenhouse Square, silently arranged themselves in a series of straight lines, took a pledge of nonviolence, and then identified themselves as artists, innovators, thinkers, leaders, and organizers, countering the image of unruly and dangerous

youth mobs that had been promulgated in the mainstream media at the time. A leading child advocate and attorney in the city described this action as “a really cool approach to drawing attention to the fact that not all students are violent thugs in the School District of Philadelphia.” He continued, “The Philadelphia Student Union is saying we’re not a flash mob. And that’s a really important message to send: that you can’t lump all of Philadelphia students into that label.” A journalist reporting on the action similarly understood their “quiet statement [that] we’re organized; we’re positive; we’re not a flash mob. Don’t tar us all with the same brush.” She concluded, “It was, I think, very effective.” Indeed, her story, which was featured prominently in one of the city’s two major newspapers, attracted national media attention. Our results show how PSU works to influence both the public’s and the policymakers’ perceptions of policies and problems.

*Asserting authority.* Several respondents felt that PSU had affected attitudes and perspectives by “forcing the powers that be to listen to them,” ensuring that Philadelphia has become a district in which student voice is heard and considered. One former district administrator explained, “They have inserted into the public dialogue the direct concerns of students, which before them, were kind of mediated by adult voices. So, the kids are now advocating for themselves.” Another former district insider observed, “The greatest impact has been that they actually did bring the concept of youth voice to the table,” and a third echoed:

I think that you come to enough SRC meetings, you have young people standing up with signs and asking you questions, you soon begin to realize, “Wait a minute, are we including student voice? You know. Maybe we are overlooking what students want and hearing from them.”

The head of a major philanthropic institution similarly noted: “The student voice that they are able to put forward at things like the School Reform Commission meetings or for the news media are very powerful voices. I mean people really listen to students.” Through their constant attentiveness and responsiveness to district decisions, their media savvy, and their steady presence at SRC meetings, PSU youth have helped many adult leaders in Philadelphia to recognize that youth have insights and ideas that are worthy of attention. Their insistence on the value of student voice means that student perspectives are now a consideration in this district.

In fact, PSU youth are frequently sought out by those in positions of power for their positions on particular issues. Some district administrators mentioned that they would request follow-up meetings with PSU youth who

made “really educated points” or interesting observations during SRC meetings to learn more, and two policymakers in the city described how they frequently consulted with PSU members to understand the “youth perspective.” One high level district administrator described how by inserting themselves “into the middle of the dialogue,” PSU youth have become a resource for the district: “When you’re part of the dialogue, I think people keep coming back to you to say, ‘Okay, what do you think?’” In addition to participating in informal meetings with power brokers in the city, PSU youth have contributed “student voice” to policy deliberations through more formal mechanisms as well.

During the most recent administration, district officials and former Superintendent Ackerman regularly invited PSU students to serve on various committees and task forces. As one former district insider explained, “[PSU’s] voice was probably the impetus for her making sure that she had young people serving on the committees for *Imagine 2014*,” Ackerman’s strategic plan. Another respondent, a journalist, observed, “I think district administrators are careful to invite them [PSU members] to the panels and include them in the blue ribbon committees.” One district administrator noted that while ongoing discussion with PSU “has not always been as easy conversation,” because “they are raising issues that are thorny in nature,” the group has nevertheless been “welcomed at the table.” Such inclusion in meetings and committees is especially notable given Ackerman’s reported skepticism of organizers. Although these invitations may be chalked up to tokenism, they may also be a way of staving off potential critiques or protests by the youth group. Regardless, many respondents felt that it is “a pretty big deal,” as one city policymaker put it, that PSU is able to “have a voice” in these committees and “actually get a meeting with the superintendent.”

*Adversaries or allies.* Many respondents described PSU as “a force” that could either undermine or facilitate any new educational initiative in the district. As a result, some district insiders feel that they have to factor the potential responses of the youth groups into their policy choices and presentations of those choices. As one former district insider commented, “You have seen superintendent after superintendent feel like they need to respond to The Student Union.” One former superintendent referred to PSU as “a pain in the neck at times for someone in the superintendent’s role” and a high-level district insider recalled that another superintendent “knew they could cause problems for him. . . . Because the student groups, if something happened, they would easily protest or get up and make a big stink about stuff.” Respondents within the district explained how PSU protests and actions “freak people out” and make administrators think, “Oh my God! They’re not going to go away. What do we do? . . . or What can we do to

make that never happen again?” Because journalists “pay attention” to the students’ voices, take them seriously, and “quote them extensively,” PSU has been able to build political capital, which has helped it to become a force to be reckoned with inside the district.

PSU’s power to derail or advance policy was also acknowledged by those who worked outside the district. For example, an executive at a large foundation in the city described a recent encounter she had with an organization seeking resources for a new educational initiative. She cautioned the grant seeker:

Don’t try a movement without getting these two groups [PSU and YUC] behind you. . . . Because if those two student groups get wound up and oppose this, it’s ugly and it’s going nowhere fast. On the other hand, if they think it’s a good thing and want to work toward it, that’s a huge part of [your] battle.

As she continued with her story, she reflected that “the fact that—I mean, I didn’t really think about it at all, but that I would give these people the very strong suggestion that they not move forward with this without having those two groups in their corner” offers strong evidence of the power PSU and YUC have amassed.

Because of PSU’s media savvy and its skill with orchestrating large public demonstrations, several respondents suggested that Superintendent Ackerman and some principals in the district viewed PSU “as a threat” or as “a foe” and actually “feared” them, a further indication of the group’s power. As one child advocate in the city explained:

It is a kind of a testament to their influence that [Ackerman] sees them as a threat, because they know how to get in the newspaper and on TV. They know how to stop traffic on Broad Street. Maybe that’s all you need to know to become feared.

Evidence of the perceived threat PSU poses to the district and to individual principals also came from various respondents’ recollections of a meeting at the district headquarters in which an associate superintendent discussed with an invited group of school leaders whether and how PSU could be excluded from their schools. One principal remembered: “The question was—Is it [PSU] disruptive? Is it harmful? What do you see? What is your advice? Is this something that we should be concerned about?” Although the respondents who attended this meeting reported that several of their colleagues expressed

displeasure with PSU's work uncovering and drawing media attention to problems at their school sites, "Nothing came down from on high directing schools to change their policy [about PSU]. No one directed me to cease to permit it." This nonpolicy is significant because it shows that district officials were concerned enough about PSU to call a meeting with principals, that they considered how they might prevent the group from having school chapters, and that they eventually decided against blocking the organization. Some respondents speculated about the fury that would have been unleashed had the district attempted to bar PSU students from organizing. Clearly, PSU has become a major contender in the schools and in district.

Respondents referred to PSU as "potent," "powerful," "prominent," "significant," "influential," and "effective," and the data demonstrate that PSU is widely viewed as a key player in educational politics in Philadelphia.

## **Discussion**

Our research shows that civic leaders in Philadelphia recognize PSU for having accomplished significant policy changes at both school and district levels over the past 15 years. This study adds to the mounting evidence of the effectiveness of youth organizing as a strategy for promoting durable, tangible, and equity-oriented educational reform (Carlo et al., 2005; Kwon, 2006; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Moore, 2011; Shah & Mediratta, 2008; Suess & Lewis, 2007; Warren et al., 2008).

PSU has also shaped the policy process in the city, emerging as a critical player in education politics. Over the course of 15 years PSU overcame mainstream media invisibility to become a go-to source for journalists, who now recognize both the value of student voice and the importance of the organization's work. It shed its "inconsequential" standing among policymakers to achieve a reputation as a powerful potential ally or a potent threat. And it transitioned from automatic exclusion from "the planning and design process" under Hornbeck's Administration, despite that superintendent's affinity for collaboration and explicit support of organizing groups, to regular inclusion on strategic planning committees under the Ackerman Administration, despite that superintendent's perceived distaste for collaboration and suspicion of organizers. By holding adults in positions of power accountable for their promises and decisions, PSU pressures the city's education leaders to act in particular ways. By maintaining their focus on the educational rights of the city's most disadvantaged students, PSU influences policymakers' agendas. By promoting alternative framing of issues, problems, and students, PSU helps shape public perception and influence

policymakers' understanding. By asserting their own authority, they have elevated student voice in the policymaking process, and by proving themselves to be powerful potential adversaries or allies, they have established themselves as widely recognized political contenders in this city.

In sum, they have shaped three core components of the policy process: *the actors* (who sits at the table, who is consulted, and who is included in policy deliberations); *the agenda* (what is discussed and how the issues are framed); and *accountability* (what happens in the wake of policy decisions to ensure follow through and proper implementation). They also have achieved "wins," concrete policy changes at school and district levels, which denote their influence not just on what is debated, but also on what is decided. PSU has, of course, also experienced losses. Its influence, however, seems undeniable, and this accomplishment in and of itself is significant. Ample literature has focused on the policy process, and although conceptualizations of it as a linear model, with discrete agenda, decision and implementation phases, have been largely discredited (Clay & Schaffer, 1984; Grindle & Thomas, 1990; Juma & Clarke, 1995), it is nonetheless noteworthy that PSU, a group of marginalized youth, has managed to play such a critical role in each of these stages. To determine which of these ways of influencing the policy process are specific to youth organizing for education reform and which are unique to the Philadelphia political scene, more research on the influence of youth organizing on the policy process will be needed in other contexts.

More thought must likewise be given to how we conceptualize "impact" when the term is applied to youth organizers and their achievements. All of our respondents, regardless of their stance toward the organization, agreed that PSU had influenced either policy decisions or the decision-making process in the district. However, close examination of their responses raises questions about how deeply entrenched social views of youth as pawns and subjects, rather than political actors and analysts, affects how adult stakeholders define the impact of youth organizing on educational policy. Regardless of their views on organizing, when asked to describe what, if any, impact PSU has had on educational policy, most of our respondents appeared to define "impact" in terms of whether the youth are listened to, respected, and granted attention. That is why respondents repeatedly pointed to media attention, flash mobs and ambitious public demonstrations, intensive single-issue focus, and presence at meetings as impact indicators. This tendency to define impact in terms of respectful attention may be positive for the group, because it means that PSU can focus on bringing light to issues, which it seems to do exceptionally well. Moreover, as Warren et al. (2011) found in their study of education organizing, the ultimate goal of

these organizers is not to collect “wins,” but instead to “build the power to be taken seriously in reform discussions and decision-making processes” (p. 228). Certainly, our data suggest that PSU has achieved this status. As one major civic leader in the city asserted, “They are taken as seriously as any other group. They’re not at all dismissed because they are children.”

However, defining impact in terms of respectful attention may also signify lower standards for youth in terms of what it means to be “successful” in the policy arena. “Having a voice” and securing a “place at the table” might mean that youth have made significant inroads into the establishment, but they might also mean youth are simply tolerated, even tokenized. Furthermore, as Schutz (2007) points out and, “As any experienced community organizer can tell you, . . . having a voice does not equal having power” (p. 9). Although PSU represents an undeniable voice in the conversation surrounding Philadelphia education, a central goal of youth organizing is to alter power relations, changing public perception of youth and elevating their own status (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Listen Inc., 2002; Youth Action, 1998). To meet this goal, youth must tackle deeply held beliefs about their capacities and bureaucratic structures that limit their access and silence their voices. More research is needed to illuminate how youth organizing for education reform simultaneously addresses topical controversies and battles issues of youth exclusion and dismissal from the larger political landscape.

## **Conclusion**

“Building power” is a popular term in the organizing literature, but it is also one that has eluded a precise definition. Certainly, educational stakeholders in Philadelphia view PSU as a powerful force. The youth of PSU have the ability to block traffic on a major city artery and to have their testimonies appear on the front page of the city’s newspaper. They can draw a crowd of hundreds and claim a seat at the table alongside a few key adult decision makers. Their power comes not only from these indicators, however, but also from a wide range of strategies, carefully deployed at the right moment with specific targets and goals in mind. Over its 15-year history, PSU has developed this broad repertoire of action and drawn strategically from it. As a result, the organization has had a profound impact on many of its youth members (Conner, 2011; Rosen, 2011) and on the Philadelphia education system, according to those who observe, manage, and participate in it.

These accomplishments are particularly striking given the complexities of educational systems and the well-known challenges of effecting educational change (Anyon, 2005; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Payne, 2008; Tyack & Cuban,

1995). School reform is notoriously complex, and change often proceeds exceedingly slowly or takes place superficially (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). For organizers, school reform has represented “a tough nut to crack” (Schutz, 2007). According to veteran community organizers, “School leadership often is more insulated and unresponsive than the leadership of other public institutions” (Mediratta et al., 2002, p. 18). There are so many constituents vying for the attention of policymakers that the voices of parents and students can be easily drowned out or forgotten. Nonetheless, the youth of PSU have found a way over the past 15 years to make their voices matter. They do not simply have a voice; they have “very powerful voices,” which they have raised to bring about positive systemic change in Philadelphia.

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