

*The*  
**Robert  
Bowne  
Foundation**

# Afterschool Matters

OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES

## **Community-Based Youth Organizations Negotiating Educational and Social Equity**

A CASE STUDY

**Sara Hill, Ed.D.**

SPRING 2004

# The Robert Bowne Foundation

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*The Robert Bowne Foundation publishes Afterschool Matters Occasional Papers twice a year. This peer-reviewed series provides a venue for publishing research that explores key issues in the theory and practice of afterschool programming, youth development, and learning during the non-school hours.*

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## AFTERSCHOOL MATTERS INITIATIVE

The Robert Bowne Foundation (RBF), seeking to have a long-term and substantive effect on the field of out-of-school education, launched several new initiatives to accomplish this mission. *Afterschool Matters* is one of the initiatives, the goals of which are to:

- Generate and disseminate research about community-based organizations serving youth during out-of-school hours
- Build a network of scholars studying community-based organizations serving youth
- Contribute to basic knowledge and the improvement of practice and policy in the area of community-based youth programs

## AFTERSCHOOL MATTERS/OCCASIONAL PAPERS

One of the projects of the Afterschool Matters Initiative is the journal *Afterschool Matters*, a national, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to promoting professionalism and scholarship in the field of afterschool education. The journal serves those involved in developing and running programs for youth during the out-of-school hours, in addition to those engaged in research and in shaping policy. Articles for the journal are solicited from the field, and a range of academic perspectives are considered along with personal or inspirational narratives and essays, book reviews, artwork, and photographs.

The RBF *Occasional Papers* is a peer-reviewed series published several times a year. The goal of the *Occasional Papers* is to provide a venue for publishing research that explores key issues and topics in the practice and theory of afterschool programming, youth development, and learning during the non-school hours. In addition, the *Occasional Papers* address key policy issues in the area of youth development. The intended audience for this series includes researchers, university staff, afterschool program managers and practitioners, and policy makers.

Prospective papers are solicited by the RBF.

Copies of both *Afterschool Matters* and the *Occasional Papers* are available on the RBF website, [www.robert-bownefoundation.org](http://www.robert-bownefoundation.org).

## RESEARCH GRANTS/RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

The RBF sponsors a national Research Grant competition as part of the ASM Initiative. Four grants of \$10,000 are awarded to support either original empirical research in or about community-based youth programs during the non-school hours or research syntheses or policy analyses of community-based youth programs. Recipients present on their work at a research roundtable at the end of the grant year.

Another program of the ASM Initiative is the RBF Research Fellowship. The Research Fellowship works with ten youth practitioners over the course of a year, teaching them to conduct research in their programs. Fellows participate in a three-day writing institute and present at a research roundtable at the end of the year.

For more information about the RBF Afterschool Matters Initiative, contact

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# Community-Based Youth Organizations Negotiating Educational and Social Equity

## A CASE STUDY

Sara Hill, Ed.D.

The Robert Bowne Foundation

### Executive Summary

This case study reveals how one community-based youth development organization in the northeastern United States advocated for social and educational equity for the low-income families it served by challenging the local school district's practice of referring low-income children of color to special education in disproportionate numbers. Because this community-based organization (CBO) is typical of many such youth-serving organizations, the case study shows how the assets CBOs bring to their communities can help them negotiate with schools to achieve greater social and educational equity for low-income families. The challenges and opportunities of school-CBO collaboration are outlined, with particular attention to the need to appropriate CBOs' strong, culturally competent relationships with their program participants.

It seemed as though when I got here all the minority kids were in special education, except for a few, and the teasing going on among the kids about those in special education, it was bad, they called it Aunt Jemima's Cabin.

*James<sup>1</sup>, staff member, Harmony Center Youth Program*

A greater percentage of black students are placed in special education programs than any other racial group. . . . [I]n predominantly white districts, almost one in every four black students is in special education, an enrollment rate 50 percent higher than that of white students.

*(Ladner & Hammons, 2001)*

On a chilly spring evening in late March, light snow dusted the grounds of the carefully groomed detached homes near the train station of Vanhold, an upscale suburban village. The sun had just set, and commuters getting off the train were jumping into their SUVs to speed home. Two blocks from the station, the lights of the Lutheran church were still on, a small sign on the door indicating that an unusual meeting was taking place in the church basement.

Twenty people sat around a long rectangular table covered by a green plastic tablecloth in the basement community room. Under harsh florescent lights, the sounds of basketballs echoed from the gym above their heads. Behind the table were a row of refreshments: cakes and cookies, tea and coffee. On the wall was a large sign listing the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Hung on other walls and partitions were children's art and poems about God. One corner of the basement was filled with toys, basketballs, and other paraphernalia.

A tall, well-dressed man was leading the meeting. A consultant hired by the Vanhold school district, his job was to conduct a study and make recommendations to the school district about how to comply with the requirements of a recent U.S. Department of



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Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) report. The OCR had investigated the school district's practices in referring children to special education. The report found that the enrollment of African-American and Hispanic students in special education was disproportionately high, with such children often being sent to the "most restrictive" settings in BOCES (the Board of Cooperative Educational Services), a vocational high school outside Vanhold. The school district had to redress its practice of over-referring children of color.

People at the table included two ministers, two rabbis, various concerned community members, a parent representative at one of the village's three elementary schools, a social worker at the middle school, and two directors of local community-based organizations: Parent Development Association, a drug and alcohol counseling and rehabilitation program, and Harmony Center, a small community organization located in the heart of the village's only public housing development. One of those sitting at the table was a parent whose children attended Harmony Center. Her eldest son had been classified as needing special education. The boy, now an honors student in high school, had been declass-

sified after a protracted battle with the Committee on Special Education, the group charged by the school district to review cases and make referrals.

The consultant described the results of focus groups he had recently conducted with village schoolchildren. "The African-American kids have a profound sense of disconnect," he began. "There's a long history of anger, frustration, and bad relations between the black kids and the school district. Although kids believe that there are teachers who care about their education, they say that quite a few of them are racist. The Latino kids feel that they are the subjects of stereotyping, like they're all seen as Mexicans, losers, and gang-bangers. They'd like other kids in the schools to experience what they've been experiencing, that they feel like outsiders, that there's been little attempt by the school to include them into the larger community." The consultant went on to explain that when he talked with the non-minority children, none of the kids noticed a difference between put-downs that included racial or ethnic slurs and other kinds of put-downs.

After he spoke, several people raised their hands to respond. One of them, the executive director of



Harmony Center, said, “You know, several of my kids were in those focus groups. They came back so excited about being able to talk about their situation. It’s sad that it takes something like this to happen to ask kids about their opinions and experiences.” The director of the Parent Development Association explained, “A lot of these assumptions about the children, they’re outrageous. One time I got all these phone calls from the school saying that one of my client’s children was in a gang because she was wearing a woven bracelet. When we asked the mother, she said that it just was a traditional Ecuadorian pattern. It had nothing to do with gangs.”

Another participant said, “This village is notorious. There are class issues here, it’s not just race. There’s a lot of resentment against the wealthy people that are moving in.” Several others chimed in, mostly with comments about the need to make the schools more accepting of diversity and different cultures. A rabbi cautioned, “I don’t think the answer is to hire more minority teachers. I don’t want to see a Balkanization of this village.” A school representative noted, “You know, it’s not just the minority kids that benefit. The upper-middle-class kids here are so isolated, they can benefit when they go out into the wider world if they have an understanding of other people’s cultures.” A parent complained, “My kids always got along with the minority kids in elementary school. Then in middle school, it was like the black kids didn’t want to be friends anymore. I don’t know why they acted like that.”

The group discussed various ways the schools could promote more interracial and interethnic understanding. The consultant suggested holding assemblies at school in which the Latino kids would get up on stage to describe their experiences as new immigrants. The meeting ended when the consultant had to leave to participate in a parent meeting at one of the village schools.

On the way to their cars, the directors of the two community organizations briefly talked together. “What a load of crap!” exclaimed one. “I refuse to go to another of these meetings where they talk about understanding each other. This is a civil rights issue, not a diversity issue.”

## THE VOICES AT THE TABLE

I observed this exchange at the end of a yearlong research project in which I was engaged at Harmony Center, one of the community-based organizations<sup>2</sup> (CBOs) in the community meeting I’ve just described.

The meeting is a small snapshot of a series of events involving many players and organizations. Its beginning is hard to determine—certainly many years before I came into the picture. The community meeting at the church took place after Harmony Center and other community agencies worked for at least six years to draw attention to the situation in which low-income African-American and Latino children were over-referred to special education.

## The CBO and its staff engaged the "missing voices" to negotiate social and educational equity for its constituents.

As I write about this event, I am struck by the disparity of responses. A clergy member expresses concern about “Balkanization,” indicating perhaps fear of ethnic conflict or resistance to hiring diverse school personnel. The parent representative is concerned, confused, and perhaps resentful of how minority children “change” when they enter middle school. One CBO director is alarmed that her children are seen in stereotypes, the other that children seldom have the opportunity to voice their opinions in a public forum. One of the most outstanding differences is between the viewpoint of the consultant, who’s concerned with promoting interethnic understanding, and that of the CBO directors, who interpret the OCR report and subsequent mandate quite differently—as a civil rights issue.

Of note are voices missing in this tale: parents whose children attend the CBOs and had been placed in special education. They’re missing primarily because such parents did not show up at the community meeting. The one parent who did attend did not speak.

This paper, the result of a study of one community-based organization, demonstrates how the CBO served as a vehicle of social change. It did so by bridging home and school and by mediating among a variety of community institutions, particularly addressing the problematic relationship between school and community. The CBO and its staff engaged the “missing voices” to negotiate social and educational equity for its constituents. It identified a problem that affected its participants, addressed the problem strategically, and negotiated for—and sometimes achieved—institutional change.

In analyzing the CBO's intervention, I will attempt to reconstruct the complex meanings that parents and staff attached to the situation of over-referral, sketching their history of problematic relations with the public schools and other community institutions as a backdrop. This case study provides, first, the opportunity to understand some of the broader issues low-income youth and families encounter on the road to educational equity and, second, a springboard for addressing some of the larger institutional issues in the relationships between schools and communities.

I will discuss how CBOs in general, as critical community institutions, can play a special role in school-community relationships. I believe that more effective employment of CBOs as community partners has the potential to establish "creative partnerships" (Heath, 2001, p. 11) with long-lasting effects. Finally, I will identify policy challenges and suggest potential directions for change.

## **METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design for my study used an ethnographic approach, a "theoretically driven, systematic approach to the study of everyday life of a social group" (Zaharlick & Green, 1991 p. 206). The study took place at a small community-based organization located in a public housing development in a suburb of a large city in the northeastern United States. The fieldwork for the ethnography spanned one year, from August 1999 through August 2000. I choose this site through "purposeful sampling" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), that is, rather than generalizing to a broad population, I wanted to "maximize discovery of the . . . patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 82).

While every organization is unique, I selected the research site because it demonstrated salient features of, and a common heritage with, many small CBOs providing afterschool services, as described by Robert Halpern (2002). I had become familiar with such organizations by working, over the course of five years, as a staff developer for two different nonprofit organizations, both of which provided professional development and technical assistance to community-based agencies providing afterschool services. Another important criterion for selection was that I was invited; the executive director of the agency where I conducted my research welcomed my presence.

In an ethnographic approach to research, the goal of composing a "trustworthy" or credible portrait of the research site is accomplished through multi-method data collection (Erlandson et al., 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). My data collection methods consisted of regular observation of program activities, particularly of the afterschool program's homework help session, but also of staff and community meetings, as well as other events that included children, staff, and parents at the center.

At the executive director's request, I ran a small literacy group twice a week during the school year for children who were struggling with reading and writing, as well as an additional reading group for fourth-grade children during the summer of 2000. Facilitating these groups and engaging with youth and parents provided additional data. I conducted unstructured and semi-structured interviews with CBO teaching and administrative staff, children, parents, community members, and school staff. In some cases, I interviewed a subject more than once; several interviews took place in participants' homes. I also collected a variety of documents, including photographs, student work, forms, and agency publications and records.

While I was an "outsider" to the ethnic, geographic, and income community of participants in this center (and would always, to some degree, remain so), I moved slowly, over the course of the year, closer to the "insider" end of the continuum. First of all, I had worked in afterschool programs, one of which was also based in public housing, as both a volunteer tutor and a staff member, so I was familiar with this kind of organization. Facilitating a reading and writing group at the center helped me become a quasi staff member. I also met regularly with the executive director and with the program director, who provided a peer debriefing on the data I was collecting and identified some of the key issues at the center. One of these issues became my central focus.

As I observed events and activities through the program cycles of an academic year, I discerned both routine and outstanding events. Extended time and familiarity with the site and its issues enabled me to identify "cultural themes" (Spradley, 1979). In the course of data collection, I recorded what I came to view as "critical incidents," events that highlight "the normal operation of the organization or contrast . . . with it" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 103). One such critical incident was the publication of the OCR study mentioned in the vignette

above. The ensuing actions and reactions of staff and parents of the CBO determined the focus of my subsequent data collection and analysis around the theme of educational and social inequity.

I organized and analyzed data by tracing the history of relationships between the participants in the study and community institutions, in particular public schools. I also explored the perceptions and belief systems constructed by the participants and staff of the CBO, their “common assumption[s] about the nature of their experience” (Spradley, 1979, p. 186). I paid a great deal of attention to their viewpoints because I recognized that perceptions and the construction of meaning have serious and profound implications for notions of identity, belonging, and membership (Lave & Wenger, 1991), notions that have subsequent implications for participation in public institutions.

Consistent with ethnography, my research questions were broad at the beginning of the study, eventually narrowing to a specific focus. My final research questions addressed the following:

- What meanings do participants construct regarding referrals to special education?
- What roles do the CBO and its staff assume in relation to the theme of educational (in)equity, in particular referrals to special education?
- How does participants’ involvement in the issue of educational (in)equity create opportunities for teaching, learning, and assessment?
- What role do the CBO and its staff assume and what actions do they take in regard to educational (in)equity, in particular referrals to special education?

## ABOUT HARMONY CENTER

Background on my research site, which I call Harmony Center in this paper, is important to understanding the CBO’s role in negotiating educational equity for its participants.

### History

Harmony Center, a comparatively small CBO with an average of 65 children attending daily during the year of my study, is located in Vanhold, a suburb of a large city in the Northeast. At the time of my study, Vanhold had 28,578 residents, most of whom, 82.5 percent, were of European descent, with African Americans making up 2.8 percent, Asian/Pacific Islanders 10.9 percent, and Hispanics, the fastest-growing group, 13.2 percent of the population (U.S. Census, 2000).



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Vanhold was a wealthy village with a median household income of \$87,983, in the top 2 percent in the nation and the top 4 percent in the state. Houses at the low end of the market began at \$300,000 and, at the high end, at \$1 million or more. According to the state’s 2000 School Report Card, the school district spent \$15,682 per child, compared to the state average of \$9,810 per child. The drop-out rate was 0.7

Sweet Cove and Waterside Homes, where Harmony Center is located, are the only subsidized housing for low-income residents in the village. They thus create a pocket of low-income and working class families surrounded by expensive residences, country clubs, and golf courses.

percent compared to the state average of 3.5 percent. Needless to say, the majority of students scored well on statewide exams.

Sweet Cove and Waterside Homes, where Harmony Center is located, are the only subsidized



housing for low-income residents in the village. They thus create a pocket of low-income and working class families surrounded by expensive residences, country clubs, and golf courses. One hundred percent of the residents are African American. Residents in this subsidized housing must earn less than the federal poverty index, which at the time of my research was \$24,000 for a family of four. The average income for a family in Waterside and Sweet Cove was \$17,000 (U.S. Census, 2000). The residents were hit hard by welfare reform, whose requirements were difficult to achieve; lack of public transportation made it difficult for residents to get to work or to training and education programs.

Many of the families who reside at Sweet Cove and Waterside Homes have been in the area a long time, in some cases as long as a century, drawn there by domestic and farm work. An interesting source of information about these families came from the local village library, which in 1983 conducted an oral history, whose materials I consulted in the library's community history room. According to these sources and to the staff of Harmony Center, many of the descendants of the first African-American families to arrive at Vanhold still live in Waterside and Sweet Cove apartments or the immediate area; many participate in Harmony Center activities. While the area has always had a sizable new immigrant population, primarily from southern Europe, in recent years other immigrant groups, mainly from Central and South America, have moved into the area surrounding Waterside and Sweet Cove Homes and have assumed many of the domestic or agricultural jobs once held by African-American workers, who moved into semi-skilled labor, or, in some cases, dropped out of the labor market altogether.

Harmony Center began with the efforts of a village resident, a president of a philanthropic women's organization that was established before World War I. This organization's mission was to address public health, a need brought on by epidemics of diphtheria and polio, which, according to historical records at the local library, hit the immigrant and small African-American communities in Vanhold hardest. The organization hired visiting nurses and social workers; later, during the Depression, it provided employment training in factory-oriented fields such as sewing.

In the 1940s, according to the village library sources, the president of the organization convinced the village to donate land to construct subsidized housing, which became Waterside and Sweet Cove apartments, and specified that a piece of land be reserved

for a community center. The community center was needed to provide daycare and afterschool care for the children of the large number of single-parent households that resulted during and after World War II.

### **Staffing**

As is typical in afterschool programs (Seppanen, DeVries, & Seligman, 1993; Halpern, 1999), staff members at Harmony Center, historically and at the time of my study, were primarily part time, and, because of funding constraints, not well paid. Harmony Center's staff included a program coordinator, James, who was a special education teacher at a public school in another county during the day. The executive director, Donna, and the program director, Malik, worked full time but, as is also typical of afterschool program staff (Merry, 2000; Halpern, 1999), did not have educational backgrounds. Donna, who began at the organization as a part-time bookkeeper, had been trained in community advocacy. She was eventually asked by the board of directors to stay on as full-time executive director. At the time of the study, she had been at the agency for five years. Malik was also a long-term staff member, having been at the agency two years longer than Donna. To supplement staff, community members and parents volunteered to help during activities, and nine junior part-time staff of high school and college age worked at the center to provide tutoring. At the time of the study, all the junior staff currently attended or had once attended Harmony Center's youth programs.

### **Programming and Activities**

As is also characteristic of afterschool youth programs generally (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Seppanen, DeVries, & Seligson, 1993), Harmony Center sponsored a variety of offerings, including arts, recreation, educational enrichment, and career exploration. Afterschool programs have typically geared services either toward intervention to prevent such behaviors as teen pregnancy or toward the broader-based goals of positive youth development (Pittman, 1991; Pittman & Cahill, 1991), encompassing more normative outcomes including social, emotional, civic, artistic, and intellectual growth (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997).

Activities at Harmony Center fell toward the middle of the continuum between prevention and youth development, providing a mix of both kinds of programming. A sample prevention activity was a "straight talk" group that addressed drug use prevention and unplanned pregnancy. Youth leadership and community service were



United Neighborhood Houses Citywide Teen Council members from Goddard Riverside Community Center

also important emphases in Harmony Center's programming. Older youth were encouraged to participate in the Youth Council—a group that plays an advisory role with the executive director and board—as well as to tutor younger children. Youth from Harmony Center were also engaged in a community clean-up campaign with youth from a local synagogue, testified at public countywide hearings, and participated on local councils and committees. Lastly, although Harmony Center provided plenty of activities and ample opportunity to work with adults, it also gave children unstructured time in which they could simply be children together.

Besides programs for youth, the center provided resources for parents and community residents such as family counseling, housing and education advocacy, emergency food and rent, and other social services. Donna, the executive director, intentionally developed relationships with other community organizations in order to be able to provide these resources. For example, local churches used Harmony Center for health and employment fairs; the housing administration of Waterside and Sweet Cove Homes and the local school board have both convened their board meetings there.

The intended outcome of Harmony Center's programming was to get the children out of the housing complex: to break their isolation and marginalization and to help them explore the wider world. As Donna explained:

A role for Harmony Center is transition. Not so much to get kids out, as to mentally get out. If they decide that [this village] is their home and they want to live here for the rest of their lives, and they've made good choices where they want to go in life, I'm happy. So they don't necessarily have to leave the area . . . or leave Waterside or Sweet Cove Homes, but they should know that there's another world, and go out and explore it, and then when they say, "This is my home," I'm happy with that. (personal communication, November 1, 1999)

It is important to note that, at the time of the study and historically, Harmony Center emphasized academic achievement. Center staff and parents articulated a cultural value that viewed educational achievement as key for upward social mobility. In addition,

local public schools were pressuring students to achieve high scores on standardized tests. Harmony Center celebrated when children received good grades in school, posting children's tests and reports on bulletin boards. Staff spent a great deal of time helping youth with college entrance, giving them help with their college applications, and taking them on visits to local colleges. At times, the agency subsidized college

**Adult residents had experienced village schools firsthand. Many had negative experiences, and some believed the experiences of their children were a continuation of their own educational and social exclusion.**

application fees, books, and other college-related costs; its involvement with college acceptance and attendance at times went beyond what many programs would attempt. Janet, one of Harmony Center's graduates, described how Harmony Center supported her college attendance:

The one thing that I'll always remember is when I came back from college pregnant . . . they offered me employment and helped me get back to school. I went to school freshman year, and in May I came home seven months pregnant. I had my son in August, and I needed employment, and I came and talked with Donna and she gave me employment, and then it came to returning back to school and I had all this paperwork and she helped me, and my room deposit, financially she helped me out. Now I'm ready to return back to school in January. (personal communication, February 13, 1999)

## **A TROUBLED HISTORY OF COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS**

Waterside and Sweet Cove Homes are located in an upscale suburban area. At the time of this study and historically, there was no public transportation, and few residents had their own cars. Cabs were available, but the fare was prohibitive to low-income residents. No local supermarket—no shopping venue of any kind—was located within walking distance of the subsidized housing. Participants suggested that this geo-

graphic isolation was conscious on the part of the designers of Waterside and Sweet Cove Homes—an intentional marginalization of residents along lines of race and class.

Malik, Harmony Center's program director, explained how he first came to perceive the marginalization:

It was my first day [working at Harmony Center], and I was in front of the train station, and I asked for directions. I said, "Can you tell me where Waterside Road is?" And the lady looked at me, and she started laughing and said, "The first or the second?" I said, not knowing, "The first one." She starts laughing again and says, "No, oh no, sir. I think you're looking for the second one." Then, being the person I am, I said, "No, I want the first one." 'Cause it was some reason why she thought that I wanted the second one and not the first one. So, to make a long story short, I walk down the street and I see what she meant by "the first one." It's where all these beautiful houses were, you know, and people of my . . . color were not there. And if I was to walk down that street, I'm pretty sure I would have gotten stopped, or asked where am I going or who am I looking for, you know, and the second Waterside Road was where my people were, my people being African American, and they were centrally located in one area in the village. And I'll never forget that, it was the first time. So right then and there I knew it was going to be a struggle working out here. (personal communication, November 16, 1999)

## **Relationships with Community Institutions**

One example of tense community relations is the problem that emerged between, on the one hand, parents and staff of Harmony Center and, on the other hand, the large mental health institution the school district used to refer children for assessment and testing. Staff and parents claimed that their children were automatically labeled by the mental health institution as having learning deficits and mental problems. These perceptions are consistent with the findings of a national study (Osher, Woodruff, & Simms, 2001) showing that children of color, particularly males, were disproportionately diagnosed as being mentally ill. In response to participants' concern, Harmony Center contracted with an independent psychiatric social worker to assess and work with their children and families.

The relationship of families and youth from Waterside and Sweet Cove Homes with local law enforcement was also highly problematic. Donna explained, “If there’s a problem at the high school, the police know about it that afternoon. The principal picks up the phone and calls the police chief. Most likely they’re next-door neighbors” (personal communication, October 3, 1999). In one incident, called the “Jellybean Riot,” police were called in response to a disturbance on the school bus involving children throwing jellybeans. Several children from Waterside and Sweet Cove Homes were suspended from school. Parents and staff of Harmony Center complained that their children were targeted for punishment and suspension, whereas other children were not. In response, Harmony Center held a community meeting at which parents, school personnel, and police discussed the incident.

### Relationships with Schools

The history of troubled relationships between the residents of Waterside and Sweet Cove Homes and the larger Vanhold community extends to the local schools. Adult residents had experienced village schools firsthand. Many had negative experiences, and some believed the experiences of their children were a

“They’ll give academic reports that are totally impossible. They’ll say that our children are reading at the first-grade level, and this is a sixth grader, and I know this kid can read. And I let them give them their reports, but I also give them my findings.”

continuation of their own educational and social exclusion. As one mother, Wendy, whose son attended Harmony Center, explained:

We had a black principal at the high school, and he came straight up and said, “They really don’t want you here, and I’m being honest.” He says, “As a teacher and also as a black man, to let you understand that if it was up to them, you would not be here. A lot of kids here, the parents have money; you guys are just being stupid.” And I understood what he was saying, because we were clowning, we weren’t going to class, and knew that we could be A+ students, honor roll students, and he used to say, “What are you doing? What are you thinking? You’re giving them a reason to not want

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you. You're giving them a reason to put you out." (personal communication, September 19, 2000)

Parents believed that being "put out" was embedded in an institutional process that, in effect, tracked or "fingered" children and created obstacles to keep parents from making informed decisions. Donna explained:

A lot of the children in special education are there because their parents were. And the major issue is that you're dealing with the same administration that had the uncle, aunt, or . . . the 20-year-old sibling. And now he's in third grade, and they've had the kid fingered since first or second grade. And these accusations were being made without any evaluation, and they were getting away with it because they would have their committee on special education meet, and knew that the majority of these parents weren't going to show up because they didn't know how to defend themselves, and everybody would sit at this table and make a decision for this child with no representative for the parent. (personal communication, November 3, 1999)

Staff of Harmony Center historically positioned themselves as advocates for the families, at times in an adversarial role. In an interview, the principal of one of the elementary schools told me that he didn't want "an Al Sharpton" in his office. Donna was sensitive to—and angered by—this perception, believing she was

**Parents and staff of Harmony Center viewed education both as a means to achieve upward social mobility by breaking out of the isolation of Waterside and Sweet Cove and, simultaneously, as a mechanism that kept their children from achieving.**

often viewed as militant because she challenged the school on issues of concern to the families her agency serves. She said that gaining respect from the school district and engaging in a collaborative relationship had been an uphill battle. She said in an interview:

We have to have collaboration. They have to work with us. We have worked hard to maintain a certain respect, to collaborate with the school district . . . for them to respect the community. They hide the beautiful parts of our children and describe

these little monsters that I don't know what they're talking about! And they'll give academic reports that are totally impossible. They'll say that our children are reading at the first-grade level, and this is a sixth grader, and I know this kid can read. And I let them give them their reports, but I also give them my findings. I say, "Let's do an outside evaluation. There's no need to sit down and discuss anything." And then they get upset because they want the parents to sign off on things. (personal communication, February 19, 2000)

The relationship between Harmony Center parents and the schools had become, at the time of the study, at best suspicious and at worst hostile. Parents believed that school personnel neither understood children from the housing development nor provided them with an adequate education. They claimed that schools were responding negatively to children's behavior, though what the children needed was early intervention and academic support when they first began having problems in school. Parents clearly articulated the view that the placement of children from Waterside and Sweet Cove in special education was rooted in both racism and classism. As Wendy shared in one of her interviews, "They put kids [out] just because of where they came from, not because of who you are and what's going on in your life, but because of where you live" (personal communication, September 9, 2000).

Alfred, the chair of Harmony Center's board of directors, articulated similar perceptions:

I know that over a few years there have been African-American kids that have been pushed aside. If you fool around you get into trouble, and your choice is to go to BOCES [the most restrictive setting for special education]. I think the teachers might be uncomfortable dealing with black children. There's such a small percentage of black children in this village, that if they act up, it's like, "This is how we're going to show them they can't do this." And this is what has been expressed to me over the years by parents. (personal communication, February 29, 2000)

**EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Parents and staff of Harmony Center viewed education both as a means to achieve upward social mobility by breaking out of the isolation of Waterside and Sweet



Cove and, simultaneously, as a mechanism that kept their children from achieving. One complaint of parents and staff of Harmony Center was that children were all districted to one elementary school, rather than being spread out to the two schools within walking distance of each other. When staff and parents of Harmony Center complained about this practice, a member of the local school board informed them that the practice was instituted in the belief that children of color would feel more comfortable if they were all together. Parents and staff, however, found this practice detrimental, limiting children's exposure to, and ability to interact with, others from a range of backgrounds; they thought it was, in essence, another form of marginalization.

Parents and staff viewed the assignment of children to special education, especially in out-of-district or restricted settings such as BOCES, as an additional institutional structure designed to marginalize Waterside and Sweet Cove families. They saw placement in special education as just one more means to exclude children and to deny them a good education that would ultimately lead to a better future. Many parents and participants of Harmony Center were convinced that racial profiling was used in selecting children for special education, which therefore became a means of isolating and stigmatizing children based not only on their race but also on the fact that they were low-income and resided in public housing. Even when parents chose to send their children to special education, they were convinced that they had not received adequate information or been included in the decision-making process.

## **A TALE OF TWO MOMS**

The issue of Vanhold school district's placement of children in special education is much more complex than simply determining whether children from Harmony Center were being "fingered" or "put out." Some children, indeed, need extra help and attention. To probe this issue in greater depth, I talked to two mothers whose children attend Harmony Center and were placed in special education. Keisha and Wendy had differing viewpoints on their children's placement, viewpoints I wanted to explore in order to further understand the meanings that parents brought to their children's referrals.

Keisha had allowed two of her children to be placed in special education. She had a fairly positive, though mixed, assessment of her and her children's

experience with special education referral and placement. Wendy, on the other hand, did not have a positive experience. Her son Roger had been sent to BOCES, the most restrictive special education environment. She had worked for years to get him removed from BOCES, eventually getting him placed back in the local high school.

**Keisha called her son Damien into the room and asked him who else was in his special education classes. His list of participants verified her observation that they were all from the public housing and were all children of color.**

I interviewed both parents to gain a sense of the history of their children's placement in special education, to ascertain what meanings they assigned to the referrals, and to draw out their reasons for keeping their child in special education or removing the child. I also asked how they negotiated the school system, what strategies they learned along the way, and, finally, how they used Harmony Center and its staff.

## **School Experiences**

Both parents had attended Vanhold schools. Keisha dropped out of high school when she became pregnant with her first child, though she later achieved her GED. She told me that she had needed extra help with her reading, was "shy," and had problems at home, but that school staff did not recognize or acknowledge her needs. The lack of help she received as a child helps in understanding her motives for allowing her children to be placed in special education.

I think I needed what my children have, because I didn't have that. I was real shy, I never raised my hand, and that was one of the problems that they always talk about with my kids, especially Sharon. She never raises her hand, she talks real low when she's called on, and that was exactly how I was. I hated Social Studies and English because we'd have these worksheets for comprehension. I hated them because I'd have to read them twelve times before I understood. I still do!

I had a hard childhood, and it was very hard learning in school. I couldn't focus. See, now-



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days, teachers see that, you can't focus, they automatically call your mother. When I was in school, my mother never got called. They just passed you through, you didn't have special nothing. (personal communication, April 14, 2000)

Wendy, too, had a problematic school experience. Though she graduated from high school, she maintained negative feelings about her education, her teachers, and the school district. Wendy is the parent who reported above that her high school principal had said that the village "didn't want" the kids from the housing projects. She prefaced the remark by saying:

The people of [Vanhold] pay too much money for their kids, so it's like, "Why do we have to deal with those people? They're not paying any money." That's what they think. We pay taxes, too: property taxes, school taxes. I went through the school district. I always thought it was a good school district; if you are able to achieve, if you can grasp whatever they throw at you, if you can handle it, you'll do fine. (personal communication, September 19, 2000)

The parents' school experiences helped me understand and frame their subsequent actions in regard to their children's placement in special education. Keisha viewed special education as a way to gain services for her children that she had lacked as a student. Wendy had managed to "handle" her negative experience in the Vanhold school district and graduate from high school, but her son could not, and Wendy subsequently spent time and effort finding ways to provide her son with an adequate education.

### Experience of Structured Inequity

Wendy and Keisha's remarks support the substantial body of literature that describes and analyzes the ways in which institutions, particularly schools, create social segregation and structure student failure (Fine, 1991; Ladner & Hammons, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2002; McDermott, 1993; Ogbu, 1978). The reasons for this phenomenon can range from lack of cultural competency on the part of school personnel in the best case to, in the worst case, institutional racism.

Both parents recognized the social segregation involved in their children's referrals. Wendy openly

stated, “They don’t want to be bothered with the kids here because, if it was up to them, they’d push them all out” (personal communication, September 9, 2000). Keisha also viewed placement in special education as an attempt to segregate children based on race and class. During one of our interviews, she called her son Damien into the room and asked him who else was in his special education classes. His list of participants verified her observation that they were all from the public housing and were all children of color.

A key element in school failure is that school personnel fail to recognize the skills and abilities students demonstrate outside the school setting. Both parents I interviewed experienced a split between how school personnel observed and assessed their children and how they themselves observed their children in other contexts. Keisha said that the school psychologist was:

... calling me a lot at work last year, and telling me how fidgety [my son] is, fidgety all the time. You know boys are fidgety! They’re totally different than girls. I’ve had three girls and three boys, you know, so I know the difference between the boys and the girls. They’re completely different; you have to treat them differently. And then each girl is different and each boy is different. Anyway, I told her over the phone, “I think you’re taking it a little bit to an extreme,” because I didn’t see it like her. The way she was seeing it was that it was completely out of control, and he’s not like that at all. (personal communication, April 13, 2000)

Wendy also experienced this split:

I used to see a lot of things in my son, when he was in pre-K; they used to write things that I didn’t agree with, that he wasn’t doing things up to par. He started very young; he’ll always be the youngest in his class. Things he was doing at home they were saying he couldn’t do at school. He was riding a two-wheel bike at the age of three. They said he couldn’t ride a tricycle at three. (Personal communication, September 9, 2000)

The dichotomy between the views of the teachers and those of the parents created a situation in which the parents had to reconcile two conflicting sets of perceptions and expectations. Their ultimate response was a sense of betrayal. They viewed the school system or specific school staff as, at best, lacking good faith toward their children. As Wendy explained, “They all claimed to be on my side in the beginning, because they

wanted me to feel secure with them, believe them that they were doing the right thing for my child and that they were going to help me. That was to build up my trust” (personal communication, September 9, 2000). Wendy experienced other contradictory messages:

When we had a meeting, the teacher would say one thing, another teacher would say another, and then when it came time to have the evaluation meetings, then everything was negative. They’d just change everything around. “He’s not doing this, he’s lacking in this, he’s having spurts of that, he got violent today, he was out of control yesterday, this, that, and the other, he’s not keeping up with his work, he shuts down.” I say, “When I asked you this on Monday, you didn’t say anything like this.” And they said, “Well, we thought we had it under control.” (personal communication, April 13, 2000)

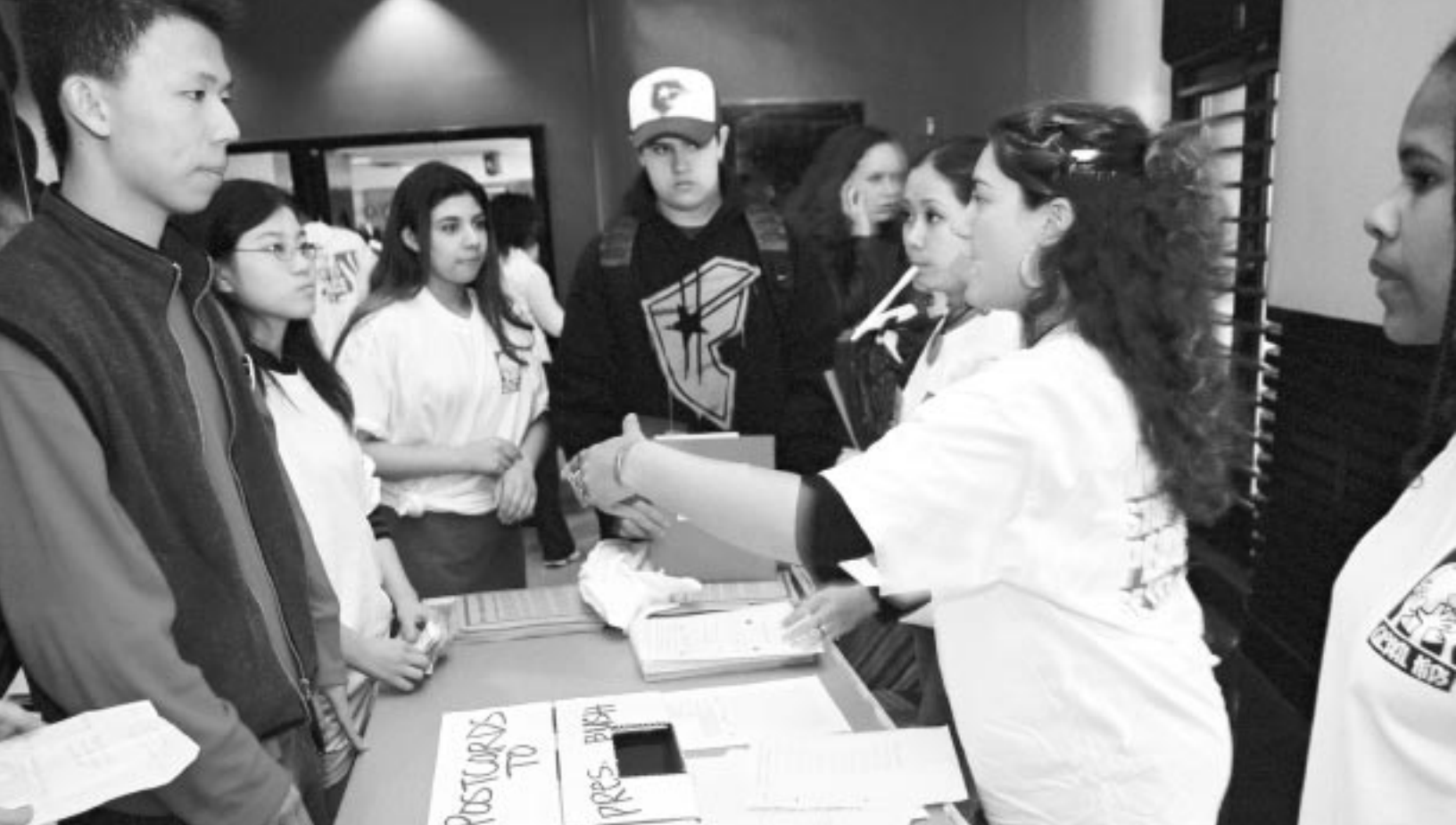
The contradictory messages the parents received about their children fueled their perception that school personnel did not understand the totality of their children—that school staff didn’t understand the children or, worse, that they saw only the deficits and failed to

**The contradictory messages the parents received about their children fueled their perception that school personnel did not understand the totality of their children—that school staff didn’t understand the children or, worse, that they saw only the deficits and failed to see children’s strengths and abilities.**

see children’s strengths and abilities. These parents believed that because their children could not perform at the expected academic level, and because they did not receive adequate intervention and remediation, their behavior at school suffered. Wendy and Keisha believed that the school was focusing on and punishing children’s behavior rather than responding adequately to children’s academic and emotional needs.

### **Construction of Meaning**

Both parents had complex and at times conflicting feelings regarding their children’s special education placements. Wendy’s son had been diagnosed as having atten-



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tion deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She exclaimed to me, “I still don’t understand ADHD. How it becomes what it is. What is it? A chemical imbalance? That doesn’t work for me. I read a million books. Trying to grasp all of that, everyone has different [interpretations]. It’s overwhelming after a while” (personal communication, September 9, 2000). Wendy’s son was, at the time of the study, taking Ritalin, but she said that she was “weaning” him off it. She mentioned several times during an interview that she believed her son had some kind of learning difficulty, such as dyslexia, but had been unable to get him tested. While recognizing that her son has a problem, she also said that he was not being challenged at school and that teachers “weren’t doing their jobs.” After many years of struggling with this issue, she eventually enlisted the help of Harmony Center to remove her son from special education.

For Keisha, the issue was also complicated by her reaction to a possible diagnosis of ADHD for her son Damien. She viewed putting Damien on drugs such as Ritalin as anathema. Associating medication with drug abuse, a rampant ill in the housing complex, she went so far as to fill out a survey incorrectly to ensure that her son did not receive the diagnosis of ADHD. On the other hand, she viewed placement in special education as an opportunity to get extra help for her children, who would also gain other benefits such as

smaller classes. She told me that accessing extra services and additional attention were the two main reasons she had kept her children in special education. She exclaimed, “My daughter reads better than all of us!” and proudly noted that her daughter had been mainstreamed into the middle school. While she acknowledged the problem of social segregation, she had decided that the benefits of special education placement outweighed the drawbacks.

Wendy and Keisha shared a common expectation of school and school personnel. They both perceived social segregation by class and race in the way their children were referred to and placed in special education by the school district. Both were conscious that children of color were over-represented in special education, and both viewed the motivations of school personnel with skepticism. They believed that their children were inadequately assessed because they saw the children performing differently, at home and in other social contexts, from what school personnel had described. The primary difference between the two parents was their reasons for either keeping their children in or removing them from special education.

### Uses of Harmony Center

Wendy’s decision to remove Roger from special education was a long-term process. Over the years, she had



visited Harmony Center, observed the work of its staff, and developed informal relationships with staff members. Because Wendy was reserved about disclosing her son Roger's experiences, Donna said that she initially "tried to equip Wendy with as much information as I could for her to attend the committee on special education meetings" on her own. Wendy attended the meetings but was at a loss because she wasn't sure whether her son really needed to be in special education. As Donna said, "She was mixed up, I could tell in conversations with her, but, when she saw other children being mainstreamed, that became an overwhelming aim for her" (personal communication, February 19, 2000).

Wendy's decision to trust Donna was spurred by that fact that Wendy had become frustrated by working on her own and realized that she needed the help of someone more knowledgeable. Wendy had observed Donna's "success rate" of getting children mainstreamed, and wanted the same for her son.

Wendy: I've watched Donna give support to other people, and I don't want this to sound crazy or slang, but Donna always kept it real. So, I went to her and said, "This is what I'm dealing with." . . . And she let out some air, it was just like, "Here we go again. Here's another one." She told me what I needed to do.

Sara: Meaning she had worked with other parents who had similar experiences?

Wendy: Yes, or other parents who had their hands tied and didn't know what to do, or who had kids in the BOCES program and didn't know what it was about. She was a support, because you go into those meetings and they tell you you have a parent advocate, on your behalf, or you can have whoever you want in there. Sometimes I thought that the parent advocate was actually there for the school. They wouldn't say much. And they knew more about it, because nine out of ten they had kids who were in BOCES for a long time and they were supposed to be . . . supposed to make you understand or help you understand, but they never did that. (interview transcript, September 19, 2000)

When Wendy eventually began using Harmony Center staff as a resource to help remove her son from BOCES, Donna gave her information about her rights and explained the processes and procedures.

Wendy: As far as them really explaining it to me, 'cause there were a lot of things that I didn't know, then I would have to come to Donna.

Sara: So, she would explain things to you?

Wendy: Yeah. Or if they sent me something, and they would ask for whatever, any type of testing they had to do with my son, of course I had to sign a consent. When they would give me a piece of paper and say, "Sign this. This is for testing, blah blah blah," and [the school psychologist] would explain to me what it is, or part of what it is, and not give me the whole story, I would come to Donna and say, "Should I sign this? 'Cause I really don't know." And being that she'd been through it with other parents, and she knows what's right, and what my rights are and what I don't need to sign, so she would say, "Go ahead, this is testing to see what level he's on." (interview transcript, September 19, 2000)

**Harmony Center played a major role in acknowledging parent perceptions, validating parents' assessment of their children, advocating for a more appropriate and equitable education for the children, and providing supportive social and academic services.**

Having eventually convinced the high school principal to accept Roger back into the district, Wendy used other staff at Harmony Center, primarily Malik, the program director, as a surrogate parent for her son. She did this even though, she said, her partner was an involved parent in the home. Malik was available during the afterschool hours to take children to sporting events; he provided guidance, discipline, and encouragement throughout the week. Malik slowly developed a positive relationship with Roger and increasingly allowed him to assume more responsibility at Harmony Center.

While Keisha didn't use Harmony Center staff to remove her children from special education, she extensively used the center's other support services over the years. For example, during the time that Sharon, Keisha's older daughter, was in special education during elementary school, she was also meeting with a social worker hired by Harmony Center for one-on-one counseling after school. The social worker helped Sharon with both her reading and her socialization



skills. Donna expressed the belief that this interaction, spanning a two-year period, was highly instrumental in helping Sharon move ahead both academically and socially. Keisha also used Harmony Center to access services when she was unemployed and behind in rent. When she was ill, Keisha asked Donna to attend parent-teacher meetings at the school in her place to find out how the children were doing and to be her representative at the special education committee.

In the interplay between families and schools, Harmony Center played a major role in acknowledging parent perceptions, validating parents' assessment of their children, advocating for a more appropriate and equitable education for the children, and providing supportive social and academic services. In addition, Harmony Center staff served as what Merry (2000) calls a "primary support," filling in at times as surrogate parents and helping to maintain family stability by providing other support services. Harmony

**Harmony Center was able to play a key role because of its history of community advocacy and because its staff was intimately familiar with the Waterside and Sweet Cove community and its history and culture.**

Center staff served both parents and their children, maintaining relationships as mentors, guides, and mediators. They helped parents negotiate systems and served as what Moll, Tapia, and Whitmore (1993) refer to as critical "funds of knowledge."

### **HARMONY CENTER'S ADVOCACY EFFORTS AND EFFECTS IN THE OCR INVESTIGATION**

The issue of special education referrals and placements came to a head in the spring of 2000 with the publication of the findings of Office for Civil Rights' (OCR) study of Vanhold school district. The OCR report confirmed Harmony Center participants' beliefs and experiences, creating a sea change in the relationships among parents of the housing development, staff of Harmony Center, and the local school district.

Calling on the OCR to investigate the placement of children in special education was part of the tradition of Harmony Center's community involvement to address social and educational inequity. Staff recognized parents' anger and frustration with the school

district and saw that there was indeed a truth behind parents' perceptions. Donna, along with staff from another local CBO, first approached the state education department in 1994, but the department was unresponsive. The two directors then approached the OCR, collaborating with two other local social service agencies serving public housing residents whose clients had similar experiences with over-referral to special education. At the time OCR began its investigation, the groups were considering filing a class action lawsuit.

OCR acts when an individual or a group initiates a formal complaint by filling out a "discrimination complaint form." Class (as opposed to individual) complaints are those of a large group of people affected by a discriminatory practice. Once a complaint is filed, OCR is mandated to resolve it within 180 days of filing. In addition to responding to complaints, OCR conducts periodic compliance reviews of entities that receive federal money. Reviews shift to focus on different equity issues, such as gender, race, disability, or special education.

In the case of Vanhold, OCR conducted a compliance review, which may have been initiated by the local office of OCR because of the complaints. When conducting a compliance review, OCR looks for "red flags," which, in the case of racial discrimination in special education, is the number of minority students in the district compared to the number in special education. This figure is then compared with statewide and national figures.

Vanhold was found to have a disproportionate number of minority students in special education. The school district had to comply with a long and detailed list of requirements to redress the situation. They had to document, for example, the total number of students receiving intervention, the length and type of intervention, the number of successful interventions, the rationale for all special education referrals, the types of services each special education student received, the length of time each student remained in special education, and the exit and mobility rates to more or less restrictive environments. In addition, according to the OCR report, the school district was required to "monitor and analyze the reasons for the disproportionate number of black and Hispanic students in special education." Based on this analysis, the district had to make "any necessary and appropriate modifications to referral and identification criteria." Finally, the school district was required to provide training for teachers in response to any changes made in school referral policy and procedures.



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When I discussed the case of the Vanhold school district with an OCR officer, I put forward the perception I had heard mentioned by parents and staff that BOCES created obstacles to keep children from being mainstreamed out of special education and placed back into the district. The officer, an African-American woman, responded, “BOCES teachers are convinced . . . that children will not function well in a regular classroom. They have lowered their expectations of these children” (personal communication, May, 2000). She mentioned that the state is now beginning to offer incentives for districts to remedy over-referral to special education, encouraging them to bring children back into the district by offering money for smaller classes and resources for earlier academic intervention.

Once the OCR findings became public, the Vanhold school board, in an unusual move, held a hearing at Harmony Center. Only two parents from Harmony Center attended. This low turnout, which officials probably attributed to lack of interest, more likely reflected parents’ high level of mistrust in school personnel. As Donna explained, “They didn’t believe it was happening. You’re talking about parents that have gone through the system, they don’t believe that there’s going to be a change” (personal communication, January 18, 2001).

The Vanhold school district needed to demonstrate to parents that it was acting in good faith. Until it did, few parents from Waterside and Sweet Cove were going

to make an effort to become involved. Harmony Center staff members also expressed mistrust in the OCR investigation. As Malik shared in our last interview, “I see it as a pothole that they’re going to fill” (personal communication, January 18, 2001). That is, he believed the school district to be applying a superficial treatment to a much deeper problem. This mistrust

**CBO staff understand the history and culture of communities, because they either come from the community or have long-term relationships with participants that sometimes span generations.**

increased when certain actions of the district created a great deal of ire on the part of Harmony Center staff and members of community agencies. For example, the school district hired a consultant from a different state to determine how the school district should respond to the OCR report. The consultant was selected without the input of Harmony Center staff, other community agencies, or residents of Waterside and Sweet Cove.

Donna remained vigilant, however, employing a range of strategies to hold the school district accountable. For example, she was asked to place a parent from Harmony Center on the school board. In response,

Donna carefully picked a parent who, she said, could “hold her own” on the board and articulate the common concerns of parents. In addition, Donna; Albert, the Harmony Center board chair; and another Harmony Center parent regularly attended community meetings whose charge was to discuss the ramifications of the OCR report. This group evolved into an oversight committee to monitor the actions of the school board.

Though she had initially been overlooked, Donna was eventually invited to become a member of a team

**Schools can benefit from relationships with CBOs by creating internal mechanisms that provide space and opportunity for staffs of both institutions to articulate their understandings and assessments of children.**

of teachers and remediation specialists charged by the Vanhold school district with reviewing its referral practices, making modifications in the procedures, and establishing effective early intervention such as tutoring and remediation for all students in the district. In addition, Donna raised money from a private foundation to hire a community organizer to work with local CBOs and the school district as an advocate for the particular needs of low-income students. Finally, in the *coup de grace*, Vanhold schools were re-districted, in the year after my study ended, so that children from Sweet Cove and Waterside were assigned to elementary schools throughout the district.

Whether the actions of the school district will remedy educational and social inequities in Vanhold remains to be seen. In fact, some of the school district's actions were perceived as attempts to further exclude Harmony Center and residents of subsidized housing from social and educational equity. However, in the final analysis, Harmony Center played a major role in publicizing the problem, advocating successfully for an investigation of the referral practices of the school district, and holding the school district accountable.

### **HOW CBOS NEGOTIATE EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL EQUITY**

The events that occurred in Vanhold are one example of how a community-based youth organization can have an impact on issues of social and educational equity for low-income families. Harmony Center was

The missions of CBOs historically have centered around such concerns as community development and social justice. CBOs are thus in a position to advocate for social and educational equity for the low-income families they serve. Some of the assets they bring to this work include their:

- Traditions of community advocacy and organizing
- Intimate knowledge of communities, their history, and their culture
- Long-term relationships with children and families, often spanning generations
- Strategic alliances and partnerships with other community institutions, such as faith-based organizations
- Culturally competent approaches to engaging children and families

able to play a key role because of its history of community advocacy and because its staff was intimately familiar with the Waterside and Sweet Cove community and its history and culture. The staff had developed culturally competent approaches to engage both children and families. In addition, Harmony Center had developed strategic alliances with other community institutions, such as faith-based organizations, drawing on them as partners and resources.

### **Advocating for Social Justice**

Other CBOs—some whose initial mandate was social justice work and others that have risen to the occasion—have emerged as advocates and resources for the communities they serve. For example, New Settlement Apartments, a housing corporation in the Bronx, invited staff from New York University's Institute for Social and Educational Policy to develop a workshop to help parents understand the results of the citywide reading test. During the workshop, parents realized their children's scores were some of the lowest in the city, so they asked NYU's staff to continue to work with them. The parents organized a campaign that ultimately led to the ouster of the school principal. Later they created



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their own independent organization, the Parents Action Committee, which has continued to work for educational equity (Zachary & Olatoye, 2001).

The Albany Park Neighborhood Council in Chicago<sup>3</sup> started as part of a neighborhood development corporation and eventually become an independent agency, according to Raul Botello, youth organizer (personal communication, November 13, 2003). The issues the council initially identified were affordable housing, safety, overcrowding in the public schools, and relationships between immigrant youth and police. Some of Albany Park's projects included collaboration with other CBOs to develop a balanced development plan, currently under negotiation with the City of Chicago, to reserve affordable units in any new residential building construction. The council also organized a conference on school overcrowding that brought together the head of the Chicago public schools, parents, students, teachers, school administrators, and local colleges. As a result, construction of a new middle school is slated to begin in spring 2004 (Raul Botello, personal communication, November 13, 2003).

The Indianola Parent Student Group, responding to a teacher shortage in the Mississippi Delta, began working with children in schools to help them with math. The organization's goal, according to Co-

Director Betty Petty, is to "create a first-rate public education and a safe environment in the African-American community and to hold public officials accountable to the needs and interests of the community" (personal communication, November 2, 2003). The group, which combines adults and youth not only in its activities but also on its board, is now involved in environmental justice issues. For example, the local middle school is next door to a cotton field, so that the students are exposed to pesticide spray. The Indianola Parent Student Group has documented spraying, interviewed community members about the condition of their health, and held community information sessions. The group presented its findings to the Federal Aviation Administration, which regulates airborne pesticide spraying, and is now negotiating with the federal agency and with local farmers to determine appropriate actions (Betty Petty, personal communication, November 2, 2003).

### **Improving Community–School Relationships**

As community institutions, CBOs can advocate for, and sometimes effect, changes in children's school experiences. One key contribution is the fact that CBO staff can supply insights into children's needs and competencies because they observe children in settings outside of





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home and school. Such insights can inform and enhance children's assessment and in-school experiences. CBO staff understand the history and culture of communities, because they either come from the community or have long-term relationships with participants that sometimes span generations. They are in a strong position to suggest "culturally competent" (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2001) approaches to working with low-income African-American and Latino families, in effect creating a "bridge" (Noam, Biancarosa, & DeChausay, 2003) or intermediary space between the school and the larger community. Finally, CBOs are in a position to guide schools regarding local community culture and the roots of conflict and can therefore be helpful in interpreting the variety of complex meanings families bring to school programs such as special education.

School reform movements are now cultivating relationships with CBOs (Annenberg Institute on Public Engagement for Public Education, 1998; Hirota & Jacobs, 2003; Melaville & Blank, 1998). In addition, school-CBO linkages are becoming a primary model in funding formulas for afterschool services. Such linkages are specifically designed to provide templates for

effective cross-institutional relationships. In New York City, for example, the New Century High Schools, a school reform project of New Visions for Public Schools, require partnerships with community-based organizations that are "actively involved in the process of planning, operating and supporting the school" (New Visions for Public Schools, 2004). In other cases, "seamless" or wrap-around programs called Beacon Schools have been created that incorporate CBO staff and services into schools. Sometimes the integration is such that the school itself is run by a CBO, a configuration called a "CBO school."<sup>4</sup> A large federally funded national program is the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, in which schools contract with CBOs to provide afterschool services. School-CBO initiatives are also funded by private foundations, such as The After School Corporation (TASC) and the MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) Initiative, funded by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

## CHALLENGES AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Much is still lacking in the relationships between schools and CBOs. Serious unresolved turf issues create obstacles to delivery of services by programs operating in schools during the non-school hours (Noam, Biancarosa, & DeChausay, 2003), yet stand-alone programs based in community centers are increasingly being frozen out of funding formulas in favor of programs based in schools. Principals and superintendents have resisted viewing schools as community institutions, so that they often do not make room for and welcome community-based agencies into their buildings or engage in dialogue with CBOs to establish a joint vision and to use staff as resources and experts. School officials often fail to understand how the historical mission of CBOs leads them to engage in innovative instructional approaches and to identify and address critical community issues in response to the needs of youth and families.

The primarily academic agenda of the schools is often in tension with the community development, social justice, or youth development emphases of CBOs. With the increased pressure created by high-stakes testing, the schools' academic agenda becomes overwhelming, while CBOs struggle to maintain their unique characteristics and identities as community-based youth development agencies. Nor have CBOs been provided with appropriate tools, training, and support to "resist pressure to promise to compensate for the perceived limitations of other institutions"



(Halpern, 2002, p. 180). This tension is often exacerbated by funding formulas that privilege schools. For example, the federal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center grants, in which schools subcontract CBOs to provide on-site services, basically maintain school control of afterschool programming.<sup>5</sup>

Schools can benefit from relationships with CBOs by creating internal mechanisms that provide space and opportunity for staffs of both institutions to articulate their understandings and assessments of children. Creating forums or joint training experiences between CBOs and schools would encourage school staff to recognize the special advantages, knowledge, and resources of CBOs and their staff, while CBO staff would have the opportunity to better understand the culture of the school. Principals, as key school personnel, need training that would encourage them to view their role less as “overseers and caretakers” of afterschool programs and more as partners in a “marriage” of equals (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003, p. 31). Teachers, as well—whether they teach in the afterschool program or only during school time—need training to familiarize them with the principles of youth development and the unique programmatic approaches developed by afterschool programs.

CBOs are on the threshold of becoming important partners in a complex network of support for children and families. The story of Harmony Center demonstrates how a CBO can be employed to mediate and resolve serious conflicts between schools and the communities they serve. Yet the effective utilization of CBOs in such a network requires good-faith demonstrations by schools that CBOs are valued community partners and resources. Until meaningful dialogue occurs between CBOs and schools—until they negotiate the challenges of territory, vision, and implementation—much of this potential will remain untapped.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “James” and all names of persons, organizations, and locations associated with the town of “Vanhold” are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> By *community-based organizations*, I mean nonprofit organizations that are rooted in, and have a history with, specific neighborhoods.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see <http://www.apncorganizing.org/orghistory.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on CBO schools, see [www.aed.org/publications/CBO\\_Schools/cboschools2.html](http://www.aed.org/publications/CBO_Schools/cboschools2.html).

<sup>5</sup> In the 2002–2003 Request for Proposals, however, CBOs were able to draw down the funds for the first time, although afterschool activities still have to occur in partnership with schools.

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### **New Settlement Apartments**

New Settlement Apartments (NSA), founded in 1990, is a nonprofit housing organization located in a chronically underserved area of the southwest Bronx in New York City. NSA is committed to neighborhood revitalization and community development. Its efforts include building innovative youth development programs and working toward educational excellence at notoriously underperforming community schools. NSA's extensive year-round community service and educational programs have served more than 2,400 neighborhood residents, who are low-income Black and Latino adults and children, including many new immigrants from Africa and Latin America. NSA is comprised of 15 previously abandoned, gut-renovated buildings and one newly constructed building, which together provide homes for 994 families. An integral part of NSA's progressive housing philosophy is that "housing is not just bricks and mortar." Thus, the organization's mission is not only to rebuild and maintain a sizeable portion of the housing stock in this impoverished neighborhood, but also to support the rebuilding of its social capital—starting with the children and teens.

### **United Neighborhood Houses Citywide Settlement Houses Teen Council**

United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH) is the membership organization of 36 settlement houses and neighborhood centers in New York City. UNH members provide services and activities—such as child care, employment readiness, afterschool and teen programs, senior centers, and literacy classes—to more than half a million New Yorkers of all ages each year. In November 2003, UNH brought together teen participants and staff members from fourteen settlement houses and launched the citywide Settlement House Teen Council. The participants agreed to meet monthly to identify concerns for their communities, target commonalities facing different neighborhoods, and determine priorities. After the first few meetings, the Teen Council decided to focus on the lack of resources for teens by working on several short-term organizing and advocacy projects. The first of these projects is SpeakUP for Quality After-School, where teens and parents can have a voice in supporting quality afterschool programs. The Teen Council has been working with other teens back at their own settlement houses to plan various SpeakUP events, including writing letters to city officials and local newspapers, hosting community forums about the importance of afterschool programs, encouraging local businesses to write letters of support to local officials, and organizing open-microphone nights with a SpeakUP component. For more information, contact Cara Herbitter, 212-967-0322, x316; or Anthony Ng, x329, or visit UNH online at [www.unhny.org](http://www.unhny.org).