An Example of Effecting Change Through Community, Movement Building, and Scaling Up

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December 4, 2014

Low-income people in this country are mired in a constant and unremitting fog of stress. This chronic stress is driven by housing insecurity, food insecurity, fear of crime, unemployment, exposure to pollution and poor education, often collectively conceptualized as the social determinants of health. The buffers against this chronic stress are family support, social connectedness, meaningful opportunity, and a sense of purpose and belonging. The chronic stress is directly controlled by policy and politics, meaning that this situation is largely manmade and thus can be unmade.

Why community? We know that when it comes to your health, your zip code matters more than your genetic code. Zip code serves as shorthand for neighborhoods, and it is there that these chronic stress-inducing conditions manifest themselves, often indelibly, in the lives of young children. However, community is also where individuals often find deep purpose and a sense of belonging. As such, community is a powerful force in shaping individual identity.

Communities are a complex network of relationships between people. Strong communities are characterized by strong and dense relationship networks. These communities are resilient and can help protect individuals from adversity. Kate Hess Pace from PICO’s Center for Health Organizing notes that “the goal of all community organizing is bringing people together to build relationships and change the conditions in which they live.” In describing “authentic community engagement,” Manuel Pastor says, “change in policy requires power, and power involves community organizing to build the voice of the community.” So while adverse community conditions are the product of policy and politics, building strong and resilient communities can protect community residents and build the power necessary to change policy.

Why movement building? Scattered resilient pockets of power are not enough—we need power that scales into movements across neighborhoods and cities, states and regions, ultimately transforming the nation and our interconnected world. So how do we get there? Francesca Polletta from UC Irvine offers three required elements for mobilizing a movement: (1) political opportunities, (2) existing structures and social groups that encourage individuals to participate, and (3) resonant frames that are persuasive and appeal to societal values. The story of how communities in California have come
together to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline may help illustrate key aspects of movement building in health.

TCE’s Building Healthy Communities (BHC), is a 10-year, $1 billion place-based initiative designed to improve the health status of 14 low-income communities through an ecological approach focused on transforming local, regional, and statewide policy and systems. Through robust community organizing, we intend to support residents and youth in changing the conditions that contribute most directly to their sense of chronic stress. Early in the initiative, the issue of school discipline stood out as a high priority.

Young people and parents in multiple sites relayed stories of unfair and arbitrary suspensions that put young talent on the path to prison rather than college. Schools in the BHC sites, and indeed across California, had criminalized behavior once effectively handled by principals and school counselors. When BHC launched, some of the partner sites had laid the groundwork for significant school discipline reform in their districts, including organized youth, well-researched policy positions, and supportive adult allies. Other sites were just beginning to build the foundation. Regardless of where each community was in their journey for more just schools, the potential to weave each local effort into a broader statewide movement was clear.

**Spread and scale.** In addition to investing in local organizing efforts and research, TCE invested in the bridging infrastructure to support statewide movement, including convening youth statewide and reframing the public debate from individual to collective responsibility. Bringing youth together from diverse communities across the state built the relationships necessary to take the fight from local districts to the next level. The communications investments were crucial to framing the issue to generate popular public support for school discipline reform. And while much progress has been made (e.g., several new pieces of state legislation and 100,000+ fewer suspensions in one year), education equity advocates continue to work locally and regionally to push for change, ready for the next window of opportunity to move change statewide.

Movement building is multilayered and nonlinear. Issues arise organically; moments of opportunity come suddenly. As the school discipline examples suggest, community organizing that raises consciousness, builds leadership, and facilitates collective action is essential. An informed and engaged public—in this case, students who could identify a problem and articulate a better alternative—is the foundation on which the statewide school discipline reform movement was built. Once established and with ongoing support, this type of civic infrastructure will sustain the gains, surface the next catalytic issue, and support readiness for movement the next time the opportunity arises.