

## **LESSONS LEARNED FROM SAN FRANCISCO'S CHILDREN'S MOVEMENT: ITS RELEVANCE TO OTHER COMMUNITIES**

The question is frequently asked: How relevant is San Francisco's experience to other communities? San Francisco is a liberal city with a diverse cosmopolitan environment. In fact, its political dynamics are similar to other communities. More importantly, the goals, strategies, and structures that were created in San Francisco are not specific to a particular political or cultural environment. Tactics will vary. Coalition partners will vary. The policies that need to be addressed will vary and the pace and order of the work will vary. But the lessons from building a service delivery system and a children's movement summarized below apply anywhere.

1. The most important lesson of San Francisco's work over the past three decades to build a children's service delivery system is the benefit of having a consistent, forceful, independent organization or organizations providing leadership in promoting social change. Furthermore, organizations with a wide repertoire of tools are most effective. A strong organizational leadership structure can unify the many segments of the constituency and help synthesize a reform agenda. This is the most important factor that has enabled San Francisco to create a social movement for children.

The most effective strategies of such an organization have the following in common:

- *Conceptualizing the work as a series of campaigns to promote concrete positive change.* A campaign has an end goal around which stakeholders can rally and celebrate success before moving on. Win or lose it focuses energy and builds momentum.
- *Being solution-oriented.* Too often efforts to promote change focus on defining a problem. It is relatively easy to talk about what is wrong. Yet proposing concrete, realistic, and easily understood solutions is what inspires hope and enthusiasm and motivates elected officials and policymakers to take action.
- *Leading with the authentic voices of those affected by change.* One elected official warned advocates, "Stop bringing those kids – they break my heart." Of course, this admonition had the opposite effect. One young person saying what a summer job means in his life is worth ten adult experts explaining the cost-benefits of a youth employment

program. Organizing parents is harder than organizing youth, who have more time and are part of schools or youth programs where they can become involved. Coleman's move to a neighborhood-based setting allowed for greater parental involvement. The use of stipends and other incentives is a legitimate way to promote involvement.

- *Building coalitions.* Multiple ad-hoc coalitions are effective – the “no permanent friends or permanent enemies” philosophy allows for maximum flexibility. The most likely allies of a campaign about children were CBO's serving young people, associations of professionals such as pediatricians, and neighborhood groups. Occasional allies were academics, churches, police officers, seniors, some unions, political clubs, and service organizations.
- *Tactics with dramatic impact.* Drama and controversy get public and media attention, which often increases the impact of a campaign. Thinking like an advertiser helps – heart-wrenching stories, guerrilla theatre, and large demonstrations can change the course of a campaign.
- *Independence.* “Speaking truth to power” is essential and only possible when advocates have no conflicts of interest. Service providers dependent on government contracts have rarely been able to sustain a strong advocacy stance, despite their desire to do so. Foundation funding has been critical to supporting independent voices.
- *Persistence.* The need for an outside voice is ongoing – there are always new problems. Even after a success, the challenges of implementation require constant vigilance. If decision makers know that a constituency will always be present, they are more likely to be influenced by it.

## **2. The local level provides many opportunities to promote change.**

No matter where policies originate, they are implemented at the local level, which is where accountability and meaningful community engagement occur. Work at the local level is where:

- The building blocks of a national activist constituency are created. Ultimately, the work of organizing is personal; e-mail cannot replace the inspiration that comes from personal contacts.

- Parents and youth can become major players in policymaking.
- There is the maximum opportunity to respond to immediate felt needs. Solutions are more apparent. The feedback loop from policy to the people and back to policy is very quick.
- Greater flexibility in strategies and targets, and greater innovation and experimentation in programs and policies is possible.

The devolution of policy from the federal and state levels creates more opportunities for influence.

### **3. Seizing unexpected opportunity is a major factor in promoting change.**

Many factors can contribute to success over which the activist has no control. They range from national events, to a sudden interest of a local politician, to the unexpected availability of resources. This means that flexibility is essential – a readiness to use multiple strategies, multiple ways of selecting and developing issues for focus, and the ability to respond quickly.

### **4. Risk-taking is essential and does not come easily – “no pain, no gain.”**

- It is a mistake to think that everybody loves kids and will ultimately prioritize their needs. Opposition is inevitable when trying to change a system – even to help children. Reasons for opposition include everything from turf, to race and class divisions, to fear of change, to competing interests. Children’s advocates in San Francisco have been demonized by Superior Court judges, city employee unions, museum board members, the Fire Department, soda companies, even the San Francisco Giants.

Solutions to problems are never perfect – Public policy is a series of trade-offs.

Proposals that are good for children may also add to the bureaucracy. A policy success may reduce pressure on the state by solving the problems locally, or create inequities by having one group benefit when another group does not. That means that there is always a reason to oppose and that moving forward inevitably requires taking risks and not being 100% right.

**5. Funding is the most important trigger for change.**

- The annual budget process of a community provides the most effective forum for promoting change in public policies. It has built-in opportunities for negotiation, public discussion, and changes in priorities. This does not mean that money alone creates change. For instance, money can more easily address the availability of services than the quality of services.

**6. A comprehensive agenda has long-term benefits.**

- While single-issue approaches bring focus and expertise to promoting social justice, a comprehensive agenda can create a broader and more unified constituency. Thoughtful priority-setting among all stakeholders and a balance over time of different aspects of the agenda is helpful and can prevent natural allies from competing with each other.

**7. Service providers play an essential role in building a social justice movement for children, youth, and families.**

- Service providers have been the core of the institutional support for a children's movement. They see unmet needs every day, have great expertise in system changes required, and have the capacity to engage parents and youth. Yet service providers are limited by their self interest. They sometimes have difficulty supporting a broad agenda and using their political capital on issues that do not directly benefit their organizations. There can be inherent tensions between provider needs and consumer/community needs. It is essential to assess at what point the providers' best interest conflicts with the priorities of the population needing to be served. An independent advocacy organization can be a mitigating influence that keeps providers focused on their clients' needs first.

**8. Being political is essential.**

- Ultimately, change in power and policy rests on changes made by political decision-makers. Ignoring the political nature of community practice limits the effectiveness of the work.

- While some community practitioners choose to ally their efforts with a particular candidate, party, or faction, others are more pragmatic and flexible and remain non-affiliated. Both approaches have benefits and limitations; however, I have found the latter to be more effective. This does not mean ignoring the fact that one group of politicians may almost always be opposed to the changes being promoted. It just keeps open the option of allying with any politician supporting your goals.
- Holding politicians accountable is a key strategy in promoting social justice for children, youth, and families. Many tactics are possible – such as report cards, public testimony, positive rewards, and use of media.

Especially when working outside the system, elections are democracy’s great gift which provides numerous opportunities for promoting social change. Elections are generally not used effectively or often enough by children’s advocates. The range of ways to use elections is numerous, from placing proposals on the ballot, to holding potential candidates accountable through everything from candidate forums to candidate questionnaires.

**9. It is essential and possible to engage in community practice both inside and outside “the system.” The combination can yield significant change.**

- “Outside” positioning allows the freedom to push the envelope, raise controversial issues in the public arena, and create ongoing pressure from those affected by the decisions of policymakers. Leaders inside the system can develop programs, allocate resources, and provide access to those who have been routinely denied. The “handoff” from outside to inside is an essential but difficult part of the system-building process
- Outsiders must recognize the limitations of their power and acknowledge the necessity of the handoff. Insiders must reflect the true intent of policies through their power to implement.
- The dynamic works best when insiders are steeped in the values and skills of community practice and outsiders include proposals with strategic solutions in their work.
- An intermediary can have some of the advantages of both perspectives.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Building **independent organizations committed to creating local children’s movements** could bring great benefits and be a cost-effective method of promoting change. Convincing funders of the potentially huge payoff of advocacy, organizing, and nonpartisan political activism as a priority for their resources is important.
- There is an urgent need to **strengthen the power of parents and young people** in the civic debate. We must create more organizations, structures, support systems, and educational opportunities that can build that power base.
- A core of the political base for improving services and opportunities for children, youth, and families is the **service provider community**. Nonprofit community-based organizations must use their organizational capacity to move beyond protecting their services and build an authentic power base for their clients. An advocacy or intermediary organization can help, as can continued funding and training of CBO’s to develop a grassroots constituent arm.
- We need to better **institutionalize community practice into our public agencies**. Community practice should be part of degree programs in public administration and ongoing professional development for the field.
- We must **capitalize on the potential of public schools** to offer young people the potential for success and create a seamless support system for our children, youth and their families. This means embracing the community school movement and recognizing schools as the institutions in our community with the greatest potential to engage families, assess and meet needs, and be anchors in our isolating society.