The Why and How of Engaging Residents for Change

BY GARLAND YATES AND TIM SAASTA

It was one of those moments of recognition you dream about but don't often experience. That moment came for the people who helped turn around the Bruce Randolph School in Denver, Colorado, in 2011, when President Barack Obama cited their work as an example of what was possible when "reform isn't just a top-down mandate, but the work of local teachers and principals, school boards and communities.

"Take a school like Bruce Randolph in Denver," he added. "Three years ago, it was rated one of the worst schools in Colorado, located on turf between two rival gangs. But last May, 97 percent of the seniors received their diploma. Most will be the first in their family to go to college."

"Awesome" was the word former school principal Kristen Waters used to describe the feeling at hearing those words. "It is just validating the great work among everyone at Bruce Randolph who is helping the kids be successful."

But as Waters is quick to point out, the story of how this school was turned around goes far beyond the work of one visionary principal. Indeed, it is a far more interesting and important story, one that suggests that the missing ingredient in reforming struggling schools is not a great principal or school superintendent, a brilliant reform idea, or even a group of committed teachers.

All of these things are certainly important. But the story of Bruce Randolph's change is really the story of a long-term process that led to this school having a large group of engaged, educated, and organized parents, parents who both pushed the school to improve and, in the process, stimulated their own children to improve how they did in school.

And the story isn't about a process that led to changes at this one school but a process that focused on much broader changes in the communities this school serves as well as three other very low-income Denver neighborhoods. At the core of this process was a way to deeply engage residents over time in changing their communities as well as a way to connect these residents with the people and institutions that impact their communities. It's a story packed with lessons about *why* residents must be engaged and *how* to engage residents effectively.

This long-term process came out of an initiative called Making Connections Denver. The Annie E. Casey Foundation supported Making Connections, a decade-long effort to change very low income neighborhoods in ten cities across the United States. Its premise was that children do well when families do well and families do well when communities are strong and supportive. The idea was to revitalize neighborhoods physically and economically while also improving services to the families who live in these neighborhoods.

How do you make communities strong and supportive? Part of the key was to be comprehensive and engage a broad range of people and institutions: funders, public agencies, service-providing nonprofits, community institutions, local businesses, neighborhood residents. But it didn't define how to do that, which was both a weakness and a strength. Early on, it allowed the people leading the initiative in each city a lot of latitude, which meant very different approaches were tried in different cities. For this reason, the initiative is a rich case study in what works to change communities.

In Denver, the emphasis was on engaging residents and neighborhood organizations in the work and building strong relationships—within neighborhoods, within the partner organizations, and between communities and institutions. The idea was that this process would build momentum, which it clearly did in Denver, where there was a long list of concrete achievements in the neighborhoods during the past decade. In addition to the changes at Bruce Randolph School, these achievements included:

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- A groundbreaking community benefits agreement for the redevelopment of a former manufacturing site in the heart of Denver.
- Passage of a citywide initiative that pays for quality preschool education for low-income children (an initiative that has given more than 25,000 children nearly $50 million in tuition support in its first five years).
- A three-year commitment by Denver's juvenile justice system to create a community court that looked to keep young offenders connected to their families and communities.

Making Connections also provided critical support to several innovative ideas and programs, including a Mile High United Way experiment with Individual Development Accounts, the City of Denver's experimental use of federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Family funds to establish a local Earned Income Tax Credit to reduce welfare rolls, and support for Denver's Child Welfare Agency to improve foster care, particularly for teens about to age out of the system.

Beyond these policy and programmatic successes, this process also had enormous impact on both individuals and institutions in this city, helping transform how they think about low-income communities as well as what they do.

In particular, the process changed how people viewed the importance of engaging residents and how to do it effectively.

Build a Deep Understanding about Why It's So Critical to Engage Residents

The widespread support for engaging residents in Denver came about because so many people saw its importance not just for achieving specific policy and programmatic goals (like better schools) but for transforming lives. Looking back on this experience, what's been most rewarding is not the shoutout from the president but the countless stories of individuals and their families who experienced profound personal change.

Contained within these stories are some critical lessons about how to effectively engage residents in a long-term change process, including the need to engage people around the issues that directly impact their lives, the need to start by helping people understand these issues, the need to connect them to others who care about the same issues, the need to get people to see that they have a voice and have a right to use their voice, and the need to find ways to engage them that go beyond simply showing up at a public meeting.

Some of these personal transformation stories are connected to the Bruce Randolph School. "I knew nothing about the education system and how it worked," said Jennifer Gonzalez, who eventually became an education organizer for an organization—Metro Organizations for People (MOP) that has been leading the effort to reform schools in low-income communities, both in Denver and now throughout the state. MOP got into education organizing as a direct result of its involvement in the Making Connections initiative.

Pulled into a meeting about Denver's schools by the promise of free pizza when Gonzalez says she had hit "rock bottom," she began to "grasp the gaps between our schools and the schools of other neighborhoods. Our kids deserve amenities and great teachers. They have a right to be safe."

She also realized that she had a responsibility to do what she could to make the schools better for her kids. "I've learned I have a voice. I've learned how to use my voice effectively. . . . I've learned how to advocate properly for myself and my kids."

And her kids have seen her transformation. "My kids see me standing up for things that are important. That's different for me. Before, when I was upset about something, I'd either yell or cry. . . ."

Gonzalez has taken her son Miguel, a student at Bruce Randolph School, with her to MOP meetings, which she says helped "change his thinking, and next thing you know, he's getting involved." This involvement helped transform him, Gonzalez says.

"My son went from barely scraping by to consistently making the honor roll. His attitude moved from not caring about school . . . to caring and absolutely loving school. He hates missing school. He hates the idea of getting bad grades. He's popular.

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He's a leader. . . . He's moved from being a follower to being a strong leader. He's open to talking in front of people. That's going to help him the rest of his life."

We could tell dozens of other personal transformation stories from the Making Connections experience in Denver. All of these stories are in some way connected to the parts of Making Connections that involved deeply engaging residents. Seeing these personal transformations—plus the related policy and programmatic changes—produced the commitment to engaging residents in Denver that continues to this day.

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Many people in Denver came to understand that, ultimately, this work is not about some appealing but abstract idea—"community change"— but about the lives of individual people who live in these communities changing in profound ways, all as a result of residents getting engaged in the process of community change. People began to see that the process of engaging residents is in itself the process of changing lives. People change through their experience of getting engaged.

Seeing this is a step toward making the kind of commitment of time and money that effectively engaging residents demands.

Build an Infrastructure to Keep Engaging Residents over Time

One striking observation from community engagement history is that, with some notable exceptions, these efforts are difficult to sustain. They generate enormous energy for a short period of time, often enough to resolve a particular issue. But changing communities always involves more than winning one issue. Few have figured out how to keep a community engaged over time.

People inevitably come and go. Parents engaged on education issues eventually have no more kids in school. Residents move or get sick. Often a handful of residents who do stay over time become dominant, becoming gatekeepers.

How do you avoid this and maintain energy for change? The key is having a mechanism set up that constantly engages new people. This doesn't necessarily mean an organization. Establishing a new organization can bring its own set of problems. The key is building a set of ongoing relationships among key individuals, funders, and other organizations, all of whom understand the critical importance of engaging residents. This is what evolved in Denver, all around a one-page list of principles that people developed together early in the Making Connections process.

Another element of building this infrastructure in Denver was a community-centered small grants program. By having a way to support the ideas and passions of residents, new community leaders can be identified, recruited, and trained. At the same time, these small grants can make concrete things happen within these communities, building interest and momentum. Nothing builds confidence as quickly as accomplishing something: developing an after-school soccer program, getting a trash-strewn empty lot cleaned up, getting a stop sign at a dangerous intersection. And nothing helps people learn faster than the experience of acting on their ideas.

Engage the Existing Organizing Infrastructure

When we began our work in Denver, the city's organizing infrastructure was in dire need of resources and capacity support. The strongest community organizer—MOP—was down to two part-time staff people. Other groups had even fewer resources. People in Denver had lost a sense of why organizing was important.

We realized that, if we accomplished nothing else, at least we could help rebuild this organizing infrastructure. Fortunately, there were organizers who were willing to give the Making Connections process a chance. This can be one of the first challenges—finding people who are willing to try a different approach and see the potential. In the world of community organizing, there are many ideas and practices accepted about the correct or usual way.

In Denver, we were fortunate to find a few people who were willing to give the process a chance, one being Mike Kromrey, MOP's longtime director. He became a close partner of Making Connections over many years. When he reflected on why he had been willing to give it a chance, he was pretty blunt: "On the big battles, we were getting our butts kicked." He also came to enjoy the interaction and the relationships with the other partners.

A second challenge is on the other side of the equation—people who have had a bad experience with an organizing group and see all organizing through this bad experience. Many people think that organizing mainly involves "actions" taken against "targets" (which could easily be them!). The reality is that most residents see "direct action" tactics as a last resort. They are not comfortable with confrontation. If there are other ways to accomplish their goals, they will gladly pursue therm.

We certainly experienced this uneasiness with organizing in Denver. One step we took was to help the other partners better understand organizing. We did a two-hour session during which organizers and a large group of Making Connections partners learned and talked about organizing. The partners began to understand how much they could learn from organizers because of their experiences with systems and agencies and, more generally, with poverty. One city official who had been extremely skeptical about organizing eventually went to a training course and became an advocate of organizing groups. City agencies began to use organizers to help them get community feedback. Relationships developed. Understanding developed. People began to get past the stereotypes and see the potential. City officials who you thought might be fearful of engaging with organizers in public meetings became excited by the potential instead.

Over time, this support of organizing paid off for both sides—the organizers and the other partners. MOP became a far more powerful organization, one that employed many residents and parents as organizers. And by supporting MOP and other local organizers, Making Connections was part of numerous policy and programmatic changes. The preschool initiative passed by 1 percent of the vote; it probably would not have passed without MOP's leadership. Key in the transformation of the Bruce Randolph School was that it became the first school in the state to achieve autonomy, which allowed the principal to hire an almost entirely new set of teachers. Again, MOP's organizing leadership made that happen. Making Connections' support for a different kind of organizing group—the Front Range Economic Strategy Center, or FRESC (a coalition of labor groups and community and faith organizations)—was critical in an effort to redevelop a dormant manufacturing site in Denver.

In other words, building an organizing infrastructure in Denver was absolutely critical to Making Connections success in this city. It is also one of the pieces of Making Connections that still exists years after the big funder support for this initiative ended.

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Focus on What Local People Care about the Most

An early step we took in Denver to show the potential of organizers was to have them help us put together "neighborhood summits" as a way of identifying the issues residents cared about the most and what they thought would make a difference for children growing up in their neighborhoods. This allowed the other partners to witness how well organized and attended these neighborhood summits were, which got them thinking about other ways they could use organizers to help them engage communities.

But even more important, the summits allowed the initiative to better understand what would truly engage residents. If you really want to build momentum for change within communities, you can't make the work all about *your* ideas for change, no matter how good those ideas may be. It's got to be about ideas that a broad range of stakeholders embrace, especially a broad critical mass of residents.

This task is a lot easier to say than to do. Everyone brings their ideas to the table. And since funders are

also bringing money to the table, their ideas are often the ones that end up being pursued.

Fortunately, in the early days of Making Connections, the foundation's ideas were broad principles, not step-by-step recipes. Indeed, this is one of the core lessons of Making Connections: Set broad principles and goals while letting local people and organizations set the specific actions that will implement those principles and achieve those goals.

Not all those involved in Making Connections agree; many would emphasize the need to be very specific in the beginning about what you want to achieve and how you are going to measure it. But if your goal is truly to change a community that has deteriorated over generations, don't let ideas get in the way of people living and working in these communities coming together to develop their own agenda for change. You have to remember that when the ideas and money are long gone, residents will still be living in these communities, facing the consequences—whether the result of success or failure.

Build Agreement about What the Goals and Principles Are

No one could really disagree about the core idea of Making Connections—that children do well when families do well and families do well when communities are strong and supportive. But how exactly do you propose to help families do better and to help communities be stronger and more supportive? In other words, you need more than abstract ideas.

This was one goal of Denver's Neighborhood Summits—to tease out the communities' ideas. The broad plan that emerged from these summits became touchstones for much of Making Connections' future work in Denver. Task forces were established to refine the input from the summits into a plan of action for the neighborhood change agenda. This step led to an overall initiative of activities and strategies around the broad priorities that surfaced from the summits.

Another touchstone was a one-page set of principles that the partners themselves developed. This set of principles emphasized the critical importance of engaging residents in every aspect of Making Connections' work. They became the ground rules for how people would work together. People often referred to the principles as they worked through specific issues over the course of the initiative.

Not everyone embraced these principles, but contrary to popular notions, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. We didn't necessarily want everybody at the table; we wanted to appeal to the people who would embrace the core of what Making Connections Denver was all about.

Whether to expand the boundaries of the Making Connections frame to allow everyone to participate was consciously debated. To avoid too many moments when the initiative might not be very clear to all the participants, we decided to be clear enough about the Making Connections central theory of change so would-be stakeholders would do their own self-selection about whether to participate.

Develop Agreement about the Core Strategy

With everything that needs to be done, with all the activity that community engagement generates, with all the people who are engaged in it, what unifies it all? How does it eventually add up? How do you avoid devolving into a group of unconnected activities?

The key is developing a core strategy for achieving a community agenda—an engine of change. In Making Connections in Denver, this core strategy was building an organized power base. In conventional organizing, a power base might mean organized residents. But for Making Connections, the idea was broadened to an organized group that included residents, community organizations, agencies, funders—all the people that would be committed to the core goals and principles.

One way to judge activities was to ask whether they helped build this organized power base. Ways of maintaining and strengthening relationships among this group became critical. Ways of building individuals' commitment to the group and to the partners became a priority. Ways of expanding this group became important. Through this group, people and organizations became more and more committed to the work and to the principles. People felt a need to

be accountable. All of this went far beyond a "partnership" or a "collaborative." Even today, many individuals look back on this experience and see it as one of the most rewarding of their careers. And even today, the relationships that developed within this group continue, as does the commitment to many of Making Connections values, such as deeply engaging residents. It was a fascinating process to participate in and observe.

Create Space for Change

Because this is not a consensus approach, the people who embrace the ideas and principles of deeply engaging communities can become vulnerable. Residents who get involved can be ostracized by their community groups. Family members can resent the time residents are investing. Funders may have had to say no to grant requests from longtime colleagues as their foundations' priorities changed. Staff of city agencies and other organizations can get criticized for the amount of time they are investing in this work. Organizers can be challenged by their organizing networks for trying something that is outside the orthodoxy.

Plus, the kind of change we are talking about is a little scary. It's like walking at night in an unfamiliar place. The idea of child welfare staff person sitting down with families can be scary, whether you are a staff person or a family member. The very act of bringing people together—across agencies, communities, classes, religions, races—can create all kinds of tensions.

The need is to create a space where people feel safe enough to try new approaches. Funders can play a key role in this by supporting this work. If the funders are committing money and expertise and influence to allow people to try these new approaches, that can do much to ease the fear.

Especially when residents are involved, ways to build the comfort level of everyone at the table are very important. In Denver, there were many dinners, many "story circles" during which people could talk about their lives, many celebrations. It was all about building relationships and mutual support networks. Eventually the Making Connections office was moved out of the fifty-third floor of a downtown office tower into a community church, a far more comfortable environment for the many residents who were working for or involved with the initiative. When meetings were held in this environment, it helped even the playing field, getting the funders and agency people a little out of their comfort zone.

Create a Way to Overcome Separateness

In many neighborhoods, great diversity exists: race, ethnicity, legal status, language, place of residence (such as public housing), and so on. Given this reality, in these neighborhoods, community engagement must involve breaking down some of these separations.

This is one value of community organizing: It clearly helps people with great differences see their similarities and start to talk and work with each other. It is also a value of all the organizing activities that can be established: Each one will have to involve a variety of people who are learning to work together for the first time.

The same thing is happening at the "partner" level: People from different institutions and agencies that had little contact with each other will need to develop strong relationships through the experience of working together on community engagement approaches.

All these differences are also why it's so important to develop a set of principles agreed to by everyone who is at the table; these principles can help people see their commonalities and work through differences.

And these differences are why building relationships are so critical. Meetings can't just be about working through agendas. They also have to be about connecting the people who are sitting around the table.

Eventually, as we saw so clearly in Denver, this work spent connecting people pays off. Going to initiative meetings becomes not a chore or a responsibility but a pleasure—people really enjoyed working with each other in Denver. They came to enjoy the back-and-forth. When reflecting on their Making Connections' experiences, many people talked

about how much they learned. Many of the relationships that developed during those years still exist, even when the people have moved on to other jobs. This is yet another way that the work a community engagement initiative starts can be sustained over time.

Develop a Set of Results and an Accountability System

A dilemma of many efforts to engage communities with goals so lofty and long term is that it is extremely hard to ensure that they are staying on track month to month or year to year. This is why any community engagement effort needs to be results oriented and to have clarity about who is doing what and by when. It needs a clear idea of what defines success over the short term. What changes do we need to see and by when to know we are on track to achieve the loftier goals? Setting goals and setting up a process that ensure the goals are met are two discrete tasks. This again is an organizing and engagement challenge.

With a community engagement strategy is that participants inevitably are looking to see a range of results. Inevitably, you have a range of people and groups working on achieving these specific results. These people are accountable to themselves, to their constituencies, to a smaller group of people in the community. How do they stay accountable to the broader agenda? This is why achieving early broad consensus on the goals and strategy is so critical. It helps keep people focused on how their piece of the work relates to the big picture: the ultimate goal of the endeavor.

This kind of agreement is just one step. A way to challenge people when they are not doing what they promised is also important. This goes back to the importance of building relationships: People do not want to disappoint those they work closely with over time. In addition, with strong relationships, when participants are challenged, they are less likely to simply withdraw or react defensively.

The main point here is that an accountability system needs to involve more than simply a set of concrete short-term goals. Another process needs to be organized.

From a community engagement perspective, the goals also cannot just be about program results, such as more teachers at a local school or more affordable housing. The goals also have to be about the number of people to be involved in the process, the number of leaders needed, the understanding that these leaders develop about their communities and about the community engagement process, and so on.

Capture the Personal Transformations

Documenting stories of personal change like that experienced by Miguel Gonzalez and his mother at Bruce Randolph School are also important. The changes in the lives of families and their children are what community change should be about. The Casey Foundation began a very promising evaluation of Making Connections called a cohort study that involved selecting 200 individuals who had been touched by Making Connections and following them over at least a three-year period, documenting the changes they experienced in their lives.

The cohort study generated tremendous excitement in Denver as a way of capturing all the changes that were happening to people affected by Making Connections in many different ways. Unfortunately, the study was halted after only one year, with local people still wanting to know what the results would have shown.

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