1 Entering the Conversation

Our national discussion about public schools is despairing and dismissive, and it is shutting down our civic imagination.

Mike Rose, Possible Lives

Today, unreasonable voices outside our profession are clamoring to tell us how and what to teach. People who have little idea how children learn to read and write are speaking out loudly, bombarding the media with simplistic “quick fixes” and loud criticism of sound educational practices. And we are letting them do it.

Regie Routman, Literacy at the Crossroads

Let me begin with a story which will, I hope, illustrate how the words of Mike Rose and Regie Routman quoted above became real for me—and have, in fact, sounded a battle cry in my own work and life. A few years ago I attended a meeting when new English language arts content standards were being considered for adoption by the state board of education. These standards had been in the works for three years (see Wixson, Peters, and Potter; Fleischer et al.). K–12 classroom teachers and English educators had labored over the exacting thought and writing of these standards, spending hours and hours after school and on weekends, to produce a document which reflected current theory and research about how best to teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening to all the various kinds of kids we see in our classrooms. These teachers studied hard, argued hard, and wrote and revised in hopes of coming up with a document that reflected the best of what we know about how to teach the language arts. At this particular meeting, teacher after teacher stood up to defend the document to the board of education, many of whose members were dismissive of their arguments, letting the teachers know quite clearly that they believed the document was too progressive, out-of-sync with the kind of teaching the board thought should be going on. Teachers watched these board members in disbelief, disheartened by the fact that a number of them had decided the best methods for teaching English without having spent even a fraction of the time these teachers had spent in classrooms, without having read even a quarter of the material these teachers had diligently studied in order to prepare the curriculum statement. The teachers were frustrated, aware that their voices were
coming through to certain board members in muffled tones at best, their message blocked despite their knowledge and passion.

After a somber lunch break in which the teachers shared their despair at the tone of the meeting, we met again in the imposing auditorium in order to hear open testimony from those attending. A number of parents rose to speak, their strong voices filling the room, and, as they did, I could feel a palpable shift in the tone of the proceedings. As parent after parent began to testify, forcefully defending these content standards as important for their own children, illustrating their defense through specific classroom examples, I sat back, amazed at the knowledge and understanding of these parents, wondering how they knew so much about the issues that so occupy the hearts and minds of language arts teachers everywhere. As the last parent got up to speak, identifying both herself and the school her children attended, I recognized the location and even knew the teacher of one of her children: a school that many would define as “challenged” for a number of reasons (from its low socioeconomic status to the many parents who hadn’t themselves graduated from high school and were often suspicious of schooling in general), a teacher whose commitment to whole language principles was well known to many of us in English education around the state (based on her participation in Writing Projects, TAWL groups, and other reform movements). This parent began to speak, slowly at first but gathering momentum as she went—and articulately defended the whole language program her child was a part of, explaining why it worked well, how her child had grown, how her child had learned how to learn. All the time she was speaking, she had clutched in her hands a pink booklet, a booklet I recognized even across the crowded room as one written for parents by her child’s teacher, Cathy Gwizdala. In this booklet, Cathy had carefully laid out for parents her whole language philosophy, focusing specifically on spelling growth and documenting carefully how certain students developed their spelling over the course of the year within a whole language classroom (see the Appendix to this chapter for excerpts from Cathy’s booklet). This particular parent, now that she understood why whole language was used in her child’s class, was not only supportive—she was impassioned. The room was silent except for her voice, with the board members leaning forward in their chairs to catch her words.

This incident has stayed with me over the past few years as I’ve thought hard about what actually occurred that day. We all know that the voices of teachers, even knowledgeable and caring teachers, have
been very nearly dismissed in the public discussion of our nation’s schools. What became clear for me that day is that the voices of parents, especially those who have been educated and informed by teachers about the issues that matter most, can help us reenter the conversation. Parents—and other community members—can help set the terms of the discussion that’s held about public education, in part because, as “the voting public,” their voices carry a certain weight with legislators and school board members, and in part because their increased understanding of the issues allows them to be informed consumers of media hype and hysterical talk. These two roles for parents are intertwined, one dependent on the other, and are vital if we have any hopes both for changing the tenor of the conversation and for expanding participation in the conversation to include the voices of teachers.

When I think about the response to teachers by the state board of education that day, I recognize it as typical of what I’ve come to see and to despair of as I have tried to make sense of the contrast between, on one hand, the hard work that knowledgeable teachers do to make their classrooms places of hope and learning for the students they teach and, on the other hand, how such teaching is often depicted by others. I pick up the newspaper day after day to hear these good, informed ways of teaching attacked by reporters who aren’t always clear on the issues; I go to local board meetings to hear certain board members lambaste these ways of teaching as unproductive for kids; I even find myself at my son’s soccer games listening to parents complain about certain teachers for teaching whole language or writing workshop or any of a variety of approaches that informed educators in our field know work for kids but that have somehow become negative buzz words for the English language arts classroom. And it has become more serious than just talk; we read in NCTE’s Council Chronicle about a twenty-year veteran teacher in the St. Louis area fired for violation of the student discipline code because she did not censor a student’s language in first draft writing; we hear about a principal suspended for over two years (at an estimated cost of $1 million) because of her advocacy of whole language and learner centered curriculum in her school (Flanagan, “Myers to Be” and “Beleaguered Principal”). We read newspaper after newspaper and listen to radio and television commentary, only to hear whole language attacked as “a simple way to prepare a nation for a godless world system” (Duff) or process writing reduced as “the notion that standards, grammar, grades, and judgment are bad. Self-expression, self-esteem and personal rules are good” (Leo). These ideas somehow take on a life of their own and become a version of truth for
Those who read and listen to them; suddenly, these “facts” then carry over to state and national legislators. We need look no further than the recent furor in Congress over the Reading Excellence Act to see this process in action: legislators began to make decisions based on impartial understandings marketed by certain individuals and groups whose characterizations of reading instruction were taken as the sole truth.² Or we might look instead to the amazingly circuitous journey of the recent Ebonics debate, in which loud and adamant voices protested the use of Ebonics in the Oakland, California, schools, fueled by a wire service report that teachers there were going to “train teachers to conduct classes in the nonstandard English speech familiar to many African-Americans” (Chiles A15). This misleading media report, later acknowledged to be “inaccurate,” led “the rest of the country initially to believe the Oakland school system was going to ‘teach’ ebonics”—rather than train teachers to recognize patterns of speech common to African Americans and use that understanding as a way to nudge these students into standard English (Chiles A15). This inaccurate version nonetheless became the version of truth believed by both ordinary and prominent citizens around the country, encouraging everyone, it seemed, to voice an opinion—but an opinion based on misinformation.

In fact, in a recent front page story in my local Michigan newspaper (from the Newhouse News Service), the reporter takes the stance of surprise when he claims, “The smoke has thinned, the spotlight dimmed, and some intriguing news has trickled out of Prescott Elementary School on the west side of this struggling city: Ebonics might actually work” (Chiles A1).

I learn about these attacks, these mischaracterizations, many of which (not all, I know) are done by fair-minded people who simply don’t understand the issues, and I wonder where we have gone wrong. How is it that the national characterization of some of these sound educational ideas has become so reductive, so simplistic, and so dismissive? How is it that so many ordinary people, predisposed to believe in schools and teachers, have been influenced so strongly against certain ways of teaching? I realize, of course, that a number of attacks emerge from the work of well-orchestrated and well-funded groups whose tactics for undermining certain educational practices are sophisticated. My concern here is that teachers too often hold back from explaining their methodologies because of both the real and the imagined influence of these groups, conflating mere questions by parents who could be swayed either way with the well-formed attacks by those who are not willing to listen to anyone. A case in point concerns two sets of my friends, both of whom have school-aged children. One
couple is very liberal; both the husband and wife are strong activists who work for social justice issues in their professional work and personal lives. The other is a more middle of the road, slightly conservative couple. All four of these people are educated, intelligent, and concerned about schooling issues. All have, on several occasions, questioned me, sometimes vehemently, about their children’s respective classrooms, the second set of parents in particular becoming incensed at certain practices (such as inventive spelling or young adult literature or the perceived lack of grammar instruction), the first set of parents merely wondering why things are done in particular ways. Usually during our conversations, I spend about five minutes explaining some of the theory behind such practices and the kinds of pedagogy they might look for in their children’s classrooms. And every time, each of them responds with relief: “Oh, I get it now,” they tell me. “That makes sense.”

As I think about their reactions, I realize that as English educators and teachers, we’ve not done nearly enough of this kind of explanation in order to relieve the anxiety of parents like these—the vast number of people who may never have heard of whole language or process writing until they read an article in The Atlantic or hear a commentary on their local talk radio show. After hearing certain practices maligned over and over, they naturally are suspicious if their child’s teacher seems to use the particular practices named in these reports. Thus by our silence, we are contributing to the tension that seems to be on the increase between teachers using these best practices and parents who are rightly concerned about the education of their children. And so, a cycle begins and even escalates: Many teachers teach quite separately from their surrounding communities, certain individuals and groups raise objections, the media jumps on the controversy, school boards respond and issue edicts . . . and teachers go on teaching, the more informed ones continuing in the practices they are convinced work, the less certain changing practices to satisfy these edicts. What seems to be lacking in this scenario is the teacher-professional seeing as part of her or his job the task of informing and educating others, a necessary part of any professional’s job (as Schön and others tell us). Vito Perrone puts it succinctly: “Only when teachers themselves assume the dominant position in regard to issues of teaching and learning in their classrooms, and begin to speak more broadly and authoritatively on matters of education, will we see significant improvement” (qtd. in Routman 169).

Rose reminds us of the danger of this dismissive attitude toward teachers that seems integral to the public discussion, lamenting that it is
“shutting down our civic imagination.” Routman brings it closer to home, stating that many outsiders to education who don’t understand the issues behind progressive teaching practices, who haven’t immersed themselves in either the theory or the practice of such teaching, are often the loudest voices in this one-sided debate. She challenges us to become more vocal: “We are letting them do it,” she insists; we are letting these others set the debate, and it has thus become too often a simple-minded debate presented in either/ors which ignore the complexities and complications of real classrooms. As I read Routman and Rose and Perrone, as I sit in more and more board meetings like the one described above, as I attend PTO meetings and overhear conversations in grocery stores and airports and movie theaters, I know that it’s time for the voices of teachers to be heard in this public debate. As classroom teachers and English educators, we cannot sit back any longer and let those who are not knowledgeable about classrooms and kids and the complex contexts that are our schools set the tone and the language for the public discussion. We must become leaders in informing the public about the complexity and the reality of public education; we must become political. Routman again helps us by defining what she thinks it means for teachers to become political:

actively and thoughtfully entering the educational conversation . . . , having the language and the knowledge to move beyond our classrooms and schools into the wider public arena to state our case, . . . carefully listening with an open mind and being responsive to the public’s concerns and questions, . . . knowing how and when to communicate and who to seek out for support, . . . using research and reason instead of emotion and extremist views, . . . being professional in the highest sense (xvi–xvii).

To this wonderful list, I would add one more: beginning our activism with the group that not only desires knowledge the most, but which can be our best advocates in the public debate—parents. What we learn from the anecdote which begins this chapter, and what I’ve learned from observation in my various roles as former high school teacher, as English educator, and as parent, is that when a teacher explains and translates to a concerned parent and includes that parent in some of the actual practice of his or her theory, the parent can become a strong advocate who can promote changes in ways that a teacher cannot. The parent can then take the lead in educating others—not only in formal ways such as speaking at a board of education meeting, but also in the casual conversations that take place every day.
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Merely exhorting teachers to become political is not enough, of course. Convincing teachers who are already busy and overwhelmed to take on what seems to be just one more task is not easy. But I wondered, when I first began to think hard about this issue of advocacy, if lack of time is the only barrier standing in the way of educators entering a more public conversation about their teaching. And so I asked: Over the course of two intensive workshops on teachers and advocacy attended by about one hundred teachers, my colleague Laura Roop and I invited teachers to write about their reasons for shying away from this role (Fleischer and Roop, “Reaching Out” and “Taking It”). Time issues, as you may imagine, cropped up again and again, but variations on two other responses appeared almost as often. The first was that many of these teachers felt they had a lack of articulated knowledge of why they teach in the ways they do, i.e., a lack of a clear theoretical understanding of the issues behind certain practices. So, for example, while these teachers might know that certain practices are successful with their kids, they aren’t really certain about why that is the case. They have learned about such practices in a workshop or in college, and they have tried them and adapted them and made them their own, but they seem to have a hard time articulating to themselves why these practices fit in so well with their own stances in teaching.

The next most common answer was this: Most of the teachers we surveyed feel they have no idea how to communicate their beliefs to others, especially others they suspect might be opposed to their stances. They imagine the forces that object to their work as so strong and organized that they don’t even know where to begin to respond. And they feel uncomfortable being put in the position of conflict. At a workshop I recently attended, one teacher pushed this even farther. “As teachers, we are trained to be nurturers,” she told us, “to see all sides of the issues, to see things with all the shades of gray. That way of thinking and talking doesn’t make for a very good response in a public forum where everyone’s looking for sound bites.”

But teachers can do it. We all know teachers, like Cathy Gwizdala, who have been able to educate their own parent communities about best practices in English language arts. As we see from the story above, her choice to become more outspoken about her beliefs made a difference. As she felt more in command of her own knowledge, she was able to write a booklet for parents; in turn, after they read the booklet, her parents felt more knowledgeable and were thus better equipped to communicate with others—a broadening circle, beginning with the teacher.
And there are other teachers who also do an impressive job of helping parents and surrounding communities understand the curricular issues underlying our best practices. We have incidental, anecdotal accounts of what has worked in specific communities, anecdotes which help as we consider how what others have done might be transferred to our own situation. When I’ve shared Cathy’s story, for example, with various groups of teachers, everyone wants a copy of her booklet; everyone wants to know, “How can I do that?” Convinced that other teachers would have equally interesting ways of parent outreach, I began asking teachers I knew about how they educated the parents of the children in their classrooms. The teachers I spoke with came from a wide variety of classroom circumstances: different grade levels, different kinds of schools (suburban, urban, rural), different parental backgrounds (wealthy, poor, middle class; working parents, stay-at-home parents; single parent, dual parent, grandparents, and so on). This variety came to be important to me as I realized the means of outreach are not necessarily universal: The local circumstances of the school, the parents, and the students dictate, in large part, what kinds of approaches will be successful. A few of us began to talk in some depth, coming to realize more and more how important this kind of education was if we wanted to have our voices impact the public conversation, and, as we shared approaches, we began to learn from each other’s practice. Eventually, we developed some workshops about both our rationale for this work and approaches that have worked (we led workshops nationally at NCTE spring conferences in Charlotte and Albuquerque, and regionally at Michigan Reading Association and for a Goals 2000 group in Midland, Michigan). Responses to our workshops were extremely positive; other teachers seemed to be grasping for ideas on how to work with parents and took away a number of specific strategies that had been successful for the teachers with whom I was working.

As you read the chapter which follows this introduction, you will meet five of these teachers and hear some of the ways in which they have expanded and integrated their teaching programs to try to include the education of parents. Their stories certainly are not the only stories out there; neither are their strategies the only ones that can be successful in reaching out to parents. What I find intriguing about their words, though, is how a conscientious approach to informing parents plays out for them in some very different settings. What is also useful, I think, is what their experiences might trigger in another teacher’s mind about what might work in her or his particular circumstances. When Kathleen,
for example, talks about how she uses “teaching letters” to help educate the parents of middle school children about the language of poetry, another teacher might be inspired to try out the concept of a teaching letter, but in a very different way. When Carolyn speaks of an introductory picnic for all the children and parents in her multiage elementary classroom of fifty students, a high school teacher might be inspired to try another kind of introductory activity for the families of just one of his or her classes.

What inspires me in their work is the way in which each teacher’s attempts at outreach have led to parents’ increased understanding of why these teachers teach in the ways they do—and, in many circumstances, to the parents’ verbal expression of that understanding to other parents, to other teachers and administrators, and to others out in the community. I’m not talking about an all-out revolution here, but rather a quiet one, characterized by talk among parents and others that is beginning to counteract some of the other messages about education that they receive on an almost daily basis. I’ve come to believe—quite strongly—that a quiet revolution is where we need to begin.

But I also wonder if this kind of quiet revolution is enough. While I remain exhilarated by the fine work these teachers are doing with parents, and while I believe it is a start toward the kind of change that needs to take place, two concerns have stayed with me. First, I worry that while the teachers profiled in Chapter 2 are experiencing success with their parents because of the individual strategies they are adopting, these strategies might be seen by others as just that: a group of isolated exercises which results in other teachers acquiring a laundry list of ideas rather than a consistent outreach program. This lack of a consistent program leads to my second concern: Without a sustained, consistent approach to parent outreach, how can we effect the kind of long-term change we need—from the necessity of including teacher voices in all the conversations about educational issues to the specific information that needs to be part of the present conversations about reform? My fear is that while English educators and teachers are starting to learn a lot about parent outreach, we generally don’t know how to expand from the incidental, anecdotal accounts of how to work with particular parents in order to create a more sustained program of parent outreach that will help in creating a new mindset. And that’s what we really have to do: create a new mindset for people—about teachers, about the curriculum, about best practices.

Creating this new mindset in any significant, long-term way is no easy task, especially once we move beyond the level of the individual to
consider changing the minds of a group at large, such as a school board or a legislative body or even “the public.” And it becomes even more difficult to effect this kind of change when we feel under siege, as teachers have rightly felt in recent days when the attacks on English educators and language arts instruction in general have reached a crisis point, when our only option seems to be reacting to a way of thinking that seems pervasive. The Reading Excellence Act serves as a ready example of this. As Congress sat poised to pass a law that would limit, even disallow, approaches to staff development and reading instruction of the whole language variety, teachers were urged from all sides to react: to call and write their representatives, to write letters-to-the-editor, to publish press releases, all in the name of taking a strong stand against this legislation. NCTE became actively involved, starting a Web site with updated information as well as providing sample letters and responses for calling a legislator and producing the NCTE Action Handbook (which later evolved into a packet titled Shaping the Future of Education: A Guide to Political Advocacy for Educators and Administrators), with many examples of how to understand the legislative process and contact legislators on current issues affecting education. Numerous sessions at recent NCTE and other conferences have devoted themselves to this topic, such as Regie Routman and Donald Graves’s presentation “If Not Us, Then Who?” and Denny Taylor’s address to the Conference on English Education, both at the November 1997 NCTE Convention in Detroit.

The strategies that have been impressed upon teachers through these various forums are necessary and important ones. When under immediate attack, as teachers all over the country were with this proposed legislation, one needs to react, and to react quickly and strongly, with as many voices as possible. But relying on these reactive strategies alone to bring about long-term change is a bit like shutting the barn door after the cow is gone—i.e., responding after the battle lines are set and the terms of the discussion are defined. What we miss in this approach is the opportunity for teachers to be the ones who are actively setting the parameters of the conversation, helping to create public opinion—rather than being placed in a defensive position all the time.

What we need, I believe, is to find a way to balance this kind of reactive response with a more proactive one—reaching out to inform the communities around us before the crisis occurs, and as an everyday part of the work we do. The anecdote cited in the first pages of this chapter is a perfect example of what I mean by a proactive response:
Cathy Gwizdala took the time to inform the parents in her classroom about her pedagogy—before they even raised questions—as a way of helping them understand why they might see certain practices in her classroom. Then, when those practices came under attack by an outside force, the parents felt compelled to speak out—with knowledge, with vehemence, with conviction. Rather than being placed in a defensive position, struggling to explain to parents the rationale for inventive spelling, for example, after their hackles were raised by articles they had read or stories they had heard, Cathy was able to anticipate their questions and head off many of their concerns. What would happen if we could create a cadre of educators who approach parent outreach in this kind of ongoing, proactive way: seeing part of their role as one of constant education of parents, even when things seem to be going smoothly and parents are not raising any questions and complaints. Could a proactive approach of providing information and listening to concerns in a serious way head off problems down the road? Could a consistent program of proactive work make those moments when we need to be reactive a little easier, lessening the siege mentality that has pervaded and overwhelmed our work for the past few years?

Most teachers do not see this charge of parent and community outreach as part of their role at present. Ooms’s 1992 survey of first-year teachers indicates the amazing statistic that 70 percent of them felt parents were their adversaries (qtd. in Swap 156), a feeling I dramatically recall from my own first year of teaching when my voice quavered every time I had to call a parent, a task I avoided as much as I possibly could. And it’s no wonder. Teachers generally have little or no instruction in working with parents, other than some sessions in how to run a parent/teacher conference or how to get more parent volunteers in their class. And if we start thinking of the role in even more expansive ways, moving toward teachers working with parents in a consistent, proactive way, a way that will create long-term change with the goal of changing the public’s mind, we’re left, I fear, with few models of how to proceed.3

If so many teachers feel they don’t know how to take the kinds of stances that need to be taken in order to help change public perceptions of education, I began to ask myself, then who does? Are there other groups or individuals, outside of the world of education, who have been successful in this goal of creating new mindsets, who have been responsible for creating a shift in people’s perceptions? As a place to begin searching for models, I started thinking of all the shifts I know—grassroots changes in perspectives on social issues that have happened in my lifetime—and two immediately came to mind.
The first is the change in how people think about drinking and driving, brought about largely by the creation of MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving). In 1980 Candy Lightner’s thirteen-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver as the young woman walked down the street. As Lightner explains in her book *Giving Sorrow Words* (co-authored with Nancy Hathaway), she was shocked when she was told that although the man who committed this crime had had four prior arrests for drunk driving, he would probably get off with a slap on the wrist: “Lady, you’ll be lucky if he sees any jail time at all, much less prison. That’s the way the system works” (9). In part to assuage her grief, she began to talk to everyone she could think of about the horror of this response—to other parents whose children had been killed by drunk drivers, to various community groups—raising questions as to how such an action could be condoned, both by the public at large and in the legal system. Gaining the support of others through her vehemence and compassion, she gathered together with people to talk to legislators and ask them why they allowed such light penalties for such a heinous act. She thus began a public campaign both to change the public’s perception about drunk driving and to change the laws which governed such conduct: to make citizens recognize the reprehensible nature of such an act and to feel a moral responsibility to have a designated driver, to make the legislators realize that citizens would no longer put up with this conduct. “Today, most people understand that it’s not something to joke about,” she says, “it’s not macho; it’s not cool; it’s not funny. It’s a crime” (12). She, who describes herself as naive and unknowledgeable about mounting a campaign about anything, created what is known by many standards as the most successful grassroots initiative of the 1980s: Through her organizing campaign, she and her group, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, actually changed the general public’s response to drinking and driving.

About the same time that Candy Lightner was starting her campaign, a group of neighbors outside Buffalo found that they and their children were developing rare and serious diseases. As they searched for reasons for these illnesses, they discovered that their homes and their children’s school were built on an old toxic dump, which was oozing poison into groundwater. Relieved that they had discovered what they believed was causing the sickness, and convinced that once city officials had heard their pleas something would be done, they brought their concerns to the proper authorities—who refused to recognize the problem and refused to take any action.
One of the moms in the neighborhood was a woman named Lois Gibbs. Shocked by the lack of concern on the part of the city officials, she felt she didn’t have any choice but to do something—what, she didn’t know. Relying on what she later called “motherly instinct” (qtd. in Berkowitz, Local Heroes 109), Gibbs sought out respected scientists to help her understand the problem, garnered the support of her neighbors and friends, told her story to the media, and began to do her own research. She explains that she knew nothing about how to organize when she started but insists that once people recognize something is wrong, they “have a responsibility”: “You know more than most people,” she insists, “and you have the responsibility to share that, and you have the responsibility to pull these people together. . . . And every time you say you can’t do it, you go over and look your kid in the eye” (qtd. in Berkowitz, Local Heroes 115). As she convinced more and more people to join with her and spread the word about the hazardous waste in her community, the story began to take on a life of its own. Soon the national media camped on her doorstep for months at a time, and legislators began to take notice. Eventually the state of New York paid to relocate many of the families, a coalition of the state and federal governments and the original owners of the site paid for cleanup, and the most comprehensive cleanup law in the world, the so-called Superfund law, was passed by the United States Congress. Lois Gibbs has gone on to create her own organization, the Center for Health, Environment and Justice (formerly called the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste), to help other neighborhoods faced with the same problems. And “toxic waste dump” has become a household word.

What Lois Gibbs, Candy Lightner, and a host of others have done in order to effect change is known as community organizing, simply defined as “people working together to get things done” (Kahn 1). Community organizing generally takes place as a group of people come together initially because of a shared response to an injustice, a fear, an issue, a cause; as a group, they figure out how to make changes in the status quo. They learn to work together, to listen and set goals, and to discover the power within their numbers to make changes in ways that individuals just cannot.

As the spouse of an environmental activist who relies on community organizing techniques on a daily basis, I knew something about the subject. I had heard of Saul Alinsky and ACORN; I had a friend in the field of public health who talked about organizing in her work in prenatal care in downtown Detroit; my husband had for years worked at organizing various communities to rally around certain
environmental issues. Over and over, as I complained about press coverage of educational issues, I had heard him say, “What you should do is mount a campaign,” “What you need is the gossip factor,” “Why don’t you create a press strategy?” I would always nod, assuring him he was right, but that neither I nor the teachers I worked with had time to do something like that. But, really, I had no idea what he meant, or how to even go about doing any of these things. I watched him in awe, campaign after campaign, as a certain group would get swayed to the way of thinking he was promoting, but I had no clear vision for how he did it or for how community organizers do their jobs every day: how their work differs in different communities or what circumstances can make or break a campaign. Nor could I really imagine how that work might connect with the work of teachers. I only knew about the success of his work and that the images that kept cropping up for me about how people actually go out in a community and create changed attitudes were gleaned from these strong examples to which I had assigned this vague name of community organizing.

Lately, though, as I continue to be frustrated by the work of state and national legislatures and the articles I read in the newspaper, I’ve been coming back to the ideas my husband had impressed upon me. Could a look at community organizing help me think about outreach differently? Could we learn something from community organizing theory and practice that could translate to teachers? If we had a model of community organizing techniques, could we adapt it and use it regularly so that our outreach to parents would no longer be anecdotal and sporadic but rather consistent and sustained across various communities? Would it help us learn proactive measures, so that we didn’t always have to rely on reactive responses? Could it help us stop the band-aid approach we’re using now in order to prevent the kinds of crises in which we seem to be currently embroiled? What would change if teachers started to view themselves as community organizers?

Organizer Ernesto Cortes believes that teachers and organizers already have much in common:

Organizing is teaching. Like any organizer, a teacher stirs curiosity and imagination, connects to people and what’s important to them, and teaches them how to acquire the capacity to pursue their inclinations and their imagination. Organizing is getting people to understand the meaning of things and how the world works—and then acting cooperatively on that understanding. (Cortes 7)

I agree. I think that teachers are natural organizers. Think what we do every day to create and sustain communities in our classrooms. We take
a bunch of disparate individuals, sometimes up to thirty-five or forty at a time, who bring diverse backgrounds, experiences, socioeconomic factors, race, gender, interest, reading level, skills, strengths, and motivations, and somehow—at our best—manage to form a cohesive group. We use rites, rituals, and ceremonies (according to Ralph Peterson in *Life in a Crowded Place*); we coax and cajole, we help them find a common purpose, and we call upon a host of other strategies to create—in a few short months—a cohesive learning community. If we teachers can do this—at least with our students—we must have great knowledge about community organizing and a host of strategies of which we are often unaware. As Bill Berkowitz, a community organizer from the world of community health and social work, tells us, community organizing is “more than a matter of technical skill . . . effective community work is also a matter of mindset and particularly of the feeling that you can, should and will use the skills you already own to help others, to build supports, and to create desired change” (*Community Impact* 21–22).

Certainly, the teachers with whom I have worked and whom you will meet in this book have that mindset. They know that parents who are knowledgeable are the first line of defense against attacks and can become the voices of reason in a time of unreasonableness. They know that working *with* parents is just that: a two-way street in which people listen to each other and learn together. And they already own a number of the technical skills necessary to help others, to build support, to create change, although none of them, I am sure, would term their techniques “community organizing.” What I hope to show in this book is how teachers might be able to build upon this mindset and knowledge, expanding their ways of parent outreach by drawing upon the lessons of community organizing. Learning about community organizing, I believe, might strengthen our ability to enter the public conversation and change commonly held perceptions; it might help us consistently, thoroughly, and, most important, proactively create a new way of thinking about education.

To learn something about community organizing, I immersed myself in disciplines that were totally new to me and, I assume, to large numbers of my readers. And while I cannot claim to be an expert about the intricacies of community organizing, I have learned a lot—enough, I hope, to be able to explain some of the basic underpinnings of and motivations for this kind of approach to the teachers and English educators who read this book, in hopes that they will see its potential as a tool for our work. Starting in Chapter 3, as I lay out the parameters of a community organizing approach, you will discover that it finds a home in a number of disciplines: in social work, in public health, in
political science, and in natural resources, to name a few. As I searched for answers to my questions about this way of thinking, then, I found myself on floors of the main university library where I’d never been before; in other locations of the university library, often tucked away in the basements of buildings far across campus; in the city’s public library. I found myself reading unfamiliar authors, who were writing for unfamiliar presses, in words that took on new meanings. (*Strategy*, for example, is a word that carries very specific meanings in a community organizing world—and not the meanings I have given it thus far in this chapter; the word is further complicated by the different nuances it’s assigned depending on which strand of community organizing is using it.) To further my knowledge, I conducted interviews with community organizers. As their stories brought to life the words I’d been reading, I found myself fascinated by their commitment and knowledge, their imagination, and, most of all, their stamina. Among those whose words and stories inhabit this book:

- Dan Cantor, Executive Director of the New Party, a vital third party trying to make its way in mainstream U.S. politics, and a former organizer for ACORN;
- Renee Bayer, Community Academic Liaison Coordinator for the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan, and a longtime community activist whose work has ranged from environmental issues (cofounding the organization Recycle Ann Arbor) to social justice issues (cofounding the Nicaragua Medical Aide Project) to public health issues (organizing women on public assistance in one Detroit neighborhood in an education program about maternal child health issues);
- Tracey Easthope, a community organizer with the Ecology Center, a large environmental advocacy and education center in Ann Arbor, whose work ranges from organizing medical personnel against medical waste incinerators in local hospitals to stopping toxic waste dumps from being built in communities;
- Barbara Israel, a professor and chair of Health Behavior and Health Education at the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan whose work has ranged from her own community organizing projects in a number of settings (including auto plants) to teaching community organizing strategies and techniques to public health professionals;
- Andy Buchsbaum, Water Quality Project Manager for the Great Lakes Natural Resource Center of the National Wildlife Federation, a former attorney with the National Environmental Law Project (the litigation arm of the environmental and consumer advocacy organization Public Interest Research Group), and a former campus organizer for PIRG, who has also worked closely with Ralph Nader and his organizations.
These individuals’ different perspectives on the work they do and their understandings of how community organizing becomes a reality in various contexts and from various starting points helped me to think about community organizing from five different orientations, which I explain in some depth in Chapter 3: an education orientation, a planning/development orientation, a mobilizing orientation, a social action orientation, and an advocacy orientation.

Scribbled in the margins of my interview transcripts and reading notes are messages like this: “How do inservice nights for parents compare to neighborhood meetings for organizers?” “How are the characteristics of a good organizer like that of a good teacher?” “What about house parties? How could we use these?” and “Are teachers comparable to organizers? and parents to leaders? how do we ‘train’ parents like organizers train leaders?” These scribblings are indications, I think, of the immediate connections I consistently found between what community organizers do as a matter of course and what teachers might do. In Chapter 4, I try to make these connections clear, beginning with my vision of a community organizing model for teaching, a model that both brings together and remains true to what community organizers in their various approaches might consider common to their practice. The intent of this chapter is not to mandate a step-by-step process for community organizing, but rather to suggest some general components that teachers might consider for their own parent outreach programs if they recognize the rationale of wearing the hat of a community organizer. Just as Rothman refers to the “mixing and phasing” that real organizers use in their movement in and out of the various orientations toward community organizing (“Approaches”), in this chapter I connect how the individual attempts on the part of the teachers mentioned in Chapter 2 might fit into a model like this, giving the flavor of what a community organizing approach to outreach might look like.

If teachers are to take on the community organizing approach to their community outreach—to become, as I suggest in this text, teacher-organizers—they must learn how. In Chapter 5 I lay out some ideas to help teachers get started: from ways teacher educators might introduce the concept of advocacy in their methods courses to an approach teacher leaders might try out in their professional development for practicing teachers. Utilizing one of community organizing’s standard training approaches—scenario development and enactment—I demonstrate in that chapter how the model of Chapter 4 might work in real settings. Beginning with scenarios I created (based on true stories shared with me by teachers), I suggest how a community organizing
model might work in practice; I further suggest how to turn this scenario work into a process for teachers to think through their own situations and contexts.

Finally, a footnote to my process of discovery comes to mind. One lesson has been brought home to me over and over in my research into community organizing. Folks who, like me, have done extensive work in composition studies and English education pride ourselves on the interdisciplinarity of our fields—on the fact that our work truly has become a “blurred genre.” We look to such disciplines as women’s studies, anthropology, and psychology on a regular basis in order to stretch our understandings. As I began this research project and moved into fields of study beyond the margins of our normally wide range, I was struck by how the conversations which consume my colleagues and me are echoed in these other disciplines of political science, public health, social work, and environmental studies. Skimming through articles in their journals, I hear questions raised about the ethics of research and the various responsibilities researchers have for telling the stories of others. I read Israel and her colleagues as they identify key principles of community-based research, including in their concerns how the research must mutually benefit all parties in order to be ethical, how change in the community must be a primary concern of all research. I read Bryant’s Environmental Advocacy and am struck by the connections he finds between environmental advocacy and action research. As I read on and on, John Dewey’s name crops up often, as does Paulo Freire’s. My point is this: My immersion in these new disciplines not only opened my eyes to some new ways of thinking that will forever inform my world view, but also showed me the strong connections we need to continue to forge across buildings and libraries and thinkers. We have much to learn from each other—and many more conversations to share.

Notes

1. Although I use the term parents throughout this book, I—and the teachers with whom I have worked—are very sensitive to the fact that not all children live in either a one- or a two-parent household. For many of these children, the term parents might mean stepparents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, or other caring adults.

2. For a fuller exposé of this issue, see Denny Taylor’s Beginning to Read and the Spin Doctors of Science; for more on the general mischaracterization of educational issues in the popular press, see Berliner and Biddle’s The Manufactured Crisis.
3. Jim Vopat, for example, creates a wonderful model for parent outreach in his book *The Parent Project*, a model that meets many of the criteria I would set for a sustained program that goes far enough in effecting changed perspectives. The problem with this program, I have heard from a number of teachers, is that it seems too “big”—requiring more time and energy than many of them believe they can actually put forth.
Appendix

The following pages contain selected passages from Cathy A. Gwizdała’s pamphlet *Spelling Development of First-graders in a Whole Language Classroom*.
Spelling Development of First-graders in a Whole Language Classroom

by Cathy A. Gwizdala
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Page 4  A most wonderful quote about spelling
Page 5  Introduction
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Page 13 Response sheet. Please send this back to me.
Introduction

Note: Literacy is a word that I will use often in this booklet. To me, it means reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking and viewing, all developing in the same child, each at its own rate, with each part's growth enhancing the other parts. A literate person is an effective communicator, and is able to enjoy, as well as understand ideas, whether through reading, writing, listening, speaking or viewing.

Dear Parents,

You may have noticed that our classroom last year was different from most first grade classrooms that you had seen or knew about. We used no "reading books", spelling workbooks, phonics workbooks, no skill sheets, etc. In the absence of all these things, you may have wondered just how or if reading, spelling and phonics were taught at all.

Well, I am one of a growing number of teachers from all over the world who believes in the whole language philosophy. In a nutshell, this means that I believe that literacy development is natural, and develops in much the same way as your child's abilities to speak and walk. All these skills become more and more refined as your child grows older and has more chances to practice. (It's just like when they first learned to talk. You were thrilled at the first "Ma-ma-ma-ma-ma-ma" or "Da-da-da-da-da-da" that came out, and accepted it as the beginning of talk. In a whole language classroom, we're thrilled with the beginnings of writing where the spelling is "inventive" or "temporary", because we know that, as the children grow, the spelling will also mature, just as those "mama's and dada's" became clearer with more practice.)
As a teacher who believes in the whole language philosophy,

* I do not believe that reading and writing and spelling should be taught separately.

* I do not believe that all children can or should learn the same skill of reading or writing at the same time, or that each small reading, writing or spelling skill must be learned before the next, supposedly more difficult one may be introduced by the teacher.

* I do not believe that partial stories in the basal readers give the children a love for fine literature that will last them a lifetime.

* I do not believe that children are empty vessels, just waiting in their seats for the teachers to "Fill them up" with knowledge.

* I do believe that all the parts of literacy develop together, each enhancing the growth of the others.

* I do believe that, when children are given the opportunity and tools to practice reading and writing in their classrooms and at home, they will naturally learn the skills necessary to be good at both, without completing workbook pages for practice.

* I do believe that, after enjoying fine literature by listening as it's read by others, personally reading, and participating in extension activities, children will develop a lifelong love of good literature.

* I do believe that children can handle much of the responsibility for their own learning, and that, with guidance, they can and will seek information using resources such as encyclopedias, storybooks, videos, television programs and other people.
In order to teach in a way that supports these beliefs, I tried to create a classroom full of real literacy experiences. These real situations, coupled with the students taking so much responsibility for their own learning, made our classroom look and run very differently from traditional classrooms. Our classroom was often noisy, cluttered, and full of groups of students everywhere but in their seats.

A quick peek into our classroom door may have made you think that the kids were just having a good time while I sat around watching them. Let me assure you, those kids learned a great deal last year. (and I stayed very busy) Their literacy development went through the roof! As you know, your children kept journals all year. While they kept theirs, I also kept a journal on the computer. Throughout each day, during most of the school year, I typed in specific examples of things I’d seen or heard the kids do for the singular purpose of illustrating the literacy development of the children. I’d like to share just a few of those examples with you now. Remember, these are real examples from your children throughout the 1993-94 school year. I hope you enjoy them, and see how much they really were learning.
What Can Parents Do to Support the Whole Language Process?

You may be wondering what you can do to further your child's literacy development at home.

*When your child takes down the turning rod from the mini-blinds to point at words as she reads, as Kayla did, encourage her! That's very literate behavior, and we want to encourage that in all our children all the time.

*When your child wants to write all the time -- that's great! Provide as much paper as he needs, and encourage letter-writing, grocery-list writing, sign-making, etc., then really send the letters, take the lists to the store during shopping trips, and hang up the signs, so he can see the usefulness of his writing.

*Take frequent trips to the library. Your children love to read, and the books are all free!

*Listen to your child read as often as possible. While listening, try to concentrate more on making sure she gets the meaning of the entire selection, instead of focusing on perfect word-calling. It's okay for your child to make a little mistake once in a while.

*Let your child see you reading and writing as often as possible! While that may not seem very important, it's one of the best ways for you to show your child how much you value reading and writing.

*Try to provide a quiet time and place for your child to read and write. Every once in a while, turn off the TV, VCR, video games and stereos, and set aside the time for reading and writing.

*Come into the classroom anytime, and watch what wonderful things go on! You'll be as amazed as I was, I promise!
Parent Response Sheet
Please return to Mrs. Gwizdala

Dear Parents,

Now that you've finished reading this booklet about spelling development in our first grade classroom, please let me know what you think about it.

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

Do you think I should continue compiling these booklets for parents?_____ 

What should I include or how can I change them to make them better?________________________________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________

Thank you!

Signed

Cathy Gwizdala