

Towards A Chicago School of Youth Organizing

By Alyson Parham and Jeff Pinzino

Chicago has always occupied a special place in the American mind. As the symbolic capitol of "Middle America," Chicago has served as a testing ground for ideas that have influenced fields as varied as sociology, architecture, and economics. The city also has a rich history of community, labor, civil rights and, most recently, youth organizing. As an emerging field situated at the intersection of community organizing-mobilizing on self-interests to confront decision makers, youth development-cultivating the capacities and self-confidence of young people, and movement-style politics-mobilizing as part of a larger vision of social change, youth organizing is taking root in interesting ways in Chicago.

The character of Chicago's youth organizing work appears different from New York or Oakland -- sometimes markedly, sometimes subtly. Various factors contribute to these localized differences: the social dynamics of the city, the history and structure of particular organizations involved in youth organizing, and local culture to name a few. The infrastructure within which youth organizing groups operate is also a major factor. Elements of this include funders, intermediary organizations, training institutes, networks, publications, conferences, and shared methods- all of which support the development and expansion of the field.

This paper describes the current state of youth organizing in Chicago. It reflects the ideas and perspectives shared during a series of youth organizer convenings sponsored by the Woods Fund that asked "Is there a Chicago School of Youth

Organizing?" Preliminary feedback from youth organizers and funders who reviewed an advance draft of this paper is also included. While this paper provides broad strokes describing characteristics of Chicago's youth organizing efforts, these characterizations do not imply that the youth organizing field is monochromatic. Indeed, for each of these characteristics, there are important exceptions that underscore, if not prove, the rule.

The Chicago Factor-The Environment: Neighborhoods, Race, Income and Politics

The role of youth organizing in Chicago cannot be separated from the environment in which youth organizing work is carried out. Chicago is a city of diverse and segregated neighborhoods, typically defined by race and income. Historically, Chicago's community organizers helped educate and mobilize residents to fight for policy reform for their neighborhoods-sometimes at the expense of neighboring communities. Youth organizing in Chicago remains rooted in neighborhoods. A look at the names of some of the organizations doing noteworthy youth organizing is instructive: Albany Park Neighborhood Council, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Southwest Youth Collaborative, Northwest Neighborhood Federation.

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with strong local authority. For example, land use and housing decisions are made at the ward level, not at the city level. Every public school has a local school council with some budgetary and administrative control. Typically, youth organizing work in Chicago focuses on particular neighborhoods. Although at least one youth organizing group has successfully leveraged improvements in citywide school policy by collaborating with other groups across the city, it remains difficult for youth organizing groups to consistently organize youth around broader systemic change.

As with other cities across the country, many of Chicago's neighborhoods are becoming gentrified. Neighborhoods that once had some of the highest crime rates and lacked basic necessities including stores, safe and affordable housing and jobs, now are characterized by high-priced condominiums, boutique stores and increased law enforcement presence. Youth organizers typically fighting for the needs of low-income, under-served residents find the original characteristics of some neighborhoods changing as low-income residents move to other city neighborhoods and surrounding suburbs. While low-income residents still live in many neighborhoods, their voices are becoming noticeably muffled. How has this affected youth organizing efforts? The changing dynamics of Chicago's neighborhoods has resulted in a different prioritization of needs and decreased involvement of new residents making the work of youth organizing more challenging.

Some believe Chicago's political system intentionally or unintentionally helps promote the segregation of neighborhoods. By many accounts, Chicago continues to be one of the most racially segregated

cities in the country. Youth organizing in Chicago has a de facto concentration on addressing the needs of low-income youth of color. Unfortunately, Chicago's youth organizing groups generally fail to deal with institutional racism and don't promote multiracial coalitions.

Interestingly, while most of the youth organizing groups in Chicago focus on low-income neighborhoods comprised of people of color, the pool of youth organizing groups in Chicago leans heavily toward Latino and immigrant youth. Recognizing that much of the organizing movement in Chicago was born out of the civil rights movement, established African American groups engaged in youth organizing are almost nonexistent. Additionally, it appears many community organizations within African American neighborhoods in Chicago no longer engage in youth organizing work. While numerous youth organizing groups do exist, significant pockets of Chicago's neighborhoods appear void of African American youth organizing efforts. A thorough analysis is needed to explore whether politics, racism or other factors have contributed to the limited number of African American youth organizing groups.

Cultural barriers also affect youth organizing work in Chicago's neighborhoods. Several immigrant cultures exist in Chicago and for many immigrant neighborhoods, addressing inequalities -- such as race or privilege is a sensitive issue. Youth organizers with immigrant parents indicated lack of parental support for their organizing efforts. Parents may not support their youth participating in activities that might cause attention to or go counter to their customs and beliefs. Diversity in culture is another factor that further

influences the field of youth organizing in Chicago.

The Chicago Factor -- Infrastructure: Community Organizing Institutions, Funders, Training Institutes, and Intermediaries

The work of Saul Alinsky in developing a community organizing infrastructure in Chicago continues to be recognized by practitioners across the world. Today, Chicago serves home to four major community organizing training institutes and dozens of local organizations established in the 1970's. Several foundations unabashedly support community organizing. Projects such as the Chicago Community Organizing Capacity Building Initiative and the Community Organizing Award are funders' collaboratives designed to help the community organizing field. Clearly, Chicago youth organizing has been nurtured in the cradle of community organizing.

A significant number of youth organizing groups in Chicago developed as the youth arm of adult-focused community organizations. Often, these "projects" began at the request of adult leaders who believed youth should have a voice regarding youth issues as the adult voice developed relative to other community issues. These projects generally hire youth organizers with money from Chicago organizing funders, send them to conventional community organizing training, and live in the context of organizations that have a well-defined understanding of what community organizing is and isn't. As a result, youth organizing in Chicago looks a lot like other local community organizing. This is different than other parts of the country where youth organizing groups may have another salient factor such as political

education and arts engagement.

Some convening participants indicated that leaders in their adult-led organizations have learned from youth and now recognize the importance of having youth leadership integrated into all aspects of the organizations including the board of directors. One youth leader testified, "Before I joined youth organizing, I didn't know my Alderman. It is not something you learn in the classroom. It is amazing that I have learned so much in two years. I am now a member of the Board and I make the same decisions and have the same amount of power as people 20 years older. It is awesome." Today, more leaders of community organizations recognize that youth leaders are capable of handling increasing responsibility. Community organizations supporting youth organizing provide youth with high-level opportunities for leadership.

Chicago also nurtures youth-led organizations. One organizer from the convenings offered a definition: "Building a youth-led organization is building an institutional voice for youth and having it run by youth." This structure has proven to be the most difficult to sustain as youth-led groups constantly struggle to convince area funders of the legitimacy of their work and ability to affect change without the direct influence of adults.

Almost all the youth organizing groups in Chicago operate with limited staff. If organizations supporting youth organizing experience reductions in funding, the youth organizer positions are typically the first to be eliminated, or the staff reassigned to other projects within the organization.

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Defining The Work

Tom Gaudette was one of Saul Alinsky's earliest full-time organizers. His major organizing took place in the Northwest area of Chicago; Northwest Community Organization (NCO), founded in 1961, is still talked about by Chicagoans. Gaudette was interviewed by Peggy Knoepfel in 1989 for *Illinois Issues*.

Tom Gaudette: I had a guy, Bob Smith, a minister, whose job was to organize the kids. They had their own youth convention one month before [the adults]. They set it up and had elections and a guest speaker and cut issues.

- Crime. "Who's going to protect these little kids? Fifteen, ten years old. Who's going to protect the women if the police don't?" We will!
- Drugs. "Suppose we want to get rid of drugs, what do we do? Where do we go?" [The kids] made us open up a drug clinic.
- Jobs. "What the hell's the use of going to school?" But it wasn't a socialist, a social-action person. It wasn't me. It was them getting up and saying, "What's the use of going to school? I can't get a job. You don't want me."

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"Youth organizing presumes young people are not apathetic but rather discouraged and need opportunities."

-A participant from one of the recent Chicago convenings.

Youth organizing work rests largely on the infrastructure of community organizing and incorporates the rigor of community organizing. Chicago's youth learn the same organizing tools as adults such as conducting power analysis, making demands, participating in direct action, being responsible for turnout, and negotiating with targets. They hold up victories as evidence of their success, similarly to traditional community organizations.

Although heavily influenced by Chicago community organizing, youth organizing has the additional burden of expectations that surround any work with at-risk youth -- that participants should be better equipped to survive adolescence, graduate high school, possibly go to college, and become healthy adults. Youth development professionals have developed frameworks that connect these expectations to the presence of certain factors in a young person's life, such as family support, or a community that values youth. Youth organizing sees the organizing process itself as developmental, and highlights aspects of it that are developmental for youth:

- Building the skills and capacities of young people
- The integration of culture
- Paying attention to the development of youth leadership
- Encouraging ongoing evaluation of and reflection on efforts

Chicago's youth organizers remain aware of their responsibility for the safety and well-being of the youth involved in organized campaigns or other special projects. They also recognize the responsibility to work with youth to uphold commitments to school and family.

Monitoring the degree of influence they have over youth remains one of the continuing challenges for youth organizers who may possess different economic and educational backgrounds than the youth in the neighborhoods. One organizer questioned: "How do you make sure you are not manipulating the young people?"

In response to these concerns, Chicago's youth organizing groups have developed innovative strategies for integrating youth development elements into their respective organizing models. Youth organizers readily acknowledge that their focus promotes positive changes in youth as individuals and the communities in which they live. One organizer stated "...we have attempted to take the best of both community organizing and youth development in developing a solid youth organizing model."

Consistent with other communities across the country, youth organizing in Chicago addresses priority issues identified by youth. Some of these issues include the quality of public education, community-police relations and equitable access to institutional services. Youth organizers have successfully implemented campaigns-as individual organizations and in collaboration with other groups-relative to education and public safety. Beyond campaigns, Chicago youth organizing groups also administer programs designed to help develop youth as socially and politically informed leaders positively contributing to their communities. In analyzing the effectiveness of their

efforts, several youth organizing groups identified researching policy-related issues, analyzing information, conducting outreach to the media, developing strategies for change, setting an agenda, public speaking and negotiating as the skills developed by youth.

For example, the Southwest Youth Collaborative concentrates on both informal and formal training. This organization's formal training, co-facilitated by adults and youth, includes six sessions on organizing. Participants develop critical thinking and analysis skills along with organizing skills. The informal training provided by the Southwest Youth Collaborative allows the participants to directly apply their new skills to test the participant's competencies. They administer pre- and post-assessment tools to secure feedback from the youth and measure the effectiveness of the entire training process.

Other youth organizers indicated their organizations' training programs include field exposure. Some groups take youth on advocacy trips to Springfield or Washington D.C. Others provide opportunities for youth to attend national or international conferences. Exposing young people to other communities enables them to experience different environments, ideas, people, and campaigns.

Funding Youth Organizing in Chicago

Generally, "youth organizing" is not a separately identified funding category for most Chicago area foundations; it is part of other funding categories. Community organizations that have used general operating grants to develop their youth organizing have been the most successful at sustaining their work. Their reputation

for creating change primarily with adults on a variety of issues gives them relative financial freedom to develop a youth organizing program by trial and error over a period of years. Independent youth organizations, especially start-up organizations, have had much more difficulty in funding their work.

Funder activism to legitimize youth organizing in Chicago has been sporadic over the last decade, although high attendance at recent meetings of funders on the subject is a positive sign. Many of the recent participants in these conversations fund other youth development strategies, and are attracted by the potential of youth organizing to positively affect adolescent development. These participants are creating a shift in the funder dialogue around youth organizing. While the expectation that youth organizing should have the rigor of community organizing will not go away, there is an additional expectation that youth organizing have the rigor of conventional youth development. The field will necessarily move to respond to this expectation.

Where Do We Go From Here? New Directions for Youth Organizing in Chicago

After several convenings, the question "Is there a Chicago School of Youth Organizing" is still unresolved. Although the trends in Chicago youth organizing don't yet have the intention or the coherence that characterize a "school," there is an unmistakable momentum among funders and practitioners of youth organizing that makes Chicago a place to watch for new ideas and methods of practice. Up to this point the state of practice in Chicago has been an unconscious series of responses to a particular set of local circumstances. The dialogues uncovered

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That's different. Then they would come to me at the adults' convention and demand support.

Peggy Knoepfel: How did the adults feel?

TG: See they're organized, there's no mob. That's the whole point—the difference between a mob and an organization. They had to ask approval to get into the convention. Credentials. They had to have a place to sit. We purposely put them in a certain place. They could get up to the microphone and speak just like anybody else. Just like adults. And they loved it because they had power. When the people all approved whatever it was they wanted, just like adults they cried. We had people with us -- "What happened?" All of a sudden, here we go. We respect each other. To me that was exciting...

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a strong interest for a forum where youth organizers could engage colleagues around issues of youth organizing, and effectively speak to funders about it. Since the initial series of Woods Fund convenings, Chicago youth organizers have hosted several independent discussions related to practice and funding of youth organizing. Furthermore, a handful of funders has begun meeting regularly to talk about issues related to funding youth organizing in Chicago. These dialogues are looking to open up new avenues of support for youth organizing, whether as community organizing, youth development, or other categories that make sense to potential funders. An emerging dialogue in youth organizing has begun to take shape, and is helping funders and practitioners to develop a common frame of reference.

These conversations indicate a beginning of intentional development of the field. Both organizers and funders are taking a step back and looking at what needs to be in place in order for the field to flourish. An example concerns the historic disconnect between most Chicago youth organizing and identity issues. Examining how groups in the West have worked to address issues such as race, religious, sex and gender discrimination, Chicago groups have recently taken as a serious topic of discussion how to address issues of identity and inequality with teenage leaders.

Finally, initial conversations have uncovered several new approaches to youth organizing by emerging organizations in Chicago. Mikva Challenge is exploring ways that youth can leverage change in the electoral process. The Interfaith Youth Core connects youth for social action across religious diversity. The Multicultural Youth Project is learning

how to connect youth organizing across African, Eastern European, Latino, and Southeast Asian immigrant communities. New models will continue to flourish in Chicago to the extent that they are incubated and allowed to influence the dialogue. Already these efforts have begun to affect the way more established youth organizing groups look at their work.

Ideas in numerous fields have earned a level of credibility through their application in Chicago. It is hoped that an ongoing dialogue on youth organizing in Chicago will similarly inform an emerging field of practice. The Chicago School of Youth Organizing continues to crystallize. For funders and youth organizers, the tasks ahead involve supporting, extending and sharing lessons learned to continue developing this emerging field. †

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