For decades urban school reformers have tackled the puzzle: the American school system, envisioned as the principal social institution for upward mobility, often reproduces racial and social class stratification. Most reform scholarship focuses on altering in-school processes to address this dilemma, but a substantial scholarship calls for the need to expand reform to forces beyond the classroom like families (Rothstein 2004). This research finds that social class shapes children’s educational outcomes through a variety of family mechanisms such as parents’: child-rearing or socialization processes; awareness of teacher expectations and reception at schools; levels of political clout and collective efficacy; and financial resources (Kohn and Schooler 1983, Lareau 1987, Furstenberg et. al. 1995, Noguera 2005, Horvat et. al. 2003, Connell et. al. 1982, and Epstein 1995). Working- and middle- class parents approach their children’s schooling in distinct ways; schools are not socially neutral institutions but rather reward the parenting practices of the dominant class (Lamont and Lareau 1988).

Two literatures study parent-school relations. Parent involvement scholarship investigates how social class shapes the way families relate to schools and ultimately student outcomes. Parent empowerment scholarship advocates altering the parent-school relationship in ways that grants parents more authority in shaping their children’s educational outcomes. Each scholarship contributes to a larger discussion of how power relations between families and schools shape educational outcomes.

Since the passing of reforms supporting more parent empowerment in schools, many changes have occurred that reshape the social context of schooling. The growth
of community groups engaging parents in schools and the dissemination of knowledge about class-based power inequalities have restructured the sort of roles parents play in schools. How do middle- and a working-class parent organization shape parent-school relationships given these changes? To address this question, I conducted an ethnography of how two parent organizations representing different class-based constituencies shape the way members relate to public schools. The schools and groups studied are located in the ethnically and economically mixed neighborhood of Westbridge, Chicago. ¹ I show that the working-class organization brokers apprentice relations between parents and teachers while the middle-class group facilitates trustee relations between parents and the school. Schools’ institutional demands, parents’ initial fears, and parents’ relative cultural capital structure these relations and expressions of elite power highlight the dilemmas facing parent organizations.

Class and Parent Involvement

How does social class shape the way parents relate to schools and ultimately student outcomes? Scholarship shows that middle- and working-class parents have different cultural and social practices that produce unequal educational outcomes.

Middle-class parents possess the academic skills as college-educated adults, have the personal relationship with educators, participate in school organizations, and more likely engage the media (i.e. books, television specials, and magazines) to support their child’s cognitive development (Lareau 1989, 1987b; Epstein & Dauber 1991; Connell et. al. 1982; Horvat et. al. 2003). Through organized engagement, middle-class parents possess more political clout or social capital at schools relying on weak social ties to other like-

¹ This name as well as all places and people in this paper are pseudonyms.
minded professionals to collectively mobilize the “information, expertise, and authority” to tailor schools to their children’s needs (Horvat et. al. 2003). Participation in governance activities places middle-class parents in roles that grant them decision-making power to shape schools according to their interests (e.g. school administration, classroom volunteers, fundraisers, see Woyshner 2005). Middle-class parents relate to schools with a “sense of entitlement,” Lareau (1997) argues, which supports their intervention and they demand individualized attention for their children. At the same time, schools reward “middle-class” approaches to schooling with detailed information about schools and tailored services for their children (Lareau 1987).

On the other hand, working-class parents possess less of the dominant cultural capital or the institutionally-supported “high status cultural attributes, codes, and signals” (Carter 2003). They tend to defer control of their children’s cognitive development to school professionals operating from a “sense of constraint” (Lareau 1987). This means participating less in school organizations, knowing less about school expectations, and having fewer relationships with teachers and other parents than their middle-class peers (ibid.). Social problems in the school’s community and the perceived apathy of parents negatively influences teacher perceptions of parents, impedes the building of trusting relationships between parents and schools, and undermines school improvement in urban neighborhoods (Stoelinga et. al 2008; Epstein & Dauber 1991, Payne 1997).

These class-based dynamics influence education outcomes. While research on what types of parent involvement matter and its direct effect on student outcomes has been mixed, certain parent activities do prevent behavioral problems (McNeal 1999, Domina 2005) and instill in children the link between academic achievement and their
future (Sanders 1998). Other research suggests that a school’s general level of parent volunteerism—especially in economically disadvantaged schools—can have a positive effect on the teacher’s willingness to engage other parents, the general school climate, and a child’s academic achievement (Brown 1998, Comer 2000, Payne 1997, Epstein 1987 Stoelinga et. al. 2008, Sui-Chu & Willms 1996). In tandem, efforts to increase parent collective involvement enjoy broad institutional support, considered by policymakers a key mechanism for improving public schools.

A smaller scholarship also explores the consequences of middle-class involvement in diverse school environments (Brantlinger 2003, Cucchiara 2008, Cucchiara and Horvat 2009, McGrath and Kurlioff 1999, Wells and Serna 1996). Policymakers and urban developers presume that creating more mixed-income schools will provide the middle-class capital and role-modeling necessary to improve city schools (Popkin et al. 2004; Khadduri et al. 2003; Lipman 2008). However, middle-class parents’ typical choices of where to live economically segregate their families from working-class families and school districts (Orfield and Lee 2005). The smaller proportion of families choosing to raise children in cities often institutionally distances their kids from working class children by enrolling them in elite schools. Other research suggests that parents who send their children to socially-mixed, less elite schools find ways to strategically stratify resources in ways that privilege their own middle-class children (Cucchiara 2008, Desena 2006). Earlier studies on tracking, also find middle- and upper-middle class parents engaging in practices that hoard opportunities for their kids at the expense of the school’s poorer and minority children (McGrath and Kurlioff 1999, Wells and Serna 1996). Nevertheless, some middle-class parents in socially diverse schools exhibit a
collective orientation toward involvement engaging in activities that benefit non middle-class children (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009). Overall, these findings suggest that middle-class parents collectively and individually exercise their class power most often in ways that privilege their own children. Scholarship comparing middle- and working-class family experiences in institutions has illuminated the key cultural, social, and institutional mechanisms that reproduce class stratification.

**Approaches to Parent Empowerment**


**Consumer-Market Paradigm**

The consumer-market paradigm attempts to reform schools at the institutional level by extending market principles—i.e. customer satisfaction, performance metrics for evaluation, and competition—to public education systems (Ball 2006, Chubb & Moe 1990). *Politics, markets, and America’s schools* is a widely referenced and representative work describing this model (Chubb & Moe 1990). Instead of channeling reform through
schools, the authors recommend a system “built around school autonomy and parent-student choice rather than direct democratic control” (ibid.25). Using private schools as a model, they argue that what makes these institutions superior is that: “Society does not control them directly through democratic politics but rather controls them indirectly through the marketplace” (27). Democratic, pluralistic politics often relies on electing people to governance positions who “rule by coercion” meaning they compete and win to “specify the legitimate means and ends for everyone” (29). Market control on the other hand, decentralizes authority to individual consumers. Like consumers, families unsatisfied with their local school would be free to “exit” and choose a school they prefer (Hirschman). The assumption is that schools not serving interests, needs, or values of the community experience less demand (e.g. low enrollment) and “close” like a bad businesses. Under the market model, parents and students are said to have more influence over policy because the model forces responsiveness, encourages choice, and eliminates bad schools through natural selection (Chubb & Moe 1990).

**Civic-Democratic Paradigm**

The civic-democratic paradigm attempts to reform schools by extending principles of democratic localism—i.e. public participation, community control, and local flexibility—to public education systems (Byrk et. al. 1998). Anthony Byrk and associates’ book *Charting Chicago school reform: democratic localism as a lever for change* analyzes 1980s-1990s Chicago school reform and is an often-referenced model of the civic-democratic paradigm. Supporters of this approach, like consumer-market advocates, believe that the centralized bureaucratic structure of schools engendered a lack
of responsiveness to local needs. Instead of interpreting direct democracy as a barrier to reform, however, they believe institutionalizing it at the local level facilitates reform. Chicago reformers believed that “resources and authority should be devolved to local school communities, predicated on a belief that local communities can more effectively solve local problems” (Byrk et. al. 1998:16). They also advocate a “fundamental rebalancing of power away from these professionals and toward parents and community members” (17).

One of the consistent challenges to parent empowerment theories—both civic- and market-based—has been that they do not explicitly address the fundamental class-based inequalities in parenting that influence how parents relate to schools. Instituting parent governance of schools through the creation of councils is one common civic-democratic proposal. Critics argue this reform does not inherently restructure parent-school power imbalances; principals and teachers can co-opt working-class parents accustomed to deferential relations with school officials (Vincent 1996). Expanding parent choice of schools beyond their local assigned option is one common consumer-market proposal. Critics argue this reform does not address middle-class families’ privileged consumer position in educational markets. By virtue of their class position, they possess more weak ties to other professionals in non-local networks gaining them comprehensive information about schools; working-class parents, alternatively, use strong ties based on family networks or a child’s social circle that yield less detailed information (Ball 2006, Cucchiara 2008, Desena 2005). Furthermore, middle-class incomes can support affluent suburban living and private city schools further enhancing their consumer market options and privilege vis-à-vis working class parents (Noguera
Finally, market competition for students and schools’ pressure to report high test scores makes middle-class children “valued consumers” relative to their lower performing working-class and low-income peers (Cucchiara 2008). Under-resourced schools with many lower income students remain the most vulnerable to the market’s test score based sanctions (Lipman and Haines 2007).

**Contemporary Parent Empowerment Dynamics**

Since these parent empowerment paradigms emerged many changes have occurred that reshape the social context of parent involvement. Today, the consumer-market paradigm operates through two relatively new features of public education: accountability systems and school choice policies. The federal law No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Chicago Public School District’s Renaissance 2010 (Ren2010) initiatives are examples of accountability policies or standards-based reforms. Both use student performance on standardized tests to measure school quality. Consistently failing to meet scoring expectations can result in school restructuring, which can mean replacing all the staff under No Child Left Behind or closing a school and reopening another as a public charter school permissible under both initiatives. Raising test scores is a common goal among accountability policies, so not surprisingly, a 2007 survey of Chicago Public School principals identified this goal as the most difficult challenge they faced (Stoelinga et. al. 2007). School choice constitutes a second manifestation of the consumer-market paradigm. Prior to school choice, parents’ citizenship mattered most as one sent children

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2 Established in 2001, NCLB requires that each state: develop content and achievement standards in every subject and administer tests to measure students’ progress in those subjects (No Child Left Behind website). Failing to meet state expectations four or more consecutive years results in school restructuring—e.g. replacing most of the staff or reopening the school as a public charter school—to dramatically rearrange the school’s structure. The Chicago Public School Renaissance 2010 initiative uses similar metrics to evaluate schools. It closes 60 to 70 public schools and replaces them with 100 schools, two-thirds of which are publicly funded, privately-run charter schools. Every five years a school’s test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates must meet certain standards to remain open.
to the assigned school based on where the family resided—which problematically fell along race and class lines (Massey & Denton 1993). As citizens, parents in neighborhoods with deteriorating public institutions suffered silently, tried to make improvements, or moved to another neighborhood. In response, policies like No Child Left Behind and Ren2010 promote school choice; both (albeit at different scales) allow families assigned to poorly performing schools to send children to another public school. Market competition for student bodies or enrollment, these choice policies assume, will force “bad” schools to improve or be eliminated (Lipman & Haines 2007). In the civic-democratic paradigm, parent empowerment means having voice and not experiencing exclusion in the public sphere. This vision guided the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 that devolved resources and authority to local school councils—consisting mostly of parents—charged with approving the school budget, developing and monitoring school improvement plans, and evaluating the school principal.

Community organizations are increasingly involved in education issues. Warren (2005) explains that community organizations—usually non-profit entities operating autonomous from the schools—have become increasingly involved in school issues.

This new movement has historical roots both in John Dewey’s conception of democratic, community-centered education and in the community-control movements of the 1960s. But it has emerged over the past fifteen years with renewed vigor and distinctive strategies in a series of important but little studied experiments (Warren 2005: 134).

The agendas of many contemporary community organizations reflect an understanding of how power imbalances shape parent-teacher relations. Recent works alter the traditional meaning of parent empowerment defined as taking power away from school officials and giving it to parents. Instead scholarship on working-class parent empowerment define it as “power-sharing”:
School personnel develop trusting and respectful relationships with parents, emphasize family strengths and avoid blaming parents for student difficulties, and facilitate involvement by addressing parents’ time and resource constraints and moving beyond traditional family-school activities (Lopez et. al. 2005: 83). Power-sharing or collaboration requires building social capital—“resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between and among people” (Warren 2005: 136)—between parents and teachers (Lopez et. al. 2005, Warren 2005, Bolivar and Chrispeels 2010). Warren (2005) argues that community organizations that build successful relationships between parents and schools build “relational power” between parents and schools. Many community groups have a history of building unilateral power or “power over” others or “the capacity to get others to do your bidding” to serve their members’ interests (Smock 2004, Warren 2005). “Relational power emphasizes a different aspect, the ‘power to’ get things done collectively” (Warren 2005: 138). Unlike the former version—which creates winners and losers—relational power facilitates win-win situations. His data on “organizing around education,” goes beyond service models that treat parents as clients for social services. He highlights cases of teacher-elites sharing power and concludes with a more cooperative definition of empowerment: “organizing fosters collective leadership development and empowers parents, it provides a way to restructure power relations to move toward more truly cooperative relationships between teachers and parents” (164).

Similar to Warren (2005), Lopez et. al. 2005 also develops a model for how parent organizations shape parent-school power relations. They find groups principally engage in “capacity building” defined as the “elements needed to translate family involvement goals into effective participation processes” (79-80). Capacity building occurs at the individual, relational, and organizational level. Empowerment begins at the
individual level where organization leaders and/or schoolworkers change parents’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes around schooling. At the relational level, organizations shape parent-school relations by “creating more effective relations between families and schools, usually by bridging differences based on culture, class, professionalism, and power” (80). Community organizations do facilitate the exchange of social knowledge between teachers and community members that improve parent-teacher relations (Bolivar and Chrispeels 2010, Stoelinga et. al 2008, Lopez et. al. 2005).

New policies, the growth of community organizations engaging parents in schools, and the dissemination of knowledge about class-based power inequalities—I hypothesize—have shaped the sort of roles parents assume in schools today. Fine (1993) wrote at a time when much speculation existed as to whether parent empowerment reforms would facilitate parent control and what new roles parents would occupy at schools:

Together, perhaps oddly, [progressives and conservatives] are pressing parental involvement/empowerment in the vanguard of educational reform. Sometimes parents are being organized as advocates for their children, other times as teacher bashers, often as bureaucracy busters, more recently, as cultural carriers, increasingly as consumers (683). This paper examines the roles parent organizations construct for members and the sort of power relations they enforce.

Recent scholarship on urban revitalization shows how new consumer-market policies reproduce traditional middle- and working-class power arrangements (Cucchiara 2008, Lipman 2009). Others study non-profit organizations that empower working-class and low-income families with the elite-supported social and cultural capital to support their children’s academic development (Bolivar and Chrispeels 2010, Lopez et. al. 2005, Warren 2005). A more complete portrait of contemporary parent-school power relations
in cities would include both middle- and working-class parent experiences and the organizations that represent them. This paper contributes a comparative study of how middle- and a working- class parent organization in the same heterogeneous urban neighborhood shape parent-school relationships in different ways.

**Setting, Organizations, and Method**

**Neighborhood Setting**

From its history as an entry-point for immigrant groups to its current gentrification, Westbridge, Chicago has always been a socially mixed community. Polish, German, Scandinavian and Russian Jewish immigrants moved into Westbridge following World War I (Local Community Fact Book 1990). Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating in the 1980s, an influx of Latino immigrants mostly from Puerto Rico and Mexico moved to the neighborhood. White middle-class professionals arrived in the 1990s stabilizing white ethnic flight and concentrating on the neighborhood’s east side. Although not solely an urban phenomena, in most cases gentrification refers to the relocation of middle-class people and private investment capital to the city (Smith 2002, Zukin et. al. 2009). From 1990 to 2000, median home prices also grew by 120% compared to only a modest 28% increase citywide. The population size and homeownership rate remained stable while residents’ education level increased, with 24% of residents over twenty-five possessing a college degree compared to only 12% a decade prior. Ethnically, the population did not change from 1990-2000. Changing socioeconomic status more than race and ethnicity characterizes Westbridge’s recent gentrification (see table below).

**Table 1: Changes in Westbridge from 1980-2000**
Data collection took place from January 2009 to February 2010 and used ethnographic sources and organization documents. The ethnography included participant observations at numerous group activities and school events. I also conducted six semi-structured interviews and seventeen formal interviews with parents, leaders, and principals. Other data sources include organization publications (newsletters, training manuals, marketing materials), the FOL list serve, and publications from the Neighborhood Parents Network.

I selected the Westbridge, Chicago neighborhood as a unique case study for a few reasons. First, it remained socially mixed with gentrifying, middle-class families who sent their children to a local public school. Previous research on school choice in heterogeneous, urban neighborhoods often finds middle-class parents choosing private

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\[\text{According to 2000 census data, the neighborhood is 27% White and 65% Latino; twenty-four percent of the population has a college degree while 18% remains below the poverty line. I determined the neighborhood was gentrifying based on it fitting the following criteria: significant population change, increasing percentage of residents with bachelor’s degrees, rising property values, and the formation or dissolution of new resident constituencies (Brown-Saracino 2007).}\]
education (DeSena 2006). Second, I purposely selected a neighborhood not located near
highly prized resources (e.g. in the central business district or on a lakefront). Many
areas experience middle-class in-migration without these motivators, so I wanted to study
a less sought after neighborhood’s education market. Third, school-related community
based organizations needed to be present, so I could examine to what extent they shaped
parent experiences in the local education market.

**Westbridge Community Organization (WCO)**

The WCO works in many Westbridge schools, but this paper focuses on the
eighteen parents currently forming the Adams Elementary parent group. While members
may have lacked the human capital or knowledge about how the school functions, their
occupational statuses as homemakers and part-time workers make them available for
working at the school. They mainly volunteer in classrooms, some help with crossing
guard and security duties, and about half of the current membership holds leadership
positions in the school’s governance groups. Group members are mostly immigrant and
second-generation Latinas with less than a high school education. Members’ husbands
hold a mix of low-skilled jobs—e.g. food preparation and janitorial work—and skilled
employment—e.g. bus transportation and mechanic work. Fathers do not frequently
participate in the organization and only a handful of members are non-Latino, so Latina
women dominate this organization’s rank-and-file.

**Friends of Lorel Elementary School (FOL)**

FOL has over eighty listserv members and twenty core members who regularly
volunteer in FOL activities. Members mainly market and fundraise for the school. A few
members hold leadership positions in the school’s governance groups. FOL attracts the
“artsy type” or “hipster” parents, two leaders explained. Core members hold occupations in the creative industry (i.e. website design, music, and marketing), education, social work, non-profit, and the computer-programming fields. Mostly white, college-educated, and established urbanites join Friends of Lorel. Their kids are primarily in pre-kindergarten to second grade.

Methods

Data collection took place from January 2009 to February 2010 and used participant observation, interview, and organization documents. The ethnographic component included participant observation at numerous group activities and school events. It intended to capture the interpersonal and organizational dynamics shaping parent-school relationships. Using snowball sampling, I conducted twenty-three semi-structured interviews with parents, leaders, and principals. Leadership and principal interviews occurred toward the end of my field time and focused on the power dynamics between the school and community organization. Interviews with rank-and-file parents occurred in Spanish and English and sampled the average member’s experience. Other data sources include organization publications (newsletters, training manuals, marketing materials), the FOL list serve, and publications from the Neighborhood Parents Network. The FOL list serve chronicled the organization’s interaction with Lorel from FOL’s inception making it an especially useful source for determining the organization’s intended way of relating to schools. In sum, these sources helped me comprehend each group’s goals within the broader socio-historical context of their partnership with schools.

Institutional Demands
Recent parent empowerment scholarship focuses less on the conditions under which teachers and principals are willing to reach out and partner with community organizations (Warren 2005:165). I find that new institutional demands rooted in the parent empowerment paradigms can lead principals to seek partnerships with community organizations. The nature of these demands shapes the roles and relationships community organizations broker for parents.

**Boosting student enrollment in a competitive local market**

FOL began as a discussion between Joan Adams and Kirk Smith at a local bar about why so few of their peers sent their children to Lorel Elementary. After presenting a number of solutions to the principal, she explained that the school faced an enrollment problem. From 1990 to 2000, the population of children declined in the Lorel area at a rate faster than the rest of the neighborhood. The city of Chicago as a whole, on the other hand, experienced a 5% increase in the number of children under age 18 from 1990 to 2000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lorel Area Population</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
<th>Westbridge</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>3392</td>
<td>-12.10%</td>
<td>26708</td>
<td>-4.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>3527</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>26144</td>
<td>-2.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2874</td>
<td>-18.50%</td>
<td>22746</td>
<td>-13.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Between 2001 and 2006 the student population had declined 17% (see table below).

| Table 2: Lorel Elementary School Change |
Lorel school boundaries captured a majority of the new middle class families and this population either had no children or chose private or public magnet school education. Most WCO mothers had no knowledge of school choices in their neighborhood when they first sent their children to school; a few parents knew about Catholic schools but found them too expensive. On the other hand, FOL parents attended school fairs, joined listservs and message boards on school options, and applied to as many as thirteen preschools. Taylor (2001) studies the spatial organization of competition between schools in London and finds a hierarchical nature of competition between schools “generally related to the examination performance of those schools and their physical location relative to other schools in their competition space” (ibid. 199). Lorel Elementary had test scores twenty points higher than other Westbridge schools (including Adams Elementary) yet scores similar to the dream schools FOL members cited. The Lorel attendance area also bordered the gentrified neighborhoods with the “good schools” and it faced a shrinking student population. These factors combined with parents’ active choosing of schools meant the school could recruit students from neighboring areas.

Kirk and Joan presented many suggestions to the principal such as becoming a magnet school, forming a fundraising committee, marketing the school, and improving their arts program. According to the principal the group’s top priority should be immediately “boosting enrollment,” so FOL focused on marketing the school to their
peers. A year later, teacher Betty McCallister became principal of the school. I asked her to tell me the most pressing issue she faced when she began and how she addressed it:

First, declining enrollment. The way we addressed it was we did a campaign, went to events, met with the alderman, pulled in FOL’s group to help us get the word out on the school, had open houses, went to community events and set up tables, I was on a school panel in [Smitherton]…it was a ‘get to know the schools in the area.’ In other words, Betty pursued efforts to help market the school to parent consumers. A consumer-market imperative undergirded the original relationship with FOL.

**Increasing Parent Participation in Governance**

The Chicago Reform Act of 1988 introduced local school councils to Chicago schools in 1989. Parent Teacher Associations had existed in neighborhood schools, but as one long-time parent and school official explained, their membership declined as the neighborhood shifted from predominantly ethnic European to Latino. Unlike the schools, the WCO had for decades consistently worked with Latino families on tenants’ rights issues and offered English language classes. Like other community organizations, the WCO first collaborated with Westbridge schools to get more parents to serve on the new local school councils.

Around the same time, neighborhood schools were experiencing overcrowding. In the early 1990s, the WCO, community parents, schoolteachers, and principals created the Education Committee to eventually win annexes (or classroom extensions). Then in the mid-1990s, a local principal explained to a WCO coordinator that she knew quite a few mothers who were not working full-time and might be willing to volunteer at the school. The principal wanted to utilize this untapped resource and created the Parent Tutor program partly financed and fully run by WCO members. Eventually the program
expanded to other schools like Adams Elementary. A teacher at Adams Elementary school described the change WCO made for the school:

Before the WCO, parents wouldn’t show up to the LSC meetings. We tried 5pm, 9:30am, no parents. But the assemblies were always standing room only. Since WCO came we’ve had more parents involved in the school. The way WCO structures parent-school relations—which I describe later—purposely creates a dependable workforce of parents volunteering and serving in governance roles at the school. In this case, a civic-democratic policy of school councils directly facilitated the sort of community organization-school ties that can facilitate parent empowerment.

In both cases, schools faced institutional imperatives that required families to play a more significant role at the school. They both lacked the social ties to parents to solicit their support. Adjusting to the consumer-market context was both a problem and solution to Lorel Elementary’s enrollment concern. It initially partnered with FOL to resolve a marketing problem. On the other hand, WCO partnered with schools like Adams Elementary to address a governance issue. In both cases, the schools needed parents arguably more than the parents thought they needed the school, suggesting a shift toward traditional parent empowerment. However, working-class parents entered the schools with less elite-supported cultural capital than teachers. Middle-class parent consumers, meanwhile, entered a low-demand school with similar (and sometimes higher) cultural capital than school officials and most other parents.

**Parents Fears and Cultural Capital**

Parents’ fears and cultural capital also shape the sort of activities community organizations create for parent members. In both cases, low social capital between the
school and parents undergirds initial impressions. Through the WCO, working-class parents convert their time and knowledge as caring adults into elite-supported forms of cultural and social capital. Through FOL, middle-class parents, use their cultural knowledge about school choice, finances to pay for marketing materials and social networks with other parents to develop stronger ties with the school. Ultimately, the WCO places parents in apprenticeship relations with school officials to gain more confidence, skills, and knowledge as found in other studies (Lopez et. al. 2005). FOL parents’ cultural capital parity with teachers and relatively higher social status vis-à-vis other Lorel parents at the school means they need not become apprentices. Instead they act as trustees shaping the school through marketing efforts approved by the school but outside the school’s full control.

**Involving Parents as Learners**

Many WCO parents told me that they experienced trepidation in accomplishing what may otherwise seem like a very simple act – entering the school building. I meet Consuela at a WCO new parent tutor training session. From later interactions, I would learn that she had recently arrived from Mexico and was pregnant with her second child; she had no work experience and her husband worked full-time. But on this day, Consuela sits alone at a child-sized table, apparently she does not have a “clique” I think, so I sit next to her and ask how she got involved in the program. A person handed her a flier outside the school one day, she explains, so she signed up. Remarks about her first venture into the school echo a common theme where parents feel immediately scrutinized and out of place, reinforcing their lower status in this public space:

I was supposed to be interviewed but couldn’t remember the date so I came into the school… I was so scared I was trembling…usually I just drop my child off and leave
but that time I actually came all the way in. I ran into Ms. Gonzales and she asked me, ‘Who are you? Why are you here?’ all these questions and I was like someone called me about an interview and left a message… Ms. Gonzales then asked me, ‘who called you?’ And I was so scared the name left my mind and I was like I can’t remember but told her it was for the program. Then she introduced herself and I was like, oh, you called me.

Lareau (1987, 1989) finds that under the natural growth paradigm, working-class parents draw a distinction between school and family life and experience powerlessness vis-à-vis school officials unlike their middle-class peers. Other scholars have reported that a school’s security policy can feed into working-class parents’ feeling of being unwelcomed in school spaces (Marschall 2006). To enter Adams Elementary, you have to be buzzed in by the office assistant. A black screen obscures your view through the glass entry doors, so you press the button and wait for a click or voice to enter. Speaking in Spanish or English Ms. Gonzalez calls you into the office, which is on the right side as soon as you enter the school. Another set of double doors guards the entry into the school hallway. You need a nametag and a purpose to pass through that second set of doors, so the voice demands to know your purpose. These security rules implemented by school officials at Adams keep adult strangers from wandering into the school and are common in Westbridge. On the flip side, they communicate to some parents that they do not belong in these public institutions unless invited by school staff. Not entering schools impedes the building of parent-teacher social capital.

Interviews suggest that many parents join because of critical moments such as: failing to understand a child’s homework, recognizing a child is academically behind, or general confusion regarding the American school system. Under what conditions does the WCO get parents in the door? The WCO uses screening mechanisms and requirements to recruit a rule-following, dependable volunteer workforce. These factors
include stipend payments, a background check and interview, a daily work requirement, and workshop and training session attendance requirements. Parents’ labor interactions often start with attending an informational session about the parent organization usually advertised by a flyer. During the session, they learn about the program’s two hours per day five days a week work commitment and the $600 per semester stipend. The stipend associated with the volunteer position designed to communicate to parents their work is “valued” proves problematic for many given their socioeconomic status. Dollars paid and hours worked fall well below minimum wage (about $3 per school day), so it is not intended to replace labor market participation but rather attract available homemakers that are typically first-generation immigrants. Consequently, as one parent coordinator explained, “Once [some parents] realize that the hours are low and they will not make that much more money, some will not come.”

Many first generation women I interviewed who participated in the program were not expected by their husbands to financially support the family. With second-generation participants, a family’s ability and willingness to support a low earning spouse was an issue. During a school activity to promote literacy at home, I strike up a conversation with Veronica seated beside her ten-year old daughter. Veronica explains: “I used to be a Parent Tutor Member but they had budget cuts and had to let a few of us go, but I know they still have me in mind and I’ll come back when I can.” I ask her if she had ever volunteered at the school before joining the WCO and she says not continuing:

The Parent Tutor program was the best thing to happen to me. I was going through some stuff in my life and had all these bills, and [my daughter] brought home this flyer and it was like God must have been looking out for me. It was a sign. I still have the bills, they didn’t go away but I’m in a better place now. The program helps us communicate with our children better, look my daughter is filling out her book log and is already on December!
Jen, a mother of two and current WCO member, had worked as a nightshift manager at Burger King. She quit her job to join the WCO when her son’s learning fell behind. I asked her to tell me about her decision and what if any sacrifices she had to make:

I was debating about whether I should do this, I sacrificed a lot because my husband was telling me ‘man you should go get a job, you should be working’ and I thought even if it’s a stipend I needed this…he was like, ‘ya don’t do this no more, they’re not paying you very well.’ And I said that to me it wasn’t about the pay it was about whether my son has me there and grows up to be an educated man. Ultimately, her husband supported her. These findings highlight the economic and social barriers to participating in the sort of education activities that support parent empowerment. Indeed to become empowered, parents must be relatively privileged in some way compared to their peers.

After learning about the commitment during the informational, parents submit to a background check and interview. Hannah—and Education Organizer (see Appendix Diagram 1)—explained that one of the many reasons the WCO interviews parents includes giving parents:

Interview experience, which can help down the road when/if they have a ‘real’ job interview [and to] get a sense of, out of all the applicants, who is serious about the program who remembers the interview and shows up on time… It sets the tone that this is a formal program, where we treat each other like professionals, not a ‘come whenever you feel like it’ sort of program. Indeed the member selection process is designed to identify individuals with dependable work habits, low financial expectations, and time flexibility. This labor market arrangement serves the school’s interest in having consistent and helpful parent volunteers.

4 The background check ensures participants have children attending the school and no criminal record—though it does not screen for immigration status. They also require parents to have the equivalent of a sixth-grade education or higher—although this information is not verified—and a TB shot.
A transition occurs when parents learn to engage the school for human and social capital development, as found in other studies (Bolivar and Chrispeels 2010, Lopez et. al. 2005, Warren 2005), and relate to school officials like apprentices. The organization brokers this new relation in partnership with teachers by: giving members name badges so they can move easily through school security; reserving a break room for parents; simulating a work on-boarding process with interviews and training; requiring members to attend workshops on topics like assessments, school choice, and identifying learning disabilities; and partnering members with teachers to assist in the classroom.

What happens after joining? Members commonly report exposure to the prevailing parenting norms. These norms emphasize using reasoning and reading to enhance a child’s vocabulary and expressive skills (Lareau 1987a). When working as teaching assistants inside classrooms, parents receive work assignments from teachers that include reading to children in English or Spanish, helping children with homework, and taking children to the washroom. Tutor activities appear rudimentary, but parents report learning to model teachers’ behaviors. During mandatory WCO-run training sessions and workshops parents receive homework assignments and other handouts in Spanish and English. One document is titled “31 ways to build your child’s self-esteem” and includes instructions like: “Encourage your child to talk about her day” and “Plan to attend school events—field trips, open houses, and conferences.”

In an interview Robert, an African male, explains that being a parent tutor has changed the way he interacts with his daughter.

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5 I did not carry out extensive classroom observations so this information is based on what interview participants and parents attending activities said.
I didn’t know nothing about a lot of the scores, like with the ISATs and the whole protocol and how that goes. [The WCO] gave me a better insight about the grading, the curriculum, and the structure… and how the schools work. […] I used to have very short patience. Working with kids in the school actually disciplined me with patience…It created me into a whole new person [such that] I’m way more patient, understanding, and talkative with my kids[…]. Like today, Diana [his daughter] had a[n] attitude… The old me would’ve been like ‘have you lost your freakin’ mind, I don’t play this it’s zero tolerance, you know you’re going to get it’. Now I’m at the point where I will definitely get to the bottom of it…and when I had to talk to my child, it was like what’s going on, what’s happening, what’s bothering you. It came to a point from where my child and I really didn’t have any communication to communication is awesome.

These data and more indicate that the WCO placed parent members into new consumer roles in which they acquired skills to understand testing protocols and learned to reason with their children, both central features of elite-supported parenting norms.

Many members also describe forming familial, trusting relations with other parents and teachers. One immigrant mother’s words capture the group experience of many mothers:

I thought they’d want me to be able to speak English. This was my fear. But, I came here and realized, no it was different and more than anything I feel very good, I feel like I’m in a family, and this is what helped me to go forward…I have friends in this group and I think we all feel like a family in this group.

Members frequently expressed wanting to work with the same teacher every year or staying longer than their two-hour period. During one leadership training workshop another teary-eyed mother explained the importance of her relationship with her teacher: “Thank God for Mrs. Diaz… and not Adams, but the people at Adams made me like the place. If I had any problem, I could go over her [home] no problem.” These social ties also translate to school loyalty with one mother explaining her school choice by saying, “I know the scores aren’t that great but I know the people here and there are good people here.” Granovetter’s (1985) concept of embeddedness characterizes economic action as embedded in social relations of trust. Actors do not simply seek economic motives or
follow “cultural rules,” but may rationally pursue “sociability, approval, status and power” (506). In sum, affective social bonds and the fact that many women’s husbands do not expect them to earn a living facilitate this low-wage labor market interaction and build loyalty to the school.

The level of involvement does vary among parents. Some parents move from basic tutor to higher paid parent coordinator worker-roles. Others move from learning basic school information and parent norms to taking adult learning courses at the school to further their own education. Nevertheless, a majority of parents remain apprentices at schools, acquiring new knowledge from teachers and WCO leaders while producing more than their working-class peers. By contributing time and one’s cultural knowledge as a parent—something coordinators emphasize—members’ achieve their principal goal of being able to support their children’s learning.

**Marketing that meets elite and school needs**

As school marketers, members shape the lower status public school for their peers and deliver on the school’s enrollment demands. Lorel had test scores similar to other frequently mentioned “prized schools” yet it did not attract white middle class parents living in the neighborhood. Many white middle-class parents expect inner-city public schools to be undesirable goods—meaning violent and bureaucratic with outdated facilities, uncaring teachers, non-white and non-middle class populations, and low test scores (Desena 2006). How do members allay their peers’ fears about city public schools? Through “rebranding” efforts FOL members effectively position Lorel Elementary in the preschool market for educating middle-class children (Cucchiara 2008). First, FOL convinced the principal to institute daytime and evening open houses.
to showcase Lorel. The open house idea—common practice at the higher status private
schools parents consider acceptable (Edelburg & Kurland 2009)— resonated with
middle-class expectations for schools to be accessible, not bureaucratic, and also services
their consumer needs (i.e. their work schedule).

Second, the group created a listserv that signaled to parents’ efficiency,
transparency, and the presence of like-minded parents—all ideas contrary to middle-class
imagination of CPS as antiquated and bureaucratic. In interviews, middle-class parents
describe it as FOL’s most significant contribution. FOL leaders constantly update the
calendar so that all school notices and important dates appear on the listserv. Lisa
described the listserv as “efficient” and a place where she could get information about the
school as opposed to depending on papers delivered in book bags, the school’s protocol.
She recalled an episode where a parent complained about the playground trash on the
listserv. “The principal addressed it immediately.” In this case, the listserv signaled
parent responsiveness on the part of the principal. Lauren’s involvement in Lorel began
with being directed to the listserv from another middle-class parent network, which led
her to assume FOL was “more established.” In this case, the listserv, perhaps
deceptively, elevated the status of the school in the eyes consumers—a point
acknowledged by leader Joan. On the listserv two years before her child reached school-
age, Rachel used it to “get information” that she said led her to believe FOL was a small
group of parents with “high expectations for their kids…and don’t think biking
everywhere makes you weird” like herself. In other words, the listserv activity postings
and parent activism affirm mutual interests between parents and schools.
Third, marketing efforts portrayed the face of the school as White and middle-class—despite the demographic data showing otherwise—and targeted these social groups. In 2009, Lorel Elementary was 87% Latino and 8% white with 90% of the student population receiving free-and-reduced lunch, a common indicator of low income status. When choosing schools, some members expressed a concern about the “social liability” of their child being the only white kid in an all Black or Latino school (Gallagher 1999).6 Both Roger and Janice considered sending their children to other predominantly minority neighborhood schools. Roger grew up in a middle class family in Los Angeles and attended a predominantly Latino public school. Although he wanted a diverse environment for his daughter, he decided against a closer public school because of the low test scores and the fact that he did not want his daughter to be the only “white blond hair and blue-eyed person” in her class. Janice worried about safety in her previous school and explained:

Janice: One of the reasons I wouldn’t have sent my daughter to school in Pilsen was one of my neighbors had indicated there was a lot of violence in the school, and they were worried about the safety of the children within the school. And every other kid in that school was Mexican and spoke Spanish, and my daughter was not…. Interviewer: And you felt [Lorel] was different?
Janice: Because it had a whole variety of kids.

Both parents consider their children’s statuses as numerical ethnic minorities a potential barrier to socialization.

How does FOL represent the school as White and middle-class? Through “rebranding” efforts FOL members used their cultural knowledge about school choice, social ties to peers with young children, and organizational ties to groups with knowledge

6 Gallagher (1999) describes the four factors shaping white racialization or the process by which whites come to consider themselves as “individuals of a racial category with its own set of interests” (25). He notes the perception of whiteness as a “social and ethnic liability” as some whites believe that racial and ethnic organizations, from which whites face social exclusion, create a racial double standard.
on marketing schools. Deploying these forms of capital helped members effectively position Lorel Elementary in the preschool market for educating middle class children (Cucchiara 2008). FOL members recruit new families formally and informally in elite venues like the Neighborhood Parents Network School Fair, online parent forums, and farmers markets all frequented by mostly white middle class individuals. The school-produced brochure about Lorel is seven pages with cutouts of fifty identifiably Black and Latino children. It dates back at least a decade. FOL leaders gleaned some basic information from the school’s brochure. Then they created Lorel publicity materials that included glossy postcards with bulleted information about the school, the open house dates, simple fonts, and no faces. Members’ racial presence with the polished, racially neutralized materials counteracted middle class images of the typical urban public school as predominately students of color, poor, and disorganized. Furthermore, FOL convinced the principal to institute daytime and evening open houses. A FOL leader explained that the school’s original practice of “make an appointment anytime and come by and we’ll give you a tour of the school…this sort of middle-class crowd is uncomfortable with.”

The open house idea—common practice at the higher status private schools parents consider acceptable (Edelburg & Kurland 2009)—resonates with middle-class expectations for schools to be accessible not bureaucratic and also services their needs (i.e. their work schedule).

What are the results?: school enrollment increased with FOL children contributing to 40% of that growth. Remember, in 2009 Whites constituted 8% of the school population and low-income children comprised 90% of the population. However, grades

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7 I define elite here as not accessible to or used by the neighborhood’s dominant Latino demographic.
with FOL members’ children tended to be around 20% white and 40% non-low income indicating that the school’s economic and racial mix really varied by grade level (Lorel Elementary School database see chart below).

Table 3: Lorel Elementary Race/Ethnicity and Class Statistics Pre-K through 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreK</td>
<td>22% 64%</td>
<td>28 82</td>
<td>43% 57%</td>
<td>55 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>4% 86%</td>
<td>3 64</td>
<td>45% 55%</td>
<td>33 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>8% 84%</td>
<td>6 64</td>
<td>24% 76%</td>
<td>18 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2% 94%</td>
<td>1 50</td>
<td>34% 66%</td>
<td>18 35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lorel Elementary School Database for 2009-2010 school year

FOL marketing efforts beginning in 2006 drove collective consumption of the lower status school and thereby helped produce the “diverse” environment many parents described in interviews. To be clear, FOL customers do not mind an ethnically diverse school; they would not choose a still majority Latino school if they did not hold this common preference. Still marketing efforts downplay race and present the school as accessible and organized with strong scores, the primary market indicator of solid academics. One member described Lorel as a “diamond in the rough,” and in the context of a stressful preschool education market, Lorel’s publicity delivers on parents’ ideal consumer experience.

In both cases, parents have fears about the school that intermediary organizations address. FOL marketing activities serve the interests of already powerful groups—school officials and middle-class parents—as other scholars have found (Cucchiara 2008) and
support their trustee role at the school. WCO learning activities place parents in lower status roles vis-à-vis teachers at schools but more powerful positions than uninvolved parents. FOL activities did not facilitate the strong bonds with teachers—as WCO members reported—since many of their activities did not involve or rely on teachers. Instead, FOL activities solicited trust through signaling common status and values through marketing efforts. One might argue that such close parent-teacher relations co-opt parents, reflect a pernicious form of elite hegemonic power, and significantly constrain parent empowerment. In the next section, I present a case where FOL and WCO parents took a contrary position to school officials.

**LSC Fundraising and Elite Power**

The WCO has a committee separate from the school district where parents and WCO community organizers brainstorm ideas for how to improve local schools. Recently, the committee took up the issue of funding cuts that resulted from the state’s budget crisis. Jen, a mother of two, recently became the president of this committee. She describes herself as “intimidated” by teachers prior to joining the WCO. At a local school council meeting, she stands and announces her title “the newly elected president of the WCO Regional Parent Group” for the small group of thirteen. She unfolds a sheet of paper and begins reading prepared notes about a conference she attended at the state capitol. After describing unsuccessful attempts to secure money downstate, she explains that she and Ron (another parent) have discussed ways of raising money locally. Her first proposal involves collecting cereal box tops worth money:

Jen: If we can get all parents involved to do this it would be a small thing that can make a difference.

(LSC teachers respond immediately.)
Ms. Smith (teacher): I don’t want to poo poo on your idea but we did try that a year ago and only made $18, because many parents shop at Aldi’s. Maybe in a newsletter or flyer you should mention that we need people to shop at other stores.

Jen: I don’t want to knock who did it before but I’m a motivated person and I can motivate other people and $18 is something you know.

(LSC teacher members discuss getting together a list of stores of where to shop.)

Ron: The biggest thing is people are not aware and if we made them aware of things it could change things.

Hannah (WCO Community Organizer): We can be involved in box tops and raise hundreds or fight for millions and billions (referencing a summer protest against the budget cuts), so we need to do a little bit of both.

Ms. Smith: If you want me to spread anything or need teachers to go with you on rallies I’m a union rep.

Ron: I think we need to come together and think of other ways to raise money. Radio stations have people calling and giving money. Maybe this school or CPS could receive some of that…

Ms. Smith: Two teachers I know had some ideas about how to raise money. Maybe some parents could help?

Ms. Rice (teacher): I can think of some suggestions like the coupon books or cookie doe sales…

Leticia (Vice-President and WCO parent): More important is when there’s a rally to have teachers, parents, children everyone involved so that we have a consciousness of what’s happening.

In this case, execution of parent ideas still relied on teacher buy-in and refinement. Teachers’ concluding remarks guide the discussion to fundraising ideas they support as the experts or people who “tried that a year ago.” The WCO’s service-oriented component, as other scholars find, can treat working-class parents as clients in ways that reinforce the paternalistic power of professionals over parents (Borg & Mayo 2001).

Existing literature finds working-class parents not participating in school governance and often deferring to teacher expertise (Lareau 1987). However, WCO members collectively defended Jen’s effort. In Adams Elementary, WCO parents possessed the trusting relationships with each other and teachers usually absent in low-income schools (Payne 1997). WCO parents, not just school officials, collectively produced school governance in ways other scholars have found (Lopez et. al. 2005, Warren 2005, Bolivar

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8 Aldi’s is a more affordable store with off-label brands.
and Chrispeels 2010). Ultimately, the group’s tradition of building members’ human and social capital as apprentices pushed some parents to do more than work at schools.

**Fundraising for the civic good**

As fundraisers, FOL members collectively leveraged their social and economic resources to bring money into a financially needy school. However, the FOL-controlled fundraising process obviated lower-income Latino participation in many ways such as scheduling meetings at inconvenient times and relying largely on online and English communication. In all, FOL parents assumed consumer-producer roles that grant the group an elevated status as trustees at Lorel who also serve the needs of less privileged families.

During a November local school council meeting, Principal Betty McCallister says the school “is in desperate need of money”. Aware of the ethnic and economic differences at her school she states, “people from all sectors of the community can be involved.” After much discussion, LSC members vote to create a fundraising committee. Subsequent monthly meetings for the committee remain sparsely attended. All three regulars remain white and middle-class and two of them are FOL leaders. Jessica sends meeting reminders out via email to some Latino parents, however they typically do not come. The committee hosts meetings at night. While parents work during the day seemingly making the nighttime choice ideal, at night, lower-income parents are typically charged with childcare making it difficult to participate. Furthermore, the events do not
have translators.\textsuperscript{9} These factors socially exclude lower-income groups and Latinos from participating (Marschall 2006).

When Latino parents do exercise voice at committee meetings, it becomes clear that FOL enjoys an undemocratic and autonomous control over funding. In February, Joan personally invites Lora\textsuperscript{10} a Latino parent who invites two other Latina mothers to a committee meeting. Although Lora is on the FOL listserv, she does not speak as if she is a member:

Lora: I wanted to ask if FOL can give a $50 gift certificate to the three eighth graders with the highest grades…it would also benefit the organization so all parents in the room will know who FOL is. Many parents do not know who you guys are.
Lauren (FOL leader): You’re at the fundraising meeting asking us for money (leans back and smiles)? Bold.
Joan (FOL leader): Yea, that was slick.
Lauren: Well, Joan and I will discuss it afterwards at the bar or we’ll discuss it at playgroup.

In an interview, the principal indicated that she intended the fundraising committee to reflect the community’s diverse constituencies. However, FOL members dominate this activity. Even at the fundraising committee meeting Latino residents appeal directly to FOL, not the school or committee, to obtain money for programming. Like school trustees, FOL parents preside over how funding gets dispersed. When asked why FOL did not just donate the money to the school to be allocated accordingly, one leader explained that money “disappears” when you donate it to CPS. Giving to specific projects ensured the money would not be mismanaged. This dynamic reinforces the group’s economic advantage and elite status at Lorel vis-à-vis other parents.

Nevertheless, FOL gave in line with a civic good by donating to programs benefitting other groups at the school. As individualistic consumers, they do care about

\textsuperscript{9} Marschall (2006) explains that traditional forms of parent participation can exclude lower income, Latino parents. Effective parent involvement programs should provide translation services, childcare, and greater flexibility with scheduling. There are Latino parents at Lorel who speak English, however, a majority of Latino parents active in the school’s other parent groups do not speak English.

\textsuperscript{10} Lora is a Latino parent who speaks English and a friend of Joan.
the school’s scores and curriculum and leave open the option of exiting if these factors decline. However, a shared vision that their presence should benefit all students undergirded their donating behavior. Group members used ties with local business owners to collaborate on events or to simply receive checks written to FOL, which leaders direct toward specific school initiatives. For instance, Lauren’s husband, a business owner, agreed to write a $1,000 check for a fundraiser to finance the sixth grade theater program for one year. FOL members do not have children near the sixth grade. In another case, money members raised money to donate for musical instruments the leadership directed to funding the soccer program. Why? According to Lauren, “the population at this school is like 92% Hispanic and soccer’s a huge sport, so I think it’s really important to keep extracurricular activities and we don’t have any.” In other words, fundraising and donating in this manner meets the organization’s goal of expanding extracurricular offerings but also the memberships’ ideology of supporting local needs.

In both of these cases, parent organization members have ideas about how to raise money. WCO members, unlike their working-class peers, present ideas in school governance spaces and teachers deploy their cultural knowledge to refine and support those ideas. Parents still treat teachers with deference, but they experience greater inclusion in school spaces and school governance through the WCO than scholarship typically predicts. Furthermore, WCO members ultimately go through traditional civic-democratic mechanisms to make suggestions, defend their positions, and reach consensus with school officials. FOL members use their higher social class position at the school to carry out their ideas independently like trustees. To be clear, FOL members do go
through the LSC (which they dominate) to garner support, but it is not their only vehicle for shaping schools. In both cases, school elites—teachers of middle-class parents—use their dominant forms of capital to support causes for less power groups at the school.

**Conclusion**

The social context of schooling has changed to include more community groups engaged in parent organizing around education. Scholars critique parent empowerment policies on the grounds that while they grant parents more control they never fully address parents’ unequal class backgrounds, which ultimately shape parents’ ability to wield power. Policies intended to empower minority and low-income parents, then, may actually facilitate inequality.

This paper compares how middle- and working-class community groups shape the way parents relate to public schools. In both cases, parent groups give schools with poor ties to families access to an important constituency at the school. A school’s institutional demands, parents’ initial fears, and parents’ cultural capital restrict the sort of relationship parent groups broker between schools and parents. The WCO engages in capacity-building to position parents to improve their children’s educational outcomes and be active citizens in the school. This activity puts parents in apprentice relationships with school officials whereby they learn elite-supported cultural norms of parenting from teachers and acquire the knowledge about schools to exercise political clout in the civic domain. FOL parents already possess cultural capital parity with school officials, but being in an organization grants them additional political clout to act as trustees and collectively shape a lower status school to their liking.
The similar situation of fundraising illuminates a critique familiar to parent empowerment paradigms that contemporarily manifests in organization-brokered parent roles. WCO activities place parents in service roles *inside* the school whereby they develop apprentice-type relations with school officials. Parents do come up with school improvement ideas—like fundraising—outside the school but use the civic-democratic tradition of pursuing school buy-in to make final decisions. Requiring political consensus from the local school council means that WCO members still face the dilemma of school officials having some authority. As other scholars of parent empowerment find, parent organizations like the WCO often do not upend traditional status-power relations between working-class parents and teachers. Ironically, in this case they leverage those relations in a work setting to build parents’ cultural capital and the school’s social capital in general. WCO members exercise more political clout vis-à-vis non-members, as they hold more seats in school governance and defend their own ideas in local council settings. However, even those who engage in school governance power-share, keeping governance *in* schools and *closer* to the authority of often more knowledgeable school officials.

FOL parents do not face this same dilemma. First, they individually possess similar cultural knowledge about schools as teachers. Second, they collectively fill roles *outside* the school that do not rely on consistent school official buy-in and yet have the power to shape school demographics and activities. They develop trustee-type relations with school officials, which presents a different dilemma: they engage in a form of governance outside the school where there is no democratic process for extracting the Latino interests they claim to also serve. Without an active effort to organize the interests
of other parents underway, FOL must rely on vocal parents reaching out to FOL or teachers who advocate on behalf of other parents to know what other families might need. Previously individual consumers exercising school choice, FOL members collectively act as school trustees choosing how to bring in money and new students. Rather than donating all funds to the school for the local school council to debate about and allocate, as trustees, they keep an account separate from the school and decide which activities to fund. Consequently, they exhibit less power-sharing and more autonomy when it comes to their group activities.

However, the absence of perfect inclusion and power parity may not necessarily mean less privileged groups always lose. In both cases, elites—middle-class parents or Adams Elementary teachers—use their resources in ways beneficial to low-income families. As scholarship on middle-class involvement in urban schools finds, some middle-class parents can be incentivized to send children to lower status, urban public schools. More importantly, these families can deploy their social and cultural capital in ways that advance the interests of less privileged families at the school. However, the can also choose to use their relatively higher status at schools to hoard opportunities for their children; Cucchiara and Horvat (2009) discuss what might motivate these different potentials. However, determining what working-class families need to be better trustees would require concerted efforts at organizing working-class interests, similar to what the WCO does and other scholarship advocates (Warren 2005). On the other hand, teachers maintain authority at Adams Elementary, but power-sharing means they do not possess full control of the agenda as WCO parents defend each other’s ideas. Whether by modeling elite supported parenting norms or using their knowledge to refine—but not
dear—parents’ ideas presented at the school council, teachers can better serve the needs of lower income families.

**Works Cited**


