

# EMPOWERING PARENTS AS PARTNERS AT OROZCO COMMUNITY ACADEMY

Lynn Schnaiberg



Parents participate in a workshop at Orozco Community Academy.

In the shadow of Chicago's Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, Orozco Community Academy is a beacon for parents in the predominantly Latino neighborhood of Pilsen. Orozco educates roughly 760 middle school students, more than 95 percent of whom are Latino and from low-income families. Nearly a quarter of Orozco students are learning English as their second language.

Thanks in part to the Pilsen Education Network (PEN), the partnership project between Chicago Public Schools and Strategic Learning Initiatives, the doors at Orozco have been thrown wide open to welcome parents, as well as their children. Since Orozco joined PEN, SLI has supported parent development workshops twice a month within the school-workshops designed to offer parents hands-on learning and encouragement so that they can better help their children with schoolwork at home; improve their parenting and communication skills; better connect with and feel comfortable in school; take ownership of improving their children's school; and boost confidence and self-esteem. Participating in the SLI-led parent engagement workshops helps parents, in turn, nurture those qualities in their own families.

According to Teresa Fraga, Orozco's school-home coordinator for the past decade, the program has produced concrete, noticeable results in even just the two years since the beginning of the PEN network. What helps make a difference, she says, is the fact that SLI trains Orozco parents to help facilitate

the bi-monthly workshops, so parents are working with and teaching other parents, building a network of empowered and engaged parents.

Teresa notes, "An [outside] presenter who comes in on a one-time shot doesn't know our parents. They'll come in and give a good workshop, but there isn't that connection ... The PEN workshops give parents a more natural connection to the schools."

The SLI parent workshops are closely aligned with what students are learning in school. For example, when science fair project deadlines were approaching for students, the parent workshop was How to Understand a Science Project. Parents conducted their own science experiments and got familiar with the notion of developing and testing a hypothesis. "So it's not so foreign to them--and it was so much fun," Teresa notes.

"Parents don't have to have a high school diploma or a college education because the learning in the workshops is all done hands-on and is intelligible and completely non-threatening."

**Teresa Fraga, School-home Coordinator  
Orozco Community Academy**

their child is learning. "It's reinforced that the parents are the child's teacher too. One parent said 'We're the child's 24 hour teacher.' So I think they probably feel they have more in common with the teachers now. And when parents come here and they're having fun learning, they will go back home and make learning fun for the child."

The PEN schools have seen firsthand how the program helps parents improve relationships with their children. Teresa Fraga recalls one young mother at a workshop where parents were discussing how to praise children.



Teresa Fraga, School-home Coordinator, Orozco Community Academy



Parents work in groups at the workshops, emphasizing teamwork and relationship-building.

“This mother kind of broke down, nearly in tears, and said ‘This helps me to understand that I should never tell my child ‘you’re dumb’ or ‘you don’t know what you’re doing.’ I just feel so bad that I’ve done that, because I don’t want to feel that way here.’ That parent, a mother isolated in her home, probably thought this was natural (her behavior with her child). This is what she does all the time. But coming to the workshops she begins to realize that there’s another and better way.”

## Strategic Improvement Model

In early 2001, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) initiated a partnership with Strategic Learning Initiatives (SLI) to develop a network of neighborhood schools in the Pilsen cluster, a pilot project to decentralize Central Office decisions and accelerate student learning. Four schools in the Pilsen community volunteered to participate in the Scaling Up Best Practice project and to provide four years of financial support.

This initiative seeks to demonstrate how to accelerate school improvement in Chicago by bringing to scale a practical, research-based model of strategic school improvement. The model involves networks of neighborhood schools which focus on the three most statistically significant drivers of Chicago’s school improvement: quality of instruction, parent engagement, and shared leadership, plus a culture of continuous improvement. (See diagram, right.)



Children are welcome participants in the parent workshops.

### ACCELERATING STUDENT LEARNING



**SLI**

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Karen Morris, Co-Director

SLI is a non-profit organization working in a partnership with the Chicago Public Schools to accelerate student learning and improve school capacity in networks of neighborhood schools. Our networks focus on strategies and tools for accelerating school performance in three essential components: professional development for teachers, parent engagement, and shared leadership.

The neighborhood networks currently working with SLI are:

The Pilsen Education Network (PEN):

Octavio Paz Charter School

Manuel Perez Jr. Elementary School

Josiah L. Pickard Elementary School

Juan Clemente Orozco Community Academy

Communities Devoted to Kids, Schools and Success (CDKS<sup>®</sup>):

Rosario Castellanos Middle School

Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez Elementary School

Gerald Delgado Kanoon Magnet School

Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy

John Spry Elementary School

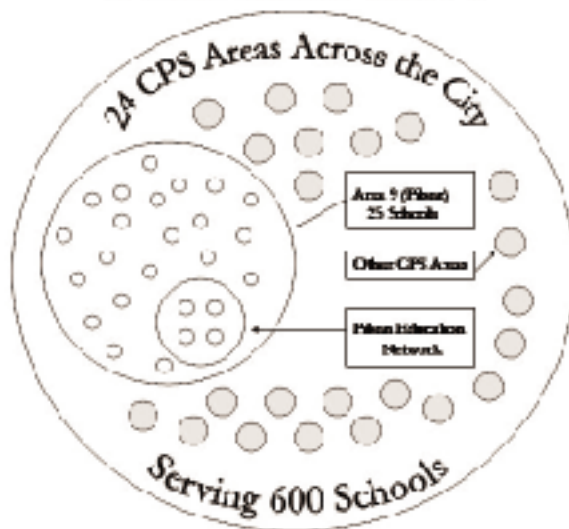
SLI’s work is generously supported by The Chicago Community Trust, Chicago Public Education Fund, Motorola Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, Prince Charitable Trusts, and Woods Fund of Chicago.

# STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENT MODEL

## ACCELERATING STUDENT LEARNING



## CPS AREA STRUCTURE & SLI NETWORKS OF NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS



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The model also helps schools implement five of the eight goals of Every Child, Every School, the CPS 2002 Education Plan that will be in effect for the foreseeable future using networks of neighborhood

schools to sharply reduce the cost per participant and school.

The new Area structure of the CPS can accelerate the scaling up of best practices by encouraging schools to work together, teachers, parents and principals learning from each others' best practices. See above diagram.

The two goals of Scaling Up Best Practice are (1) to accelerate the rate of student improvement and (2) to increase the capacity of the schools to design and continuously improve the program after the four-year partnership with SLI has ended. The ultimate aim of this initiative is to encourage school and district leaders to study the results and to deepen the existing support for this model of strategic school improvement within the Chicago Public School system, using a combination of funds from the CPS Central Office and individual school development budgets. SLI utilizes these funding sources, along with support from the private sector, which is listed above, to implement Scaling Up Best Practice as a CPS partner.

# SLI

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