

## **DENNIS SHIRLEY. (1997). COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR URBAN SCHOOL REFORM. AUSTIN, TX: UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS. 352 PP.**

Lauren Richter  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Recently, a rather unconventional approach to school reform has captured the attention of many interested in public education. The movement originated in the unlikely state of Texas, which has otherwise had a rather undistinguished past with regard to education. Texas's ongoing reform experiment reflects the revolutionary partnership between influential community organizations and local schools united to transform the nature of school reform. Their accomplishments are raising new questions about the future direction of the school reform movement. In his book, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*, Dennis Shirley contemplates the contribution of community organizations-exemplified by a group called the Texan Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)-to the contemporary dialogue of school reform. He claims that by failing to address the larger social context afflicting schools, traditional models of reform are destined for failure. Ultimately, Shirley argues that Texas's reform efforts are deeply rooted in the democratic tradition of public education in America. *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* is the story of an unlikely state, forging an unexpected alliance; resulting in perhaps the most logical approach to school reform in decades.

Urban public schools are in a state of crisis. Yet, Shirley contends that for the past dozen years, reformers have continued to make the same mistakes. Premised on the misconception that fixing education means fixing schools, reformers have done "nothing to coordinate education within the school with development within the community" (p. 2). Shirley accuses current reform efforts of treating schools as isolated institutions, insulated from the political realities of their neighborhoods. Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities*, likened these restructuring reforms to "little more than moving around the same old furniture within the house of poverty" (as quoted in Shirley, p. 2). Shirley argues convincingly that reform efforts that ignore the deterioration of people's lives will do little to confront the economic dislocations, political estrangement, and social disorganization that characterize urban communities.

Shirley's understanding of public education informs this interpretation of the purpose and promise of school reform. He reasons

Public schools in the United States were born out of the conviction that education is not an individual affair but a public matter, one of deep import for the cultivation of social order, civic liberty, and democratic vitality (p. 4).

By interconnecting civic and democratic capacity and public education, Shirley establishes the foundation for his endorsement of community organizations as vital instruments in the development of social capital. Shirley "emphasizes the potential of civic action to improve academic achievement in low-income urban neighborhoods" (p. 27). He characterizes school reform as a movement requiring activism and democracy. Stressing the public's responsibility to each and every child, he insists it is not enough to restructure individual schools; instead you have to reform the public who is responsible for education. To his credit, Shirley's hopeful musing on democracy and civic responsibility as a means to reclaim American ideals of equality in education leaves the reader with a feeling of optimism regarding the future of education.

For readers interested in the historical background and theoretical framework of the social action that the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation promotes, there is a thorough treatment in the second chapter. For those more inclined to get to the heart of the case studies, Shirley welcomes them to go immediately to the following chapters. In my opinion it would be a great disservice to the reader's understanding of community organizing to entirely skip the second chapter. Essentially, "the particular historical influences and philosophical underpinnings which guide Texas IAF work provide much of the clout and direction which render the case studies comprehensible" (p. 32). This section reveals the systematic foundation of the Texas IAF, thus dispelling the mystique of community organizing.

The Texas IAF's school reform exemplifies a unique form of parental engagement which surpasses typical parental involvement by using concepts of citizenship to stimulate political action. Texas IAF organizations "self-consciously promote social capitalization", and shrewdly use schools as a base for the political revitalization of the community (p. 75). Shirley claims that the IAF organizations have used their collaborative relationships to develop legitimacy and to promote reciprocity and mutual accountability. Additionally, the IAF organization is enormously committed to developing natural leaders from the community to fill the leadership roles of the organization. Yet, despite Shirley's accentuation of the importance of leadership training sessions,

there is never any explanation on *how* these leaders are trained. I remain curious to know why it has remained un-addressed in Shirley's discussion.

The Texas IAF is a faith-based organization, making it even more revolutionary in the public education dialogue. Shirley himself advocates the organization's religious institution base. He confesses that his "own interpretation is that the organizations' structures and intentions are parallel to the 'two aspects of the church's life that are both demanding and inseparable: universality and the preference for the poor'" (p. 45). Shirley argues that IAF organizations' social base in religious institutions has positioned them as a potent catalyst for both educational reform and neighborhood revitalization. The author suggests, "we reconsider the cultural taboo that implies that discussions about politics and religion are breaches of decorum and inappropriate topics in public schools" (p. 259). However, not all of us are prepared to embrace this possible resource for educational reform. Despite predictable sensitivities to bridging schools and church, there is also the issue of exclusion. While Shirley addresses the ramifications of faith-based organizing, he stresses the advantages of an institutional base such as churches. Shirley does not dwell on the issue, though his thoughtful analysis warrants acknowledgment.

*Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* looks at four schools in the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation's "Alliance Schools" network. Shirley's case studies are a pleasure to read. The book moves at an enlivened pace in its middle section, with each case flowing effortlessly into the next. Shirley mixes honest observation with fair analysis, and the findings reinforce the methodology and rationales discussed earlier in the book. Shirley's cases reflect the gradual shift of the IAF reform strategies towards internal school issues. Individually, each school had its share of highs and lows. No two schools used exactly the same strategy to exactly the same end, thus suggesting a significant degree of flexibility inherent in IAF reform methods. These examples illustrate the effects of "community-based political power mobilized for public school reform" (p. 295). It seems fair to say that the Industrial Areas Foundation's achievements present a compelling challenge to the existing theories of the education reform.

Shirley offers an assessment of the problems and criticisms that face community organization models of reform. According to the author, principals and other members of the faculty can often be the most resistant to change. Most of the people who resist community-based reform efforts are motivated out of some fear. Teachers fear job security and destabilization of the learning environment, neighborhood parents fear that community-based organizations threaten their individual relationships with teachers, and husbands even come to resent wives for rebelliousness. Additionally, Shirley briefly mentions other social and economic factors that sometimes make neighborhood schools rather resistant to change. Though his discussion of obstacles is interesting, it does not reflect the same level of insight and analysis, as do the other sections.

Shirley's critique is far more thoughtful than his discussion of the obstacles. However, his method of identifying a criticism and then defending the IAF somewhat compromises his objectivity. The reader is left with the impression that despite criticism, Shirley will continue to fully endorse the IAF strategies, thus making identifying the critiques seem moot. That being said, Shirley does manage to raise some interesting considerations.

School reform does not exist in a vacuum. Reformers can no longer afford to pretend that education can be free of politics. Education is all about power, and it's time that the schools and communities started wielding some of their own. Shirley insists that, "most educators and school reformers try to keep politics out of the discussions about schools-as if that were possible or desirable in a robust democracy" (p. 284). Shirley's convictions are deeply democratic. He celebrates the relational power that the IAF has gained from the systematic development of social capital, and he praises each school's broad-based community collaborative as a manifestation of principles of democracy. Shirley's democratic idealism is refreshing and invigorating, and it inspires the passion that distinguishes his work.

Dennis Shirley's *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* raises a number of questions and challenges to the current philosophies of urban school reform. Shirley insists that the success and popularity of the Industrial Areas Foundation's "Alliance Schools" challenge reformers to reconceptualize American public education. Reformers must begin to think outside the schoolyard, and engage the community as a catalyst to improve urban schools. Texas's revolutionary reform experiment presents a compelling counter-example to the current rhetoric of privatization. Shirley's examination of the Texas IAF reform effort thoughtfully argues for its inclusion in the contemporary context of school reform. *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* is a must-read for those frustrated with the current direction of urban school reform.

*Lauren A. Richter is an undergraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. She specializes in American History and Urban Education, and has done considerable coursework in the field of community organizing and school reform.*

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

---

**Source**            **URL:** <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-2-issue-2-fall-2003/dennis-shirley-1997-community-organizing-urban-school-reform-aust>