CHAPTER II

MORE THAN "HALF A LOAF": EVERYDAY GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATIC ACTION IN THE 1960s

> We had a school district, and we had a little, but it was very little. I can't even say we had half a loaf, and we got greedy, because we weren't talking about even a half a loaf. People said, well, be satisfied with half a loaf. I said, 'we're not getting half a loaf, we wanted it all.'
>
> Dolores Torres, member of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Governing Board.[1]

Introduction

Under heavy rain on August 3, 1967, over a thousand parents in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn turned out to vote in a unique election. The voters, predominantly Black and Puerto Rican residents of two neighborhoods virtually abandoned by city officials, elected seven parents to represent them on the governing board of their newly formed school district, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville (OHB) Demonstration School District. Among the elected were Blanche Pile and Hattie Bishop, active parents in their schools and neighborhoods. Dolores Torres, also an active and involved parent, was nominated to serve as the community-wide representative to the governing board.[2]

These three African American, West Indian and Puerto Rican parents had no idea that by agreeing to serve as school and community representatives to the new governing board, they would become key figures in New York City's community control movement. The OHB governing board's decision to transfer nineteen teachers and school

---

[1] Dolores Torres, interview by author. Tape recording, 15 June 2004.

[2] Blanche Pile, letter to parents of P.S. 144, n.d Reverend Herbert C. Oliver Personal Papers.; Organization Chart of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration School District, January 1968, Oliver Papers. The other parent representatives on the board were Wilda Henderson, P.S. 73, Agnes Hanson, P.S. 87, Clara Marshall, P.S. 137, and Elaine Rooke, J.H.S. 271.

administrators out of the district in the spring of 1968 thrust Pile, Bishop, and Torres into a vortex of controversy involving community control advocates and leaders of professional unions.[3]

Not long after the summer election, the governing board attempted to clarify its decision-making powers, which because they were not defined by state legislation, were subject to the competing demands of labor contracts and central school board policies. Without clear guidelines, the governing board's efforts to appoint principals and teachers committed to the community control experiment led to confrontations with the teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), as well as with the union representing school administrators, the Council of Supervisory Administrators (CSA). As a result, Ocean-Hill Brownsville became the flashpoint for citywide clashes between community leaders and union officials, culminating in a prolonged teacher's strike in fall, 1968.[4]

Yet, buried beneath the controversy were the day-to-day deliberations and actions of board members attempting to govern as democratically, collectively and responsibly as possible. From the detailed minutes of their meetings, oral history interviews, and observers' commentary, governing board members seemed to have struggled to transcend their individual interests so that board decisions, especially the most controversial, reflected democratic consensus and compromise. Despite diverse and, at times, conflicting political and personal affiliations with community organizations and local schools, members of the governing board, for the most part, sustained a common

---

[3] Torres interview; Memo to Board of Education from the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School Project, September 20, 1967, Oliver Papers.

[4] "Suggested Guidelines for Demonstration Projects on Decentralization," submitted to the Board of Education by the Advisory and Evaluation Committee on School Decentralization of the Board of Education, December 6, 1967, Oliver Papers; Minutes from meeting with State Education Commissioner James Allen, September 13, 1968, Oliver Papers; Reverend Herbert C. Oliver interview by author. Tape recording, 10 January 2005.

educational purpose. During the abbreviated life of the demonstration district, board members' daily work of governing seemed to be deliberative and informed. Withstanding strong political pressure from outside and the pull of individual political commitments, the Ocean-Hill Brownsville governing board, for most of its tenure, managed to avoid factional disputes.[5]

Two inter-related dynamics appeared to contribute to board members' emergence as collaborative leaders. First, most parent and community board members were community organizers or civil rights activists before they joined the board. Board members' recalled that organizing expertise gave them a broad perspective on community needs and city bureaucracies. Given the board's pioneering efforts to create a new kind of school board, this knowledge seemed crucial for informing school board direction and strategy. Moreover, some of the parents had worked together as organizers and recalled that as a result, a certain degree of trust and respect had developed among them.[6]

Another factor that appeared to influence the governing board's daily governing processes was the support provided by the district's educational leader, Rhody McCoy. McCoy, one of the few African American administrators in the school system, had worked as a teacher and administrator in the "600" school system for more than fifteen years. According to McCoy, when he was appointed as Unit Administrator of the OHB Demonstration School District, he directed his energy towards the growth and development of board members, particularly the non-professionals. McCoy provided

---

[5] Minutes, Ocean-Hill Brownsville Governing Board, August 1, 1968, Oliver Papers; Oliver, interview; Torres interview; "Report on Three Demonstration Projects in the City Schools from the New York City Commission on Human Rights," February-March, 1968, Fol. 120, Shanker Papers, United Federation of Teachers (UFT) Archives, New York.

[6] Torres interview; Oliver interview; Fran Barrett, interview by author, 23 March, 2004.

ongoing training that encouraged a range of new leadership capacities; from mastery over Roberts Rules of Order to a sophisticated understanding of educational policy and practice. McCoy pushed members to defend their political and educational positions, forcing them to use evidence and prodding them with counterfactuals, the same way he would challenge a student in a classroom. From McCoy's perspective, the professional development of board members was as important as that of teachers.[7]

Given board members shared backgrounds as community organizers, and McCoy's efforts at professional development, the board began to cohere into a hard-working governing body. Some participants argue that the board's coherence was based on a common enemy – the UFT and CSA – that brought competing interests together. Though there may be truth to this perspective, it overlooks the ways board members attempted to create a democratically-governed district, even before the professional unions launched an active oppositional campaign.[8]

Critics of McCoy and the Governing Board attributed some of the board's cohesiveness to McCoy's manipulation and the fact that the parent members, at least during part of the board's existence, were paid through a foundation grant. One critic, in particular, charged that McCoy put parents, on a "secret payroll." Most critics, as well as the media, ignored the role played by the parent members on the governing board and focused on two male leaders, a minister and a priest. This external view of the board created a limited picture of what actually occurred in the daily process of governing the

---

[7] McCoy interview by Walter Stafford, 20 October 2002, copy in author's possession; Rhody McCoy, "The Formation of a Community-Controlled School District," in *Community Control of Schools,* ed., Henry M. Levin (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1970), 180; Rhody McCoy, interview in *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s,* eds. Henry Hampton, et al. (London: Vintage, 1990), 508.

[8] Gitu Weusi, interview in *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s,* eds. Henry Hampton, et al. (London: Vintage, 1990), 502-3.

demonstration school district, and may have contributed to misinterpretations of the boards' actions.[9]

This chapter's narrative of the challenges and promises of everyday governance is framed by Charles Payne and Adam Green's notion of Black folks "every day rituals of democratic practice." According to Payne and Green, such rituals, as practiced in the nineteenth century, were essential processes for engagement and activism.[10] The chapter argues that the governing board constituted a democratic institution that, together with other forms of engagement, supported the leadership development of grassroots activists, particularly African American, Puerto Rican and Caribbean-American women. In turn, these activists contributed to the democratic functioning of the governing board. Unlike some of the other public activities in which board members were engaged, the governing board required members to bridge significant differences, not only among themselves but with their broader public, about how to best educate Ocean-Hill Brownsville's young people.

This unique feature of the governing board was partially determined by the role of public schools in a democracy. Community control itself was not limited to schooling; it encompassed other community-embedded projects such as employment in local construction of public buildings and the transformation of abandoned, tenement housing. While local demands for greater community control overlapped in many of these issue

---

[9] Martin Mayer, "The Full and Sometimes Very Surprising Story of Ocean Hill, The Teachers' Union and the Teacher Strikes of 1968," *New York Times Magazine,* February 2, 1969, M18. From 1962-67, Mayer served as the chairman of one of New York City's boards on the Upper East Side of Manhattan; Reverend John Powis, "The Role of the UFT in the History of Ocean Hill-Brownsville," *New From Ocean Hill-Brownsville*, February, 1969, 8-11, Oliver Papers.

[10] Charles Payne and Adam Green, introduction to *Time Longer than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950,* eds., Charles Payne and Adam Green, (New York University Press, 2003) 7.

areas, schools constituted a somewhat special terrain because children's attendance was compulsory, funding was entirely public, and local governance had deep historical roots. Indeed, these unique features of public education influenced the course of the community control movement in schools, because governing board members were responsible for defining and sustaining a common educational purpose in a politically and socially diverse community. The chapter argues that the dissention between the Governing Board and the professional unions was a necessary stage in the democratic process, as disenfranchised communities demanded more voice in the education of their young people.

The chapter first considers the fluid boundaries between governance over local schools and anti-poverty programs in the 1960s. Because many of the Governing Board's parents were also engaged in leading community organizing campaigns through anti-poverty agencies, the chapter analyzes these two different forms of organizational leadership. The chapter then turns to the formation of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville demonstration district, the Governing Board, and the board's two different stages of governing. The first stage, roughly the first six months, was devoted to hiring district and school leadership and developing governance structures such as board committees and by-laws. The second stage focused on clarifying the board's decision-making powers as an experimental policy-making body. The chapter shows how, throughout both stages of governance, the UFT and CSA attempted to weaken the Governing Board's authority over personnel decisions, leading to a citywide controversy in the spring of 1968. At the core of the power struggle between the governing board and the professional unions was

a recurring democratic debate about who would have the power and authority to set the terms for the education of young people in Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

The Confluence of Community Control and Community Action

As the discussion of governance in Chapter I indicated, citizen participation in schools became popular once again after World War II. When the local school boards in New York City were "revived" by the state legislature after a financial scandal in school construction in 1961, residents had a renewed opportunity to participate in decision-making. Although the revitalized boards of the early 1960s were appointed, rather than elected, city officials invested new meaning in local governance, however symbolic. Therefore, local school boards provided a convenient pre-existing structure for community control of schools. While the boards provided the structure, anti-poverty funding and a citywide community control movement provided the means through which community control was attained.[11]

The confluence of anti-poverty funding and organizing for community control of schools in the late 1960s also created turbulence and conflict in some areas of the city. Skeptics at the time suggested that the problem with community control was that there was "no real community," and argued that anti-poverty programs created suspicion and mistrust among those with less power outside the anti-poverty circle.[12] However, for the

[11] "Historical Review of Studies and Proposals Relative to Decentralization of Administration in the New York City Public School System," June 12, 1967, Mayor's Advisory, Box 14566, Fol. Misc., Ford Foundation Archives, New York.

[12] Joseph Featherstone, "Community Control of Our Schools," *New Republic*, January 13, 1968, 19.

most part, anti-poverty funding seems not to have had a negative effect on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board.[13]

Anti-poverty funds were an important boost to community organizing in the mid-1960s, even if subsequent turf battles eroded earlier gains. For example, the Community Action Project (CAP), a federal anti-poverty project, helped stimulate community organizing in both Harlem and Ocean Hill-Brownsville, in education and many other city services. CAP's designers believed that poverty could be fought at the local level if the poor participated in, and assumed leadership of, alternative community institutions. By emphasizing the maximum feasible participation of the poor in decision-making, and through bypassing the traditional hierarchies of power and control, CAP sought to create alternative structures that would ultimately transform the quality, governance, and administration of city services in poor communities.[14]

Although CAP was just one of a host of community organizing sponsors, along with numerous religious groups, the CAP ideology of local empowerment, supported by significant funding, helped institutionalize and legitimate community-controlled institutions. The intersection of the community control movement in education with community organizing in other issue areas meant that board members were simultaneously fighting for quality education and the improvement of housing,

---

[13] "Report on Three Demonstration Districts in the City Schools From the New York City Commission on Human Rights," February-March, 1968, Fol. 120, Shanker Files, UFT Archives.

[14] Peter Marris and Marin Rein, *Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community Action in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 246-248; Alice O'Conner, "Community Action, Urban Reform, and the Fight Against Poverty: The Ford Foundation's Gray Areas Program," *Journal of Urban History* 11(July 1966): 598-600; Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 198-205. According to Wendell Pritchett, the Brownsville Community Council (BCC) was "one of the most organized Community Action Agencies in the city." However, later evaluations of most CAP programs found that they failed to promote the political organization of the poor. But Pritchett argues that the BCC, by decentralizing to local groups, supported political leadership by the poor. Torres and Pile both worked for one of the groups that worked under the BCC umbrella, Christians and Jews United for Social Action (CUSA) a grassroots organization committed to organizing Brownsville's poorest residents.

employment, welfare, health services, and policing. These multiple forces for change could have clashed in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, given competing claims on scarce city resources. Instead, parent board members used the expertise and experience developed as community organizers in fields such as housing to inform their decision-making on the governing board. The resulting boundaries between community organizing activities and board responsibilities became quite porous. For participants, there seemed to be little conflict of interest between paid community organizing and participation on the governing board. On the other hand, the governing board was part of the larger school system and, on the surface, did not seem to fulfill the CAP ideal of building alternative institutions to replace bureaucratic city agencies in local communities.[15]

Rather than bypassing existing institutions such as the school system, the governing board was very much part of that system. Governing board members were elected by community members and parents and were legally responsible for making education policy and overseeing state and city funds. However, despite such insider status, the governing board was also an alternative institution within the larger school system. The founding members envisioned a board that would not only be publicly responsive to members of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community but would also target, and change, broader school system policies that denied equal opportunities to poor students and their communities.

Further contradicting the CAP model, the make-up of the governing board membership was specified in advance. For example, a certain number of seats were allocated for parent, teacher, administrator, community, and higher education representatives. At one point the board considered revising the by-laws to eliminate the

[15] Torres interview.

teacher and administrator representatives because it seemed that there might be a conflict of interest. But in the end, the board decided such representation was important for making educational decisions. Furthermore, the parents representatives on the board were elected by parents throughout the district, not appointed as were most CAP representatives.

The governing board's mix of professionals and working and unemployed parents created an opportunity for cross-class relationships. But such relationships were not inevitable. Certain conditions, such as the strong linkages between school reform and community revitalization, helped non-professionals exert leadership. Rhody McCoy's support also seems to have helped non-professionals become more equal participants on the board. McCoy's commitment to the growth and development of poor people's leadership capacities seems to have guided his relationship with the governing board. Unlike many professionals, McCoy appears to have straddled the separate worlds of middle-class educators and clergymen and low-income parents.[16] McCoy seems to have grasped the importance of democratic, local governance in poor communities. At first, it appeared that such governance would also include representatives from the UFT. But the early bonds between the UFT and parents in Ocean Hill-Brownsville dissolved quickly, suggesting that the final confrontation between community and labor had deeper roots than are typically assumed.

[16] McCoy interview.

The Formation of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration School District

The neighborhood of Ocean Hill, situated on a sliver of land in Brooklyn overlooking neighboring Brownsville spread out below to the east, had experienced significant white flight in the early 1960s. Ocean Hill's brick apartment buildings and solid three-story brownstone buildings, neglected by their owners, fell into serious disrepair. By the time of the election, Ocean Hill was predominantly Black and Puerto Rican. Brownsville's demographics followed a similar pattern, but the neighborhood was geographically larger than Ocean Hill and its housing stock included one of the largest concentrations of low-income public housing in New York City. While the two neighborhoods were separated by a sweeping hill, residents shared common experiences with city agencies.

Both neighborhoods lacked essential services such as decent housing, adequate sanitation and garbage removal, sufficient healthcare, and quality schools. The election in August was an attempt to deal with just one of residents' pressing concerns -- the problem of inadequate schooling. Not all of Brownsville's schools were included in the demonstration district, which was a relatively small district for New York City. Indeed, the shape of the OHB district was determined as much by politics as it was by geography.[17]

Prior to the election in August, the schools in Ocean Hill and a section of Brownsville were part of District 17, a racially and ethnically-divided district. Linden Boulevard divided predominantly Black and Puerto Rican Ocean Hill and Brownsville to

[17] McCoy, interview by Stafford; Betsy Levin, "And Then There Were the Children: An Assessment of Efforts to Test Decentralization in New York City's Public Schools," Project Evaluation, May 1969, Ford Foundation, Report # 002149, Ford Foundation Archives; "Some Facts About Brownsville," October, 1967, Oliver Papers.

the North, and predominantly white East Flatbush, Canarsie, and East New York to the South. Neither Ocean Hill, nor Brownsville, were adequately represented on the district's local school board. Their token representation, and a history of failed integration plans, brought parents and community leaders from both neighborhoods together to propose the creation of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Independent School Board-District 17.[18]

Not long after, Reverend Herbert Oliver, newly arrived in Ocean Hill after having worked in the thick of the civil rights movement in Birmingham, Alabama and now minister at Westminster Bethany United Church in Bedford Stuyvesant, agreed to serve on the board. Oliver's experience with his son in New York City public schools quickly convinced him that critical action was necessary. The main goal of the new school board was to stimulate parent involvement and to work with interested teachers to improve the schools. The pending opening of a new middle school, I.S. 55, which would replace failing and troubled J.H.S. 178, presented an opportunity for parents and community members to push for a greater voice in the design of the school, the selection of teachers and a principal, and the introduction of neighborhood staff into the school organization. The Steering Committee for I.S. 55 submitted their proposal to the superintendent of schools, Bernard Donovan and the members of the Board of Education, but did not get any response for four months.[19]

Meanwhile, Mario Fantini, a program officer at the Ford Foundation, and Sandra Feldman, from the UFT, encouraged parents, teachers, and community members to

---

[18] "Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration District Independent School Board," n.d., Oliver Archives.

[19] Oliver interview; "Memorandum from the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Independent Local School Board of District 17 to the Board of Education, City of New York," October 18, 1966, Oliver Papers.

submit a proposal to set up an experimental school district in the northern tip of District 17, composed of I.S. 55 and J.H.S. 271 and their five feeder elementary schools: P.S. 178, P.S. 144, P.S. 137, P.S. 87and P.S. 73. At this point, Donovan finally responded and in a series of meetings in the late spring, the parents and community leaders met with Fantini, Feldman and Donovan to attempt to clarify the guidelines for the operation of the experimental district.[20]

The parents had a number of questions that remained unanswered at the meeting. Would the schools' superintendent have to approve the appointments of the principals in the district, or could the local governing board and their unit administrator decide? Would the unit administrator need to be licensed by the city as well as the state? Would the schools receive as much money as some of the schools involved in the More Effective Schools (MES) program, a compensatory educational program sponsored by the UFT for schools in poor neighborhoods?[21]

Donovan was unclear about the board's powers, particularly in regard to the qualifications and selection of administrative personnel.[22] The school system's chief administrator's indecisiveness at the beginning of the project would prove fatal. His only clear answer was that the Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools would not receive the same amount of money as the twenty MES schools in the city. Donovan insisted that the point of the experiment was to prove that schools could improve on the regular per pupil allocation and that more money would skew the experiment. Donovan's decision, in this matter, would not help the relationship between the UFT and the Governing Board.

---

[20] Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration District: The Independent School Board, n.d., Oliver Papers; Reverend John Powis, "The Role of the UFT in the History of Ocean Hill-Brownsville," *News From Ocean Hill-Brownsville,* February, 1969, 8-11, Oliver Papers.

[21] Meeting with Donovan, minutes, OHB August 1967, Oliver Papers.

[22] Ibid., 1.

Donovan agreed that the community should work with the Board of Education to select a principal for I.S. 55, and that the four elementary schools without principals should remain unstaffed until after the election of the governing board for the experimental district.[23]

Armed with their proposal, and with little guidance from Donovan, the parents, with McCoy's assistance, set up the August 1967 election for parent representatives to the new Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration District Governing Board. Parents envisioned a board and district that would be able to "select and appoint personnel, initiate and approve programs, request budget appropriations and make budget allocations."[24] The proposal also called for a Unit Administrator who would be the educational and administrative leader of the project and would report to the governing board.

[23] Ibid., 1.

[24] "Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration District: The Independent School Board" n.d, Oliver Archives.

The Governing Board

During the summer of 1967, twenty-five parents spent a month scouring the two neighborhoods of Ocean Hill-and the north-west part of Brownsville in a door-to-door campaign to inform parents and community residents about the local schools' needs and a proposed solution -- a demonstration school district. The parents visited every building in the area and every apartment in the larger buildings. These parent outreach workers would have been even more effective if they had a list of parents' names and addresses, but Board of Education officials refused to give them this information. Other services needed to improve as well, and many of the same parents and community activists involved in the school board elections were simultaneously working to improve neighborhood housing, employment, sanitation, drug rehabilitation, and health care.[25]

But the focus in July and August was on registering parents to vote, and setting up an election for a governing board that would hopefully begin to make a difference in the neighborhoods' seven existing schools and the new intermediate school that would soon be opening. Although it was an unusually quick election process, overseen by police cadets from the Neighborhood Youth Corps and college students, the campaign succeeded in getting 1,049 parents out of 4,200 eligible parents to vote. Many people from the South and Puerto Rico voted for the first time, creating a 25% turnout in an area that usually only posted a 15% turnout rate of eligible voters in the November general elections. The campaign's success stemmed from months of community organizing to simultaneously improve schooling, housing and other neighborhood services. Four of the seven parent representatives elected to the governing board were presidents or former

[25] Torres interview by author; Oliver interview by author; Powis, "The Role of the UFT in the History of Ocean Hill-Brownsville" *News from Ocean Hill-Brownsville,* February, 1969, 9-11, Oliver Papers.

presidents of their Parent Teacher Associations; the rest were actively involved in their respective schools. The parent representatives, all African-American, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican women, each represented a local school in the district, but as board members, they were also expected to represent the broader needs of community residents.[26]

In a flier to the parents of P.S. 144, Blanch Pile, the school's newly elected parent representative on the Governing Board, provided a chronology of educational activism in the two communities. This public narration of events, which became a standard form of communication from the governing board members to community residents, was both a way of keeping local residents informed and encouraging participation in board deliberations and actions. In the absence of local newspapers, especially at the beginning of the demonstration district, governing board members' public dissemination of information, especially at the school level, became an important form of communication.

In her carefully worded missive to the parents of P.S. 144, Pile described the history of the demonstration district. First, she explained, residents and community members from the upper part of Brownsville and the area at the eastern end of Bedford Stuyvesant, known as Ocean Hill, had worked during the last school year with interested teachers to form a school community advisory board.[27] That led to the proposal for an

---

[26] Newsletter, Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration School District n.d. circa, March, 1968, Oliver Papers; Thomas R. Brooks, "Can Parents Run New York's Schools, " *The Reporter*, January 11, 1968, 21; a report issued after the election found no evidence of coercion in the nomination or election process, see "An Evaluative Study of the Process of School Decentralization in New York City" the final report of the Advisory and Evaluation Committee on Decentralization to the Board of Education of the City of New York, July 30, 1968, 37, Decentralization Folder, PEA Archives, Teachers College, Columbia University; Oliver interview; Torres interview, Carol A. Wielk, "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Project*: Community Issues,* vol. 1, 2 (Institute for Community Studies, Queens College):9, Maurice Berube Papers, Queens College, New York.

[27] Pile to P.S. 144 Parents, n.d., Oliver Papers.

independent school district and the election of parent representatives from the seven schools in the district.

Pile also explained that on August 7, four community-wide representatives were selected to serve on the board from a pool of nominees proffered by community organizations in both Ocean Hill and Brownsville. By August 10, the governing board representatives made their first of many trips to the behemoth Board of Education headquarters, at 110 Livingston Street in Brooklyn. Their main goal was to tell the citywide superintendent of schools, Bernard Donovan, to "put his cards on the table" and grant the governing board members the authority to select a full-time principal for P.S. 144.[28] P.S 144, an elementary school of 2000 students, was not the only school without a principal in the demonstration district, but it was the school most desperately in need of effective leadership.[29]

P.S. 144 was considered the worst elementary school in the area; the school ranked as the twelfth lowest school in the city in terms of reading achievement. Over the course of three years, the principal appointed by the citywide Board of Education came to the school, on average, only one month a year; the rest of the time he was out on sick leave and eventually, on terminal leave. Because the Board of Education failed to address the lack of leadership in P.S. 144, the school was in chaos. Children were out of control in the halls, and the teacher turnover rate was hovering around sixty percent.[30]

Not long after the meeting with Donovan, on August 21, 1967, Pile and the six other parent representatives joined the rest of the governing board members -- five

---

[28] Ibid.,

[29] Governing Board Minutes, January 30, 1968, Oliver Papers.

[30] Betsy Levin, "And Then, There Were the Children," 179-80. According to Pile, 75% of the families at P.S. 144 were on welfare, the highest in the district.

community representatives, two principals, four teachers, and one college representative -- to appoint Rhody McCoy as the Unit Administrator for the district. McCoy had helped parents and community leaders develop a plan for the district over the summer, on leave from his post as acting principal at a "600" school, a special school for troubled students. In their minutes, governing board members noted that they needed to quickly appoint a leader for the experimental district because school would open in less than three weeks. Board members were concerned that four schools in the demonstration district would be opening without principals and at the very least, McCoy would hopefully expedite the appointment process.[31]

The parent representatives were already somewhat experienced at community organizing when they ran for election. According to Torres, Pile was from "one of the islands and had "umpteen" kids. She was very educated and sophisticated, could speak Spanish, and would "tell parents in no uncertain terms, don't be suckers, don't let people sucker you in. You deserve the best education for your children."[32] Pile, who had eleven children ranging in age from elementary school to Air Force enlistment, had been active in the community for more than five years. She was one of the early proponents of the Independent Local School Board of District 17, formed in October of 1966 as the precursor to the demonstration district. In her proposal for the Independent Local School Board, Pile asked the Board of Education to provide information about the district's

[31] Minutes OHB governing board, August 22, 1967, Oliver Papers; Ocean Hill-Brownsville: The Independent School Board n.d., Oliver Papers.

[32] Torres interview.

reading scores. At the time, the Board of Education did not provide public, school-level test score information. The Board did not respond to Pile's request.[33]

Before winning the election as the parent representative on the governing board from J.H.S. 178, Hattie Bishop, frustrated with the Board of Education's failure to provide information about school achievement, conducted her own research about school performance across the district. Torres remembered that Bishop was very caring, so that "anybody that had a problem, she would have taken them all home with her to try to solve the problem." Soft-spoken but firm, Bishop had nine children and had been involved in educational issues in Ocean Hill-Brownsville since she arrived from North Carolina five years earlier.[34]

What struck Bishop when her children transferred to school in the North was how rare it was for children in J.H.S. 178 to be assigned homework. Indeed, the poor performance and low expectations of the principal at J.H.S. 178 were significant influences in shaping parent demands for a demonstration district. In her role as a member of the proposal-writing committee, Bishop interviewed many community members, including students, to assess the level of school performance in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Bishop discovered that students were reading three to four years below grade level. Bishop's grass-roots research was an important factor in the creation of the demonstration district.[35]

Torres had moved to Ocean Hill with her three children from East Harlem, after she left her husband because he objected to her leaving the house to help neighbors and

---

[33] Levin, "And Then There Were the Children," 181-2; Memo from The Brownsville, Ocean-Hill Independent Local School Board of District 17 to the Board of Education of the City of New York, October 18, 1966, Oliver Papers.

[34] Torres interview; Levin, "And Then There Were the Children," 181-2.

[35] Levin, "And Then There Were the Children," 179-180.

friends who did not speak English. Torres continued to help others in her new neighborhood, but this time she became involved in community organizing efforts. Her involvement began, Torres remembers, when she met a priest at Our Lady of Presentation Church, Father John Powis, who asked if she would chaperon a dance for young people.[36] Powis, a white Catholic priest, served as one of the community representatives on the board and had helped start Project Method, a community-organizing group that Torres eventually joined. Torres would also work for CUSA (Christians and Jews United for Social Action), founded by Thelma Hamilton in Ocean Hill.

Although Thelma Hamilton did not serve on the Governing Board, she was a major force in education and community organizing in Ocean Hill and Brownsville. Hamilton, a mother of eight, had been involved in fighting for better schools in Brownsville as a parent leader. Hamilton was the executive secretary of the Parents Workshop with Reverend Milton Galamison until 1965, leading three citywide boycotts of schools. Hamilton then helped Powis and Torres launch the welfare and housing movement in Ocean Hill. Their work as housing and welfare organizers included a focus on education. Hamilton then worked as head of education for the Brownsville Community Council, an umbrella anti-poverty agency.[37]

Torres' eagerness to serving on the local governing board, a major commitment of time and energy, developed from a deep frustration with the schools in her neighborhood.[38] Torres remembered how the school district tried to place her children's

---

[36] Torres interview.

[37] "Butler, Oliver, Hamilton: That's the Ticket," *The People's Voice*, June 12, 1970, 2, Oliver Papers; Paul Chandler, interview by author, 10 June 2004; Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002) 211-212.

[38] Torres interview.

elementary school, P.S. 144, on triple session. Triple session meant that Torres would have to take one of her children to school at 7 a.m. and two at 11:00 a.m., and none of them would have a full day of school. Worse, Torres would have to walk them across busy North Avenue where there was no crossing guard and no red light, and where a young student had been killed by a bus.

But schools were not the only challenges for young people and their families in Ocean Hill. Torres found that shortly after she moved to Ocean Hill, the neighborhood had begun to change. Most white residents were leaving and the neighborhood had begun to deteriorate. Torres' introduction to community organizing was through her efforts to improve schools and simultaneously maintain the neighborhood's housing. Ultimately, the poor state of housing would eventually drive Dolores out of the neighborhood when she was burned out of her home.[39]

Torres, like Bishop and Pile, conducted her own grass-roots research on schooling outcomes. But Torres also became a sophisticated analyst of the welfare system and drug abuse programs. Like the other parent leaders, Torres' personal experience, a son who became a drug-addict, enhanced her knowledge of drug treatment and drug prevention programs. Bishop, Pile and Torres understood that an important but rarely utilized source for evaluating the effectiveness of schools and other city services was the knowledge and experience of local neighborhood residents. As community organizers, and as parents, Bishop, Pile and Torres spent much of their time listening to, and working with, young people in Ocean Hill-Brownsville to enlist them in the growing movement for community control. Not always agreeing with each other about the best way to organize, or even the

[39] Ibid.; Chandler, interview; Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn*, 211-212.

appropriate attire for organizing, Bishop, Pile and Torres had developed a certain degree of trust based on their experiences in "the streets."[40]

The First Stage of Governing

At first, the parent leaders' proposal for an independent school board delineated, in shopping list fashion, a host of issues they wanted the Board of Education to address. There were no priorities established to order the list of wide-ranging problems, and no clear plan for how the parent organizers hoped to address them. The proposal's style was not unlike that of typical PTA fliers, implying that simply by listing problems and making demands for solutions, the dysfunctional culture of schools would change. But this lack of sophistication faded as board members participated in intensive training with McCoy.[41]

Hiring a Superintendent

After fifteen years in the "600" school system, McCoy did not anticipate that when he went for an interview in Ocean Hill-Brownsville for what had been advertised as a summer position, he would not be returning to his school in the fall. The position was posted as a planning opportunity to help parents and community members develop an implementation plan for the OHB demonstration district.[42]

In the course of the interview, the parents asked McCoy what he thought about their proposal for a demonstration project. McCoy did not sugarcoat his reservations. He

---

[40] Torres interview by author; Fran Barrett interview by author. Tape recording, 23 May 2004.

[41] Memo from The Brownsville, Ocean-Hill Independent Local School Board of District 17 to the Board of Education of the City of New York, October 18, 1966, Oliver Papers.

[42] The 600 schools were set up for students who had been expelled from other schools for behavioral problems; McCoy interview by Stafford.

told the parents he thought it was a sham because the union was going to control it. According to McCoy, Clara Marshall, one of the parent representatives, did not hold back either, goading him about his light-colored skin and hair in the process. "You little red head, what makes you think you can do it?" McCoy responded, "I'm the professional."[43]

McCoy thought at first that he might have "blown" the job, because he prodded his interviewers to defend their point of view; a dynamic he thought was important to the working relationship between a superintendent and school board members. McCoy realized afterward that the Governing Board accepted him partly because the demands he made of the board demonstrated that he intended to establish a working partnership with the Governing Board.[44]

This was the beginning of what seemed to be a long-term working relationship between the professionals -- McCoy and his leadership team and the governing board parents -- Marshall and the other seven parent representatives. From the minutes of the governing board meetings and articles by McCoy at the time, the relationship appeared to work because both the professionals and the parents were direct and candid with each other. As a professional, McCoy did not seem patronizing, in part because he was committed to helping parents' develop their capacities to become skeptical but forceful leaders.

McCoy worked with the parents over the summer to put together a plan for the demonstration district. But more importantly, he worked with parents "night after night" to help them understand how to run effective meetings, follow Roberts Rules of Order, and develop their capabilities as public speakers. McCoy encouraged parents to speak to

---

[43] McCoy interview by Stafford.

[44] McCoy," Formation of a School District," in *Community Control of Schools*, ed. Henry M. Levin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 175.

the press, visit other communities considering community control, and work on citywide curriculum committees focused on the problem of discipline. McCoy described one parent representative who had difficulty with public speaking when she first started on the board. By the time the district had developed its initial program, the parent had become one of its most articulate spokespersons.[45] McCoy encouraged another parent representative, Agnes Hanson, to become more analytical by pushing her to defend her positions on education policy. By asking her questions and challenging her assumptions, McCoy helped her become a more sophisticated observer of school organization and instructional processes.[46]

The process of developing parents as leaders was not always easy. According to McCoy, he needed to discourage the kind of individualist culture prevalent in PTAs and school boards that fosters "selfish attitudes and desires to emerge as leaders."[47] Instead, McCoy attempted to help parents sustain a collective sense of their overall effort. McCoy encouraged Governing Board members to "think of common needs, to view the schools as an interdependent totality—a whole school system."[48]

McCoy's attention to interpersonal group dynamics among Governing Board members, and his efforts to train other professionals to develop a similar awareness, contributed to the growth of Governing Board members as equal partners in relation to the professionals. In addition, McCoy was "versed in the subculture of the majority of the board" and because of his knowledge of that subculture, or class culture, and his

---

[45] McCoy interview by Stafford; Torres interview.

[46] McCoy interview by Stafford; Torres interview; Marilyn Gittell, et al., *Local Control in Education: Three Demonstration School Districts in New York City* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 34; McCoy, "The Formation of a Community-Controlled School District," 181.

[47] Mc Coy interview by Stafford.

[48] McCoy, "The Formation of a Community-Controlled School District," 180.

attention to interpersonal relationships, he was able to bridge the differences between the professional members of the Governing Board and the parents. McCoy recalled how the dominant society distorted the parental identities of poor and working class parents.

> But here are these parents, used to feel so bad themselves, that I'm the cause of my kid not learning because you've been told that you don't care about your kids in school, you're apathetic, you don't come to meetings, if they send for you, you don't come, if you come down you got a blade, gonna whup the teacher. You got all kinds of fictitious addresses, fictitious names, you live under four different names, draw checks under three. You know—they got you. They tell you the story of your life. Don't tell the causes. Those parents went into classrooms and instead of seeing little Johnny, they saw twenty-five little Johnnys, all in the same boat…. What's going to happen to these kids? So these parents locked the door on the community and they say, "These kids' education is going to change." And all hell broke loose since that time.[49]

McCoy's interest in transcending class differences appeared to help set an example for the professional members of the board and other professionals in the district. One way McCoy did this was through his emphasis on collective decision-making. For example, if there was a split among board members regarding a policy issue, McCoy would ask that the board reconvene and consider modified versions of the policy which McCoy would help craft. If an individual board member had a specific request, McCoy would only meet with the member in the presence of another board member of the person's choosing. McCoy asked that the principals attend board meetings to observe how McCoy worked with the Governing Board, so that the principals could develop working partnerships with their governing board representative.[50]

Another way McCoy bridged class differences was through his support for youth leadership. McCoy convened meetings with the student leaders in his home so that they

---

[49]Rhody McCoy, "Why Have an Ocean Hill-Brownsville?" in *What Black Educators Are Saying*, ed., Nathan Wright, Jr. (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1970), 254-55.

[50] McCoy, "The Formation of a Community-Controlled District," 183; Oliver interview; Torres interview; McCoy interview by Stafford.

could meet with district staff to share their ideas. McCoy entrusted a small group of militant youth with the responsibility of working with truants. Finally, youth were encouraged to attend public meetings in the district where the Governing Board and McCoy made sure they were heard. McCoy thought that there should be more representation from community youth on the Governing Board, because they "must have a voice in self-determination."[51]

Reverend Herbert Oliver, the chairman of the Governing Board and someone McCoy considered a moderate, remembers that sometimes the local school board meetings would attract 700 or 800 people, some of whom were angry young activists who the Governing Board listened to with understanding and patience.

> We listened to them, there were a lot of fiery speeches, there were people there who threatened to burn down the city, but we listened to them. We heard them, and they felt heard. They wanted a forum, not just to be pushed aside. And I think this frightened many of the teachers, and they felt that we had linked up with black nationalists and other radical groups, and we were their captives. This was not the case. We knew what were we doing, but we could listen to others.[52]

Defining Common Needs and Aspirations

The preamble to the proposal for the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experimental school district underscored the class and race dimensions of the project. The proposal used District 17 to illustrate Ocean Hill-Brownsville's invisibility. For two an a half years, the preamble notes, Ocean Hill-Brownsville had no representation on the District 17 school board and therefore, no voice in determining policies to address the community's educational problems.

---

[51] McCoy, "The Formation of a Community-Controlled District," 183-185.
[52] Oliver interview.

> There are people here who feel themselves out of sight of other people, groping in the dark. The City takes no notice of them. In the midst of a crowd, at a church, in a market place, these people are about as obscure as they would be if you locked them somewhere in a cellar. It is not that they are censured or reproached they are simply not seen-the invisible people. To be wholly overlooked and to know it is intolerable.[53]

The plan for the experimental district, with its own governing board, looked forward to a unique opportunity for community residents to become visible. It was an effort that represented the "last threads of the community's faith in the school system's purposes and abilities."[54]

The organizing experiences of the governing board's parents and community members were significantly different from the experiences of the teacher and principal representatives. Most of the parents and community members had participated in the fight for desegregation of schools in their communities and, for some, in other parts of the city as well. The failure of the Board of Education to desegregate schools, after years of promises and moral rhetoric about the dangers of segregation, influenced parental demands for more control of their neighborhood schools as a means to improve the quality of education.

The Governing Board's preamble suggested that local governance of schools might pose an alternative to violence, because such local control would provide a way to end oppression. This was contingent, however, on shifting the power to make key decisions from the central administration to the demonstration district. One of the specific decision-making powers the governing board claimed was crucial to making the demonstration project work -- the power to select and appoint personnel -- would turn out

---

[53] "A Plan for an Experimental School District: Ocean Hill Brownsville," n.d. 1, Oliver Papers.

[54] "A Plan for an Experimental School District: Ocean Hill Brownsville, Preamble, n.d., Oliver Papers.

to be the flashpoint in union and community relations. The board's goal was to find professionals who would identify with the students and reverse the "miseducation" that had been prevalent in special service schools.[55]

According to the proposal for the demonstration district, governing board members and community leaders claimed they wanted to make a difference for students by hiring professionals who would be able to relate to students, understand their home life, and know the community and its needs.[56] Members claimed that hiring more Black and Puerto Rican principals would help reverse what they called the "miseducation" of students based on low expectations.[57] But they also stated that what mattered most was getting the best teachers possible -- white or Black. One aspect of good teaching, as defined by board members, was that teachers would serve as role models for students, preferably by living in the community and relating to students in the store, at church, or on the street. There seemed to be a great resentment towards teachers, almost all of them white, who left school at the end of the day and had very little to do with students outside of the classroom. Board members wanted teachers who "had learning," which meant they could address both the academic and social needs of students.[58]

---

[55] Ibid., 1; The proposal also states that the board should have the power to, "initiate and approve programs, request budget appropriations, and make budget allocations."

[56] A Plan for an Experimental School District: Ocean Hill Brownsville, Preamble, n.d., Oliver Papers.

[57] Torres, interview; Preston Wilcox, "Teacher Attitudes and Student Achievement," June 1966, Berube Papers; Marilyn Gittell, "School Decentralization and School Policy in New York City," *A Report for the New York State Commission on the Quality, Cost and Financing of Elementary Secondary Education*, October, 1971, p. 113, copy in author's possession.

[58] Oliver interview.

Recognizing Challenges

The board's statement of objectives, formulated only two months into its term, did not provide answers to the multitude of problems in the district. Instead it set forth its objectives as "the hopes and aspirations of the Governing Board" as it engaged the task it faced.[59] For example, some governing board members recalled that, through their experience, they were well aware of the city's role in undermining the physical infrastructure of their community and its denial of social and political opportunities for Ocean Hill-Brownsville's residents.[60] Therefore, the aspirations and hopes of governing board members did not seem to be divorced from the social, economic and educational challenges they faced. According to the fact sheet about Brownsville included in the Board's plan, Brownsville's population of 120,000 people -- approximately 40% Puerto Rican and 60% Black -- was also quite young. Almost 45% of the population was under 21 years of age, and those who were 25 years and older averaged only eight years of schooling. The median income was $4,000, with over 60% of those employed, working in semi-skilled, unskilled, or service occupations. Brownsville housing stock was old, eighty-five percent of it built before 1939, and a significant portion of it was deteriorating. The infant mortality rate in Brownsville was almost double the city's, as was the rate of pneumonia, influenza and venereal disease. The fact sheet emphasized the housing crisis in Brownsville and illustrated the diversity of housing construction and deterioration in the five areas that made up Brownsville as a whole.[61]

---

[59] "A Plan for an Experimental School District: Ocean Hill-Brownsville," October 1967, 3, Oliver Papers.

[60] Oliver interview; Torres interview.

[61] "Some Facts About Brownsville: A Fact Sheet," n.d., Oliver Papers.

These facts and figures, while frightening, lacked the visceral power of governing board members' descriptions of what they observed on the ground in their neighborhoods. In their attempts to address the overwhelming local problems long overlooked and underserved by elected officials and city agencies, organizers witnessed horrifying housing conditions. As the demographics of Ocean Hill-Brownsville changed in the early 1960s, and the population became mostly Black and Puerto Rican, landlords abandoned their buildings, and many residents were left without heat and hot water.[62]

Many of the worst-maintained buildings were large apartment complexes which had once been well-maintained, but whose double-occupancy rates in single apartments created overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Absentee landlords continued to collect rent and the residents were mostly captive because they had no place to move to. Rather than fix the buildings, as organizers had urged, the city eventually condemned them. The empty lots that resulted became repositories for old cars and garbage. This drove many people out of the community and as one organizer noted, took the fire away from the community organizing efforts in housing, education, and welfare.[63]

In one building an organizer found a ground floor apartment without a floor. In another, strange sounds in the wall turned out to be the scrapings of lizards' tails. While dilapidated and overcrowded housing was the top complaint of many community residents, other physical and social conditions also caused great concern. After housing, the key community concerns were crime and vandalism, drug addiction, rats and roaches, and schools. In addition, pot-holed streets and irregular garbage collection, employment

---

[62] According to the 1960 U.S. census, 73% of the population was black, 24% Puerto Rican, and 3.% other. Carol A. Wielk, "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Project: A Profile, Institute for Community Studies," Queens College, February, 1969, 4, Berube Papers.

[63] Chandler interview.

discrimination, police harassment and brutality, and insufficient and ineffective medical services demanded attention. Organizers simultaneously addressed multiple needs, not only because it was the best organizing strategy, but because of the dynamic interconnection between poor housing conditions, for example, and unequal educational opportunities.[64]

Addressing Unanticipated Challenges

The least anticipated challenges came from the professional unions, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the Council of Supervisory Administrators (CSA). While the Governing Board's preamble and statement of objectives captured the drastic consequences of state and city neglect of poor communities, there was little discussion about how the professional educators should conduct themselves in response to such eviscerating community conditions. It was as if the governing board assumed, at least at the project's start, that the district's teachers and principals understood why it was imperative for all the community's adults, including the education professionals, to transform the learning opportunities for young people in their schools and communities.

At the citywide level, even though tensions already existed due to the I.S. 201 controversy, there was still hope that the UFT would support the demonstration districts. After the height of the 201 controversy, Mario Fantini at the Ford Foundation thought UFT support was still possible. "Will the teachers' union go along with the break-up of the system into sub-parts? Indications seem to be that they would, providing there is an important role for them in the process." But Fantini did not anticipate that the UFT's

[64] Chandler interview; Torres interview; Carol A. Wielk, "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Project: A Profile, Institute for Community Studies," 4.

assumption of a leadership role would come into conflict with the Governing Boards in the demonstration districts.[65]

The United Federation of Teachers. Teachers were involved in the Ocean-Hill-Brownsville demonstration district even before the initial proposal for the demonstration project was submitted to city schools superintendent Bernard Donovan in July, 1967. Torres remembers that during the 1966 school year, parents and teachers had worked together at P.S. 144 to relieve overcrowding. Parents and teachers also demanded the assignment of more teachers to the school.[66] Sandra Feldman, the UFT's field representative in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and also Shanker's right-hand person, sent a letter to the Ford Foundation's program officer in charge of the demonstration districts, saying that she "was more hopeful (about Ocean Hill-Brownsville) than any other (project) in the city." She added that the tentative proposal she had attached to the letter was worked out by teachers, parents and community people in Ocean Hill-Brownsville.[67] Moreover, Feldman participated in the formative meetings for the demonstration district at the Ford Foundation and the Board of Education.[68] Despite this auspicious beginning, relations between the governing board and the UFT teachers in the district quickly deteriorated. Perhaps one of the reasons for the de-coupling of teacher from community interest was the timing of the demonstration districts. Community organizing and civil rights activism in the demonstration districts was unfortunately intensifying in tandem

---

[65] Mario Fantini to McGeorge Bundy, Recent Developments in the I.S. 201 Crisis, October 11, 1966, Reel number 2372, Section 4. Grant 67-426, Ford Foundation Archives.

[66] Torres interview.

[67] Letter from Sandra Feldman to Mario Fantini, May 11, 1967, Reel number 2372, Section 4. Grant 67-426, Ford Foundation Archives.

[68] In May, 1967, Feldman sent a proposal to the Ford Foundation entitled, "Tentative Proposal for I.S. 55 Brooklyn and its Feeder Schools," Reel number 2372 Section 4. Grant 67-426, Ford Foundation Archives.

with the UFT's organizing efforts to increase the union's power in citywide education policymaking.

The OHB Governing Board took teacher representation seriously; it included teachers as voting members of the board, unlike the other demonstration districts. Although parent and community members comprised the board's majority, teachers and principals were well represented. Staffs at each school were asked to elect a teacher representative to the Governing Board. The UFT could assign an ex-officio member to the board if it wished to. Supervisors from the elementary and junior high schools were asked to elect one representative from each division. During the Governing Board's first summer in 1967, nine temporary teacher representatives served on the board, with the assumption that the staff of each school would elect a permanent representative in the fall. But no permanent elections were held; instead the UFT began withdrawing their support from the project and eventually the nine teachers would leave the board. But no formal resignation ever took place. Instead, the teachers just stopped coming to the Governing Board meetings.[69]

Several factors appeared to have influenced the UFT's ultimate withdrawal of support from the demonstration project. One was the UFT's unwillingness to accept Donovan's refusal to fund the elementary schools in Ocean Hill-Brownsville as MES schools.[70] The unique feature of MES was that it was a formal agreement between the Board of Education and the UFT through the collective bargaining process. This was a novel concept at the time because it introduced a new level of bargaining over

---

[69] Minutes from Governing Board meeting, September 8, 1967, Oliver Papers; Rev. John Powis, "The Role of the UFT in The History of Ocean Hill-Brownsville" *News from Ocean Hill-Brownsville*, 9-10, Oliver Papers.

[70] Per pupil funding for MES schools was $915 as compared with the estimated city-wide average of $485. Thomas R. Brooks, "Can Parents Run New York's Schools? *The Reporter* (January 11, 1968):11.

educational policy, not just working conditions and salaries. Although subsequent evaluations of the project raised questions about MES's effectiveness, the union demanded that the MES program be part of their 1967 collective bargaining negotiations. When Superintendent Donovan told the governing board members and the UFT representative that he would not fund the Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools at the same fiscal level as the 21 MES schools in the city, the UFT appears to have reconsidered their support for the project.[71]

The 1967 Teachers' Strike**.** To make matters worse, tensions between teachers and community members were mounting across the city, and this escalation affected the relationship between the governing board and the UFT. For example, point five in the UFT-school system contract negotiations in the spring of 1967 contained a clause that granted teachers the right to permanently remove "the disruptive child" from the classroom, with no appeal or recourse on the part of students or parents. What became widely known as the disruptive child policy proposal caused considerable resentment across the city, and made relations between parents and teachers even more fractious in the nascent demonstration districts.[72]

Parents throughout the city reacted strongly to the provision and lashed out at teachers and the UFT, through press releases with statements such as "the teachers' job is to teach not to judge!" and "are there any true professionals?"[73] The threat of a teachers'

[71] Meeting with Donovan, minutes, OHB August 1967, Oliver Papers.
[72] "United Parents Associations' (UPA) Position as Presented at the Fall Round-up," September 16, 1967,1, Policy Studies 67, Board of Education Teacher Collective Bargaining, PEA Papers.
[73] Ibid., 1.

strike over the issue further exacerbated parents' belief that teachers did not want to be held accountable.[74]

But the UFT did not back down. Instead, during the spring and summer, union leaders' pushed their policy demands -- MES and the disruptive child -- threatening a "mass resignation" of teachers in September.[75] The term "mass resignation" was used to avoid the penalties a strike vote would bring. Shanker declared that "teachers will stay out for weeks, months or till Hell freezes over if union demands are not met."[76] In addition to the MES and disruptive child demands, the UFT made other non-monetary demands such as a reduction in teacher supervision after three years so that teachers would not be observed, rated, or held responsible for lesson plans. The UFT also put forward a demand to have principals and other supervisors selected by tenured faculty in each school. Such demands ran counter to the goals of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board members, who wanted teachers to be held more accountable. The board also wanted more power to appoint principals in the districts' schools.[77]

On August 24, 1967, at the Governing Board's second meeting, Dolores Torres informed her fellow board members that people in the community had decided to keep the schools open in the event of a teachers' strike. An African-American teacher representative on the governing board, Ronald McFadden, said that the Negro Teachers Association would refuse to support the strike. Board members eloquently expressed the

---

[74] Press Release, "Two Bridges Neighborhood Council on the Upcoming Strike of the UFT," Folder 120, Decentralization, 1967, Shanker Papers, UFT Archives; Rosalie Stutz, "A Surface Conflict," *Westside News*, September 21, 1967, Shanker Papers, UFT Archives.

[75] "Why Resignations?" UFT flier, n.d. Commuity Control File, Shanker Papers, UFT Archives.

[76] UPA Position Paper, Sept. 16, 1967, 2, Community Control File, Shanker Papers, UFT Archives.

[77] Ibid., 3.

fact that, "we are a new school board trying out a new idea. Why would we close our schools?" Members voted to keep the schools open in the event of a teachers' strike.[78]

The strike couldn't have come at a worse time for relations between the Governing Board and teachers in the demonstration districts. The first indication of organized teacher resistance to the experimental project occurred not long after the appointment of Rhody McCoy as Unit Administrator in August. At the third meeting of the Governing Board, McCoy presented the five principal candidates he had identified to fill the open positions in the district, and asked that the board appoint the principals at the meeting. A teacher representative objected to one of the candidates, Herman Ferguson, because he had previously been suspended from his position at the Board of Education. The seven teacher representatives abstained from voting because the principal candidates were not on the city's civil service list. But despite the teachers' objections, the Governing Board voted for all five candidates, including the first Puerto Rican principal in New York City's history, Luis Fuentes.[79]

The Friday before school started that fall, on the eve of the impending UFT strike, teachers returned to their schools to collect paychecks for the summer. The governing board members hosted a luncheon at each of the schools to solicit teacher support for the project and to encourage teachers to elect representatives to the governing board. But by that time, there was little remaining common ground between the union and the Governing Board. Oliver remembers that when he and Father Powis went to the schools, they were met with such hostility that they were not allowed to speak. "The teachers were there en masse and they just simply shouted us down. . . . They didn't want to hear

[78] OHB Minutes of Governing Board, August 24, 1967, 2, Oliver Papers; McCoy interview by Stafford; Powis, "The Role of the UFT," 10.

[79] Governing Board minutes, August 31, 1967, Oliver Papers.

us and they didn't choose anyone."[80] At P.S. 73, Powis claimed that they were met with a "storm of protest for over two hours," and the principal joined the teachers in resisting the governing board's leadership, saying that the school was still part of District 17. By the fifth meeting of the governing board, the teachers still had not elected their permanent representatives to the board.[81] When Oliver and Powis returned to the schools a few weeks later, they again urged teachers to hold elections. This time a few African American teachers met and chose representatives to the board from four schools.[82]

The four representatives -- Colene Blenman from P.S. 87, Alberta Loftin from P.S. 137, Ted Fletcher from I.S. 55 and Ronald McFadden from I.S. 271 -- who were elected in what teacher detractors considered a "rump" election, would serve on the Governing Board for the life of the demonstration project. These teachers, along with the parent and community representatives, attended all board meetings and contributed to a sense of continuity and stability in the district.[83]

Meanwhile, on September 11, 1967 the UFT called for a mass resignation of teachers, and the city's schools were closed for three weeks. Some of the slogans used during what amounted to a strike, though it was not officially called a strike, were an affront to parents and civic groups throughout the city. The Public Education Association interpreted the UFT's strike slogans as direct attacks on students and parents. For example, 'Children Need the Chance to Learn" implied that disruptive children should be removed from the classroom by teachers, with no input from parents. "Teachers Want

---

[80] Oliver interview; Governing Board minutes, September 8, 1967, Oliver Papers. The teachers failed to elect their permanent representatives to the Governing Board by the set deadline of Sept. 6, 1967. The board agreed to wait until after the strike to ask for the names of the permanent representatives; however no names were submitted.

[81] Governing Board minutes, September 8, 1967, Oliver Papers.

[82] Oliver interview.

[83] Oliver interview; Governing Board minutes, October 10, 1967, Oliver Papers.

the Chance to Teach" meant that the MES program should be expanded to other schools and imposed on the demonstration districts, against the parents' opposition. When the teachers walked out in September, parents across the city volunteered to teach in hastily set up Freedom Schools, and volunteered to conduct classes inside schools. Some principals, concerned about protecting their relations with the UFT, refused to allow parents to serve as volunteers.[84]

After the teacher's strike ended in October, the governing board encountered increased resistance from the UFT that took three forms: a continuation of the UFT's refusal to participate alongside parents in the governing of the district; withdrawal of UFT and often, teacher support at the school level; and pressure on the citywide superintendent of schools to weaken the power of the Governing Board, particularly in personnel decisions. In addition, the UFT joined forces with the CSA, an unprecedented alliance of teachers and their "bosses," in a suit against the Governing Board's appointment of principals.[85]

The Council of Supervisory Administrators**.** In October, the CSA brought a legal suit against the board's appointment of five new principals recommended by Rhody McCoy and approved by the demonstration district's Governing Board. The UFT joined the suit as an *amicus curiae* but their petition was later dismissed. The CSA argued that principals were supposed to be chosen by the merit system which, through its institutional vehicle -- the Board of Examiners -- maintained a list of eligible principals who could

[84] Memo from Fredrick C. McLaughlin to the Board of Trustees of the Public Education Association., 1-3, Collective Bargaining File, Box 1, Subseries 13.5, PEA Papers.

[85] Governing Board minutes, October 10, 1967, Oliver Papers; Powis, "The Role of the UFT," 9-11.

only be hired in list order.[86] Thus, the Governing Board was faced with the potential prospect of losing the five principals they had already appointed. Worse, they were threatened with not being able to hire future principals responsive to the vision and goals of the demonstration district.

Governing board members viewed the CSA's challenge of their principal appointments, based on what they felt were rigid civil service regulations, as the opening salvo in an all-out attack by the CSA and UFT on the autonomy and authority of the experimental district.[87] However, as the challenge by the CSA went to court, McCoy continued to appoint principals, eventually putting together a diverse cohort of principals in the seven district schools -- three African Americans, two Italians, and the first Asian and Puerto Rican principals in the school system.[88]

Assistant Principal Transfers. In spite of the strong principal cohort the board had appointed at the beginning of the school year, the CSA crippled the district's schools when all 18 assistant principals requested transfers.[89] When these transfers were announced not long into the first term of school year, the new principals faced considerable difficulty putting together a leadership team in most of the schools. The transfer of such a large number of assistant principals was a severe blow to the district. Because most of the schools had large student populations, many over 1,000 students, the need for the kind of supervision assistant principals provided was quite urgent. Some of

---

[86] Ibid.

[87] "Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration School District: A Newsletter ," n.d. circa, March 1968, Oliver Papers 1; David Rogers, *110 Livingston Street: Politics and Bureaucracy in the New York City School System* (New York: Random House, 1968), 192.

[88] Interview Oliver; Luis Fuentes, interview by author, 7 March 2005; Governing Board minutes, August 21, 1967, Oliver Papers; McCoy interview by Stafford; Marilyn Gittell, et al., *Local Control in Education: Three Demonstration School Districts in New York City* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 90. Powis, "The Role of the UFT," 10. Jack Bloomfield was nominated by a teacher.

[89] Governing board minutes, October, 27, 1967, Oliver Papers.

the transferring assistant principals said their professional association had advised them to request a transfer, and others claimed they didn't feel wanted by the new administrator.[90]

McCoy did not fight these assistant principal requests. However, to ease the strain of the transition on schools, he decided that the transfers would not be granted all at once, but over the course of one or two months. At the same time, the Governing Board faced an additional challenge of attracting teachers and assistant principals to the district in the middle of the school year. Because the Governing Board was forced to select assistant principals from the civil service list, and not from any other source, it found that very few assistant principals on that list wanted to come to the district. Worse, according to McCoy, some of the most vocal detractors among the assistant principals remained in the district, even as their colleagues transferred out.[91]

The 1967 teachers' strike, the suit by the CSA against the Governing Board's principal appointments, and the transfer of the nineteen assistant principals set the tone for the rest of the school year. Teachers and principals opposed to the demonstration project attempted to assert their power through their professional organizations. These professionals used formal structures, such as the teachers' contract and the Board of Examiners' procedures, but also employed non-formal methods such as mass transfers and periodic walk-outs to undermine the governing board. These combined strategies consumed the Governing Board's energies and distracted board members from focusing on the needs of schools.

---

[90] Report to Governing Board, OHB Personnel Committee, May 7, 1968, Oliver Papers.
[91] Ibid.; McCoy interview by Stafford.

Clarifying The Board's Policymaking Role

In a board memo summarizing the events of the 1967-68 school year, Governing Board members pinpointed the CSA and UFT's withdrawal of support, at a nascent stage in the district's development, as the tipping point at which the Governing Board should have ended the project. With the removal of the assistant principals in the fall and the vehement opposition of at least a hundred district teachers (out of a total district teaching staff of five hundred), the governing board, in retrospect, decided that "we should have stopped the project by November 1."[92]

However, the board members did not terminate the project. Instead, they continued to try to realize their goals and aspirations for the district by attempting to clarify their powers as decision makers through meetings with city and state policymakers. Perhaps this choice signaled an expectation that policymakers would intervene in support of the governing board. Whatever drove governing board members to continue at this pivotal stage, their push to spell out their governance authority, especially in relation to personnel, intensified the conflict with the UFT and CSA.[93]

On January 1968, the governing board met in a public session to review the recommendations of its by-laws committee. Board members were particularly concerned that the by-laws delineate their policy-making functions in terms of personnel. The board was clear that its policy function was to set professional standards for hiring and job performance, but the unit administrator was responsible for supervising and disciplining personnel. Board members spent most of the meeting discussing potential conflicts of interest that might occur as a result of having professionals as voting members of the

[92] Governing Board minutes, January 5 and 30, 1968, Oliver Papers.
[93] Ibid.

governing board. But in the end, the board voted to keep teachers, and administrators, on the board as voting members. This was not an easy choice. The board deliberated for some time, weighing the potential risks of asking teachers and principals to set professional standards when the professional unions were opposed to such accountability measures.

Several outsiders attended the meeting, including John Polley from the New York State Education Department. Polley had been one of the main researchers and driving forces behind the Bronx Park Experiment, an earlier experiment in community control in the 1950s.[94] Polley's presence at the meeting is an illustration of the conflicted position of state education personnel. Despite his experience with an earlier experiment in community control, Polley did not help the Governing Board clarify its powers *vis-à-vis* the Board of Education. For example, it does not appear that Polley shared his strongest research recommendation from the Bronx Park Experiment, that popularly elected school boards in New York City should have more power over personnel.[95]

But even if Polley had shared his insights gleaned from the Bronx Park Experiment, he was not a power broker in the education department. Instead, State Education Commissioner James Allen appointed Esther Swanker to be the special assistant in charge of the demonstration districts. Board members felt that Swanker was "brilliant in her role of protecting the Board of Education and especially Dr. Bernard Donovan, Superintendent of Schools."[96] Each time, for example, the Governing Board met with Swanker and other state department personnel during their four-month quest to

---

[94] The Bronx Park Experiment is described in more detail in Chapter I, pp. 9-11.

[95] John W. Polley, et al., *Community Action for Education: The Story of the Bronx Park Community of New York* (New York: Teachers College, 1953).

[96] Oliver interview by author.

clarify their powers as a board, they were advised to negotiate with Superintendent Donovan and the citywide Board of Education. But when the governing board went to Donovan and the President of the Board of Education, Alfred Giardino, they were told that only the state legislature had the power to change certain guidelines. What resulted was an endless, enervating cycle of city and state policy-makers' passing the buck. This failure to address the pressing personnel needs of the district, well into the first school year of the project, meant that the Governing Board and Unit Administrator were constantly distracted by a crisis over personnel in most of the schools.[97]

After the assistant principals had transferred out of the district *en masse* in the fall, the governing board did not have the authority to replace them with candidates of their choice. Instead, candidates for assistant principal positions were supposed to come from the Board of Examiners approved list. The governing board met with the President of the Board of Education, Alfred Giardino, at the beginning of March, 1968, to make it clear that the board should have the power to select assistant principals who supported the goals of the demonstration district. Board members wanted the same relief from the restrictive Board of Examiners guidelines for hiring assistant principals that they had been given for hiring principals. In the fall of 1967, New York State Commissioner of Education, James Allen created a separate category of principals for the demonstration districts, called "demonstration school principals," allowing the governing board more flexibility with these appointments. Giardino refused to follow the Commissioner's principle, arguing that appointing "demonstration school assistant principals would

[97] Memo from the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration School District, "What could be, what the truth really is, telling it the way it is," March, 1968, Oliver Papers; McCoy interview by Stafford.

stretch the law too far," and that legislation would be needed to change the Board of Examiners.[98]

At this critical juncture, Allen supported the demonstration districts by recognizing that the district's professionals should be hired on the basis of the match between their beliefs and values about community control and those of the demonstration district. But the civil service mentality encoded in the Board of Examiners operated on an antithetical set of principles. In the interest of maintaining objectivity in the hiring process, and awarding jobs on the basis of supposed merit, the Board of Examiners treated professionals as interchangeable parts in a vast, factory-like system. The examiners' notion was that professionals should be capable of service in any community or school, based on their performance on centrally-developed tests that supposedly objectively assessed candidate's merit. The demonstration district challenged this traditional notion by suggesting that merit should be at least partially defined by the alignment of professional beliefs and values with those of parents and community members. In challenging these merit notions at the core of the New York City school system, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board members became the first initial shock troops in what evolved into a twenty-five year crusade to eliminate the Board of Examiners.[99]

Once again the governing board considered disbanding. After the meeting with Giardino, the board had not only failed in its efforts to appoint their own assistant principals, but the judge hearing the CSA suit ruled against the legitimacy of the

---

[98] News Release, March 5, 1968, OHB Governing Board, Oliver Papers.

[99] Paul Trachtenberg, introduction to *A Transcript on the Public Hearings Held Before the New York City Commission on Human Rights, January 25-29, 197,* ed. Paul Trachtenberg (Agathon Publication Services: New York, 1972), ix.

governing board's first five principal appointments. However, the board did not disband, but instead tried a new strategy.[100]

The Second Stage of Governing

Rather than asking for clarification from policy-makers who were proving unwilling to take responsibility for an experimental project they themselves had authorized, the governing board began to act on its own. Dolores Torres set the tone for the next phase of the governing board's policy-making when she announced in a news release:

> As a community representative to this Governing Board, my hand is on the pulse of the people in this area. I can tell you that people did not elect this Governing Board to be a powerless puppet for the Board of Education, the Ford Foundation, or Mayor Lindsay. We were selected to see to it that the black and Puerto Rican children, victims of the "white power" structure, do not continue to be oppressed by white racism any longer. Our children will get the best education, by whatever means, -- peaceful or forceful -- decided by the parents of this community. Our Principals will stay! If they are removed, the power structure will have to make their first use of the National Guard for 1968.[101]

Claiming that the "guidelines for an experiment can only be written from experiences learned during the experiment," the Board met on March 19 in executive session to discuss the problems of personnel in the district. The governing board discussed problems with some assistant principals and teachers at the two middle schools, I.S. 55 and J.H.S. 271, and agreed that certain professionals who were not supporting the demonstration district should be transferred out. No action was taken, but tensions in the middle schools mounted over the spring vacation, with the death of Martin Luther King and continuing problems with safety and security in both schools. In April, the Governing

---

[100] News Release, March 5, 1968, OHB Governing Board, Oliver Papers.
[101] Dolores Torres, Ocean-Hill Brownsville News Release March 5, 1968, 4, Oliver Papers.

Board met with State Commissioner Allen, Mayor John Lindsay, and officials from the Board of Education, to explain that some of the professionals would have to be transferred out of the district's schools. Board members explained to city and state officials that in addition to fires in the schools and lack of safety, some assistant principals were attempting to divide Black and Puerto Rican students. But no action was taken for or against the Governing Board as a result of the meetings. Instead, policy-makers passively allowed the differences between the Governing Board and professional unions to fester.[102]

Transferring Personnel

When the Governing Board met again on May 7, the board decided it was time to act on its own. The personnel committee presented a report. The committee recommended that 19 professionals – 13 teachers, five assistant principals, and one principal, be "removed" from the district.[103] The committee prepared a statement for the board that specified the background of the district's personnel problems. After providing a comprehensive summary of the difficulties the governing board had encountered since September of 1967, when the board appointed its first five principals and was immediately challenged, the personnel committee listed the names of the teachers, assistant principals, and principal the committee recommended for removal from the district. The board did not write up charges against the educators. Instead, the decision was to remove the educators from the district because they were undermining the

[102] Ibid.

[103] Report to Governing Board Ocean Hill School District From Personnel Committee, Mrs. Clara Marshall Chairman, May 7, 1968, Oliver Papers; OHB Fact Sheet, May 27, 1968, Oliver Papers.

demonstration project, and transfer them to the central Board of Education. The governing board did not have the authority to fire the teachers.

The Personnel Committee then explained that,

> we feel we will be condemned by many as having to make this unpleasant recommendation. But every attempt on our part to solve the problem has met with failure. So we will have to write our own rules for our own schools. Enforcement of these rules will have to be carried out by the people of the community.[104]

After discussing the personnel committee's recommendation at length, the board voted, in a public session attended by community members, to transfer the teachers out of the district. The board agreed on the wording of a letter that would go out to the nineteen professionals the next day.

> The Governing Board of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville School District has voted to end your employment in schools in this District. This action was taken on the recommendation of the personnel committee. This termination of employment is to take effect immediately. In the event you may wish to question this action, the Governing Board will receive you on Friday, May 10 at 6 P.M.[105]

Luis Fuentes remembers the tension in the room the night the board made the decision.

> There was a lot of hesitation that night about what to do with those teachers, (assistant principals and principal), 19 of them. It wouldn't be the first time teachers have been asked to leave a district. Maybe it's the first time that they'd been asked to leave the district by parents. But in the past, these things were done at the superintendent's office, at [110] Livingston Street. People were transferred, here, there, anywhere.[106]

The much-publicized public report of the historic meeting of the May 7 governing board meeting, by Martin Mayer, claimed that Powis was the chairperson of the personnel committee and that the committee had been formed in March by Reverend Oliver. However, the personnel committee had been in existence since the start of the

---

[104] Ibid., 1.

[105] News Release, March 5, 1968, OHB Governing Board. Oliver Papers; Report to Governing Board Ocean Hill School District From Personnel Committee, Mrs. Clara Marshall Chairman, May 7, 1968; Governing Board Minutes, May 7, 1968, Oliver Archives.

[106] Fuentes interview by author.

Governing Board, and Clara Marshall had always served as the chair. Mayer maintained that while the Governing Board was deliberating in executive session, the "door burst open and 15 to 20 militants rushed in" and claimed that it was a community meeting. Mayer described the meeting as the "poisoned ground of educational failure" in which "the governing board had sown the dragon's teeth of impersonal injustice. And the armed men sprang up."[107]

Reverend Oliver recalled the same moment when community members came into the governing board executive meeting. However, his interpretation of the event differed from Mayer's. As president of the Governing Board, Oliver argued for the board to continue meeting in executive session but was overruled by the majority of the board. Oliver accepted this decision, despite his objection, because he wanted all political views within the community to be represented even if he didn't agree with them.[108]

Powis, in an article written not long after the even, refuted Mayer's statement that there were armed militants in the room.

> All of our Governing Board meetings are open meetings. People are allowed to come in; people from the community do come in whether they are men or whether they are women. We do not consider them militants. The Governing Board makes its own decisions.[109]

Clearly there were differences among board members about how the meeting should have been handled, as well as questions about the controversial action the board took to transfer the nineteen educators. Nevertheless, in this instance the personnel committee members made a recommendation to the board based on careful deliberations. Mayer's article contributed to citywide perceptions that either McCoy or community militants

---

[107] Martin Mayer, *The Teachers Strike New York, 1968* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 50.
[108] Oliver interview; Torres interview.
[109] Powis, "The Role of the UFT," 11.

were calling the shots, not, as Mayer claimed, the "ladies of the governing board" most of whom "were on welfare." This charge is not reflected in the governing board's minutes, which indicate that the parent members were active participants and decision-makers throughout the long-ordeal.[110]

The Governing Board's fact sheet, sent to the "people of our community" just ten days after the strike, reiterated the same point that the Governing Board had made since the fall of 1967; the demonstration district had been "sabotaged" by most of the assistant principals and many of the teachers. As a large police force was sent in to Ocean Hill-Brownsville to keep order, the governing board's concerns escalated. This time, the fact sheet claimed, the stakes were higher than at the district's inception. "Since the police have taken over our school buildings, we don't want our children frightened by police. The question at stake now is bigger than when we began. The question is whether a Black and Puerto Rican community will ever be allowed to determine its own destiny."[111]

Confrontation with the Professional Unions

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Governing Board members recall that when they transferred, involuntarily, 19 professionals -- 13 teachers, five assistant principals, and one principal -- "the entire power structure of the city started fighting our school project and our children."[112] The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) accused the governing board of firing the teachers and demanded that they be reinstated. The multiple teachers' strikes that followed once the demonstration district refused to take the professionals

[110] Mayer, *The Teachers Strike*, 43.

[111] Fact Sheet: "To The People of Our Community," Ocean Hill-Brownsville Decentralization School Project, May 17, 1968, Oliver Papers.

[112] "Fact Sheet to Parents, Students and Community People about the School Problems," May 27, 1968, Oliver Papers.

back centered the attention of the city, and the country, on Ocean Hill-Brownsville and the clash between proponents of community control and the UFT.[113] In the three weeks after the teacher transfers, the Governing Board explained its actions to community residents and parents in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, which by now had been occupied by police cordons around the schools, helicopters overhead, and undercover agents on the roofs of surrounding buildings. The Governing Board's public statements at the beginning of the conflict captured the essence of the position the board would take throughout the entire controversy.[114]

> We affirm our decision to transfer 19 assistant principals and teachers. They will not return to the schools. We publicly denounce the false and racist statements of Mr. Albert Shanker. The parents -- and the young people themselves -- of the 9,000 students have taken over our own schools, which is our right and duty. We are also saddened by the fact that for the past week the educational establishment of this city has supported the so-called procedural rights of 19 people above the just demands and educational needs of 9,000 children.[115]

The confrontation over the 19 transferred educators distilled the broader fight about the role of the Governing Board in democratic decision-making to a standoff between the UFT, CSA and the Demonstration District. The school system had an ongoing agreement with the UFT to quietly allow involuntary teacher transfers between districts. This practice, albeit informal, had been prevalent among school districts and accepted by the UFT and CSA. But when the Governing Board made a formal, public motion to transfer teachers and administrators, the UFT claimed it was a violation of due process rights. At its core, the confrontation was about who had the power to shape the

---

[113] Marilyn Gittell, *Local Control in Education*, 90.

[114] Press Release, "Ocean Hill-Brownsville School District," from Governing Board, Clara Marshall, Vice-Chairman, May 31, 1968, Oliver Papers.

[115] Memo to Parents of the OHB District from the Governing Board and Rhody McCoy, May 20, 1968, Oliver papers; "Fact Sheet to Parents, Students and Community People About the School Problems," May 27, 1968, Oliver papers.

governance authority of the Demonstration District. In the absence of legislation and central board of education policy, the Governing Board assumed what it believed to be its right to transfer personnel. But the Governing Board did not do so without having waged a months-long campaign at the city and state level to clarify, through formal policy, its decision-making authority over personnel.

The Governing Board called a public meeting on May 27, 1968 to explain its actions to students, parents and community members, and to clarify why the board was holding out against the intense citywide pressure to take the transferred educators back. The board explained that 300 out of 500 district teachers walked off their jobs for three days because the board refused to reassign the transferred teachers to classrooms in the district. The board made a clear distinction between those teachers who walked out and the 200 who stayed with the children.

> It is obvious that 300 of our teachers care more about Mr. Shanker's orders than they do about educating our children. We want to publicly thank the 200 teachers who came in and taught our children last week. We now know who the teachers are who really care about our children.[116]

The political spectacle over the right of the nineteen professionals to return to the OHB Demonstration District dragged on for at least seven months after the involuntary transfers were first announced. The city publics were riveted on the political standoff between the UFT and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Governing Board and its Unit Administrator, Rhody McCoy. But buried underneath the daily media reports about strike actions and negotiations were the actions of a second group of professionals, those 200 teachers and eight principals who did not walk off the job. When the UFT called three citywide strikes in the fall of 1968, the 208 teachers and principals who had stayed

[116] OHB Governing Board, "Fact Sheet to Parents, Students and Community People About the School Problems, "May 27, 1968, Oliver papers.

in their schools in Ocean Hill-Brownsville were joined by teachers and principals in schools around the city who worked with parents to keep their schools open.[117]

Conclusion

The Governing Board's decision to transfer 19 professionals, and the UFT's decision to call a six-week citywide teachers' strike over the Governing Board's refusal to accept the professionals back, would reverberate throughout the city long after the end of the experimental demonstration projects. But in taking such a controversial stand, the Governing Board did not operate in isolation from the system, but instead attempted to change long-held beliefs about the need to insulate professionals from community influence. The OHB experiment, and the governing board's resulting actions, confronted mediating structures that had protected schools from communities for a half-century. In challenging some of these structures, such as the Board of Examiners, the Governing Board was taking on a Herculean task. But in addition to the old, encrusted central system bureaucracy, the Governing Board also challenged a bureaucracy-in-the-making, the professional unions and their contractual power base. This conflicted conjunction of old and new bureaucracies might have been diluted, at this critical juncture, through state legislation. Unfortunately, in the spring of 1968, when state legislators finally acted to attempt to defuse the conflict, they passed a bill that merely delayed, for a year, any significant action on New York City's centralized structure.

Working against the grain of a rigid bureaucracy, the demonstration district was at the mercy of powerful forces aligned against it. State legislators were pressured by the

---

[117] George Barner, "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Community Views the News Coverage," unpublished report, Center for New York City Affairs, New School for Social Research, n.d., Maurice Berube Papers, Queens College.

professional unions fighting to preserve those aspects of the bureaucracy, such as the Board of Examiners, which protected their professional prerogatives and systemic power. The unions were aided and abetted by the citywide controversy they had helped to create about the perils of community control. The failure of the citywide Board of Education to support the demonstration districts allowed the superintendent of schools to undermine the experiment from within the system. The governing board's focus was on realizing their goals for the district and fending off concerted attempts to undermine those goals. There was limited time, and perhaps too limited capacity, for them to develop a citywide strategy to confront, and attempt to surmount, this complex of powerful opposition forces.[118]

Almost thirty years after the contentious teacher's strike of 1968, Albert Shanker reiterated his long-standing characterization of the community control movement. "The fact is there was no educational idea to this whole thing [community control]. It was part of the leftist politics of the 1960s that romanticized local people. While it spoke in the name of democracy, it was anti-democratic."[119] The day-to-day governing experience of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Governing Board suggests otherwise. Indeed, contrary to Shanker's view, this chapter demonstrated that a democratic debate about who should govern schools in poor African American and Puerto Rican communities was at the core of the power struggle over the control of schools in Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

---

[118] The one major exception was when the governing board met with the governing boards of the two other demonstration districts to prepare a joint statement of the five powers the demonstration districts needed to make community control meaningful. See, Governing Board minutes, January 30, February 9, 1968 and March 5 and Flier, "What has been agreed upon by the three experimental school districts for community control," March 19, 1968, Oliver Archives.

[119] Joseph Berger, "Seeking Change Where It All Began: Cradle of School Decentralization Welcomes Albany's Plan," *New York Times*, 20 December 1996, B1.

Although this chapter attempts to reinterpret the struggle, it also tries to demonstrate that the Governing Board was not necessarily endangering a pluralist democracy, but instead was promoting it. The demands of a disenfranchised group of parents and community members could only have been met within newly defined legal parameters for the experimental district. The state's refusal to grant legal authority to the Governing Board limited the political space for tolerance of pluralism. Whenever the Governing Board members pushed against this limitation, their actions were considered anti-democratic. But the governing board considered the actions of the state anti-democratic, because the state claimed to be decentralizing power but insisted on retaining control. The ensuing debate about disenfranchised communities' powers over education in relation to the state focused public attention on the weaknesses of the state's democratic structures of public education. The Governing Board exposed these weaknesses and at the same time, offered alternative solutions.

Shanker's perspective on the crisis was shared by many who wrote in the aftermath of the strike. Martin Mayer's account became somewhat of a doctrinal classic about the perils of community control.[120] Not long after the crisis, Phillip Green, a political scientist, challenged Mayer and others on their anti-democratic claims. Green first weighed their arguments, and then posed a counter-argument consistent with the perspectives of this chapter. Green first considered whether there was some merit to the argument that community control, as a pluralist cure for the disease of liberal democracy, might prove to be worse than the disease. Green argued that the from this perspective, the destruction of traditional civil liberties, manifested in the transfers of the 19 educators out of the demonstration district, was even more threatening than potential corruption.

[120] Martin Mayer, *The Teachers Strike New York, 1968* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

Thus the transfer action was defined by the critics of community control as portending a disaster for democracy. As Green frames the anti-democracy argument, pluralism does not counter liberal democracy, but becomes one of its worst enemies.[121]

Green offers an alternative analysis based on an analysis of the power differential between the Governing Board and the UFT. Green points out that Mayer himself highlighted this power imbalance when, to support his characterization of an irrational Governing Board, Mayer argued that the board could not possibly have hoped to win a confrontation with the more powerful, well-financed union. Therefore, Green argues,

> to compare the spasms of self-defense in which they [the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community] lash out at an oppressive society with the deadly and destructive operations of a marauding American senator (Senator Joseph McCarthy) is to be totally insensitive to the human dimensions of politics.[122]

But even more critical than the human dimension, Green argues, is the fundamental political issue of coercion. For Green, liberal toleration can mask the state's powers of coerciveness that, if unchecked, "weighs upon the victims of state power as heavily as though they did not live in a liberal democracy at all."[123] Green argues that in instances when formal equality and real equality sharply diverge, liberalism becomes a "mask for privilege." Therefore, liberals' refusal to tolerate the Governing Board's appeal for social justice and equality was as anti-democratic as the supposed dangers of pluralism.

Another charge by Mayer and the critics of community control was that Black "militants" did not speak for the majority of community residents. This chapter demonstrates that the "militants" were part of a broad spectrum of community activists

---

[121] Phillip Green, "Decentralization, Community Control and Revolution," in *Power and Community: Dissenting Essays in Political Science*, eds., Phillip Green and Sanford Levinson (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969) 260.

[122] Ibid., 261.

[123] Ibid., 263.

encompassing diverse ideological and political beliefs. Many of the participants within this spectrum were rendered invisible by the critics of community control, who used the accusation of militancy to argue that the entire movement was unrepresentative of the majority of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community, and therefore anti-democratic. Instead, the democratic participation of women and parents in the demonstration district, working in conjunction with the young people in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, strengthened democratic participation and helped these actors become, as Green puts it, "self-determining citizens."[124]

But Mayer argued that women and young people in Ocean Hill-Brownsville were controlled by McCoy, Powis and Oliver. According to Mayer, these three leaders controlled all access to information from the outside world and because "both the mothers and the youngster are very ignorant," they are "poorly equipped to judge what they are told."[125] From this chapter's portrayal of Blanche Pile, Hattie Bishop, Clara Marshall and Dolores Torres, and their documented actions on the Governing Board and in their neighborhoods, the charge of ignorance and lack of sophisticated judgment is hard to sustain.

The next chapter turns to an examination of the professional lives of three teachers and supervisors in the school system during the 1950s and 60s. As part of the first generation of African American and Puerto Rican educators in the city's school system, their experiences provide yet another lens for understanding the school system's post-Brown era. The first chapter considered the state of the schools serving Black and Puerto Rican students during this period from the perspective of official reports, good

---

[124] Ibid., 273.
[125] Martin Mayer, *The Teachers Strike: New York*, 1968, 112.

government groups, I.S. 201 and the citywide community control movement. This chapter focused on these same schools from the vantage point of parents and community leaders in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. The next chapter attempts to capture educators' viewpoints through the life stories of three African American and Puerto Rican educators in the city's special service and 600 schools.