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For immediate release:

Community organizers + involved citizens = An educational success

Chicago, Feb 9, 2009 – Sometimes solutions to the most difficult problems are hidden in plain sight.

For the past few decades, educators in charge of low-income school districts have struggled to improve the achievement of students and schools by hiring newly-minted teachers for hard-to-staff schools. In many states, student performance in these communities has stagnated or lagged. Worse, as many as a quarter of the teachers intended to help turn the educational tide, move on to higher-paying and less-troubled school systems within a year or two.

A few years ago, Chicago community organizer Joanna Brown asked a seemingly simple question: Can the residents of these under-resourced communities be drafted and prepared to become the instructors these neighborhood schools so desperately need?

"I saw passionate parents and community members with an interest in children and schools who wanted to contribute more," she said of parent tutors, teachers' aides and others in her neighborhood with big dreams but few means of gaining the qualifications to become accredited instructors. "How could we make that happen?"

"I immediately saw the potential ... what these residents could give back to a community," said Chicago State University Professor Maria Teresa Garreton, who has worked to improve bilingual education in the city's public schools. She was so moved in 1999 by the impassioned queries of Brown and several interested parents that within weeks she applied for a grant that might foot the bill for such a program's creation. "These people just needed a bridge to get to their goals, someone to help them get where they needed to be," she said.

Around that same time, Madeline Talbott, a tireless community organizer whose work had taken her from Massachusetts to Arkansas to Texas and then to Illinois, was looking

for ways to positively impact the quality of teachers in the neighborhood schools where she organized.

"I found that our organization alone couldn't do it," said Talbott, who then headed Illinois ACORN, a community-based group best known for voter registration and affordable housing issues. "So I reached out to some other organizations...."

Tapping into Chicago's broad network of community groups, Talbott first enlisted Logan Square Neighborhood Association, where Joanna Brown organized, and came across Brown's and Garretton's effort, then called Nueva Generacion (New Generation). In Talbott's estimation, their effort had larger potential, capable of addressing the systemic issue of high teacher turnover at poorer schools.

Working in collaboration with Brown, Garretton and many others, including elected officials, Talbott (now Lead Organizer of Action Now) helped develop the blueprint, support, and strategies, and that eventually led to the 2004 law creating the Grow Your Own Teachers Education Act and Grow Your Own Teachers, a coalition of community organizations. Grow Your Own (GYO) is an innovative, grass-roots initiative that seeks to forge a pipeline of quality teachers by uniting community organizations, educational institutions and school districts that, in turn, recruit community residents who are active in their low-income local schools but haven't been able to afford college.

With the help of state funding, the coalition of seven community organizations has created 16 partnerships across Illinois that locate and prepare potential teachers. By 2016, GYO hopes to have placed 1,000 individuals from local communities as teachers in the state's low-income schools. To date, the program has seen 11 graduates enter classrooms as fully-accredited teachers and has 500 candidates -- mostly women of color -- in the pipeline.

The program seeks to tackle a full complement of thorny academic issues: Reducing high teacher turnover rates; easing the cost of recruiting teachers to underserved schools; increasing the number of minority teachers in classrooms; and infusing schools with competent teachers who have strong ties to their communities, where large class sizes, language barriers and intractable societal issues can impact learning.

GYO candidates -- community residents or school employees who have earned at least a high school diploma or a GED -- receive loans of up to \$25,000, financial aid and child care during their stint in the program. In return, they must satisfy all state teaching requirements and teach in hard-to-staff schools for a minimum of five years.

After graduation, the one-time community members will teach in their own neighborhoods, often mainly-minority areas, where teacher turnover is nearly twice the national rate. Nearly 90 percent of GYO candidates are people of color with strong ties to their communities, in tune with their neighborhoods' culture and challenges.

GYO also has ancillary benefits for a community, according to Brown. In immigrant-

heavy neighborhoods, for example, the program can serve as a bridge for new arrivals -- quickly integrating and immersing them into the bloodstream of a community.

"We are not only creating good teachers, we are creating teachers who have a solid philosophy. There is a lot of knowledge in these families, in these communities," said Brown, an education organizer of a non-profit group based in one of the city's Latino neighborhoods. "These individuals bring so much to the table in under-resourced areas. They really become community role models."

The fledgling GYO program's innovative approach has caught the attention of educators in other states, including Arizona, California and New York. Selected educators and community groups from those states are either in the process of studying or trying to duplicate the Illinois initiative.

"What Illinois has created is an excellent template for the rest of the nation," said Kandy Aldana, a California high school English teacher who was part of a contingent of educators that recently met with GYO Illinois officials. "I think it's a great approach to getting new teachers."

Closer to home, GYO enjoys support from many Illinois lawmakers, including State Rep. Esther Golar and Sen. Iris Martinez, who have led the fight for continued funding for the program. "At the end of the day, the ones who will benefit are our children," Martinez said at an event celebrating GYO's progress.

In these lean economic times, where communities are suffering the ravages of budget cuts, GYO is a bold, cost-efficient way of tapping into a community's resources to improve its schools, said Anne Hallett, GYO director.

"We think the program holds great promise," she explained. "These are talented, inspired people who might have been overlooked as a resource. Now, they will be able to benefit their schools and an entire community."

"There's one thing I kept telling myself -- difficulties mastered are opportunities won," Igartua said. "I kept saying that in my head because [the program] was so difficult."

"We're going to Springfield to make sure that the General Assembly knows this is succeeding, and allows us the opportunity to present even more people with the chance to help their schools and communities."

For more information about the rally and Grow Your Own, visit www.growyourownteachers.org.