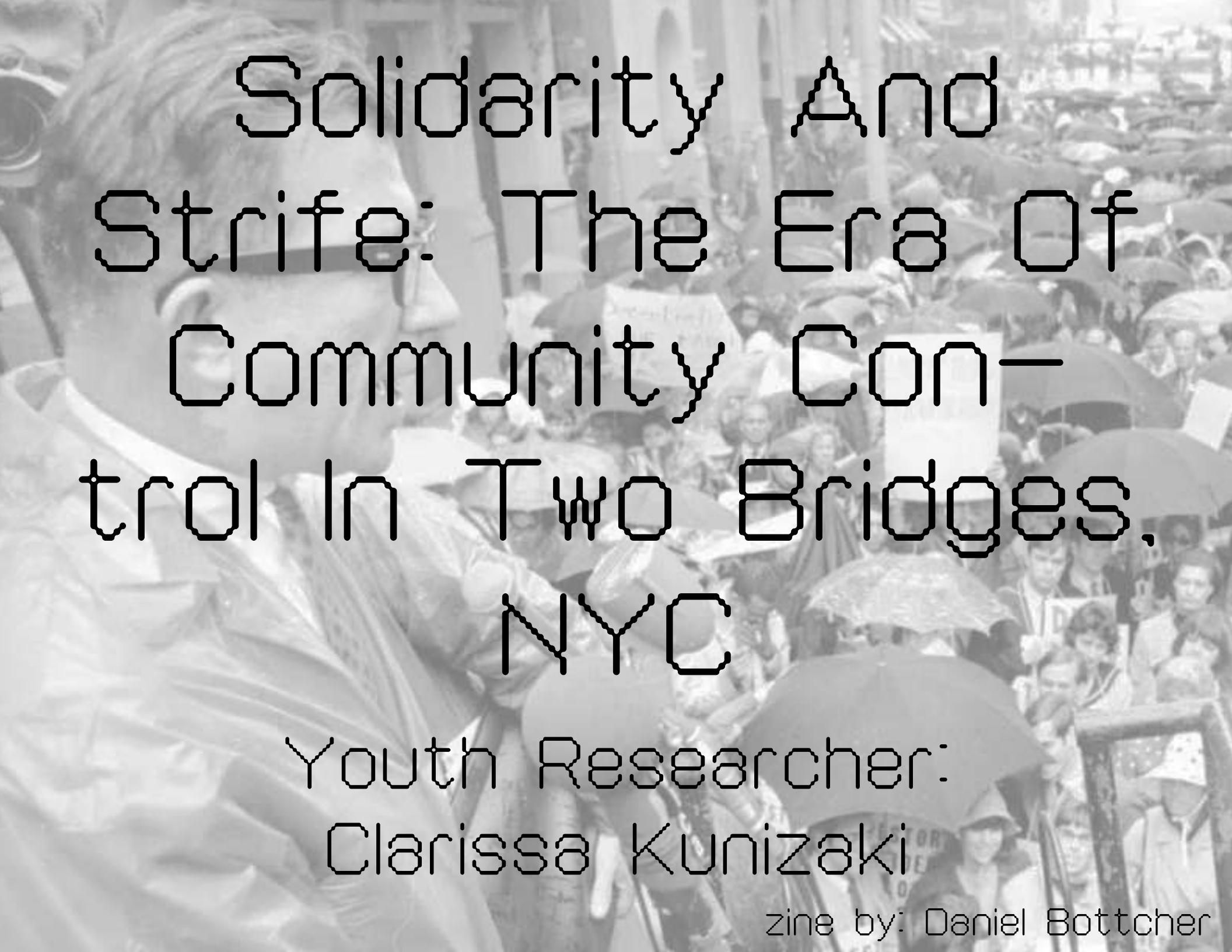

Solidarity And Strife: The Era Of Community Control In Two Bridges, NYC

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Author's Note Deconstructed

"Reflecting on my relationship with education as a lifelong New York City public school student, I am reminded of James Baldwin's words, "I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."1 As an Asian and Latina young girl, I recognize the profound gift of attending well-resourced public schools throughout my life. This privilege is one that has pushed me to critically consider—and challenge—the ways in which educational inequities, rooted in systemic racism, impact fellow marginalized peers. My efforts and experiences in investigating these themes, largely in conversation with other students and educators of color, inspired me to explore how marginalized communities in New York City have historically fought not only for access to adequate education, but also for the power to shape an educational system that serves their children's needs and affirms their identities."—Clarissa Kunizaki

The community control movement, which emerged in New York City in the late 1960s, fought for the right to create a system that nurtured critical thinking, restored dignity, and ensured that students of color were equipped to thrive in the face of systemic oppression. As the events that unfolded in resistance to the movement—namely, the 1968 New York City teachers' strike—are centered in discussions on community control.

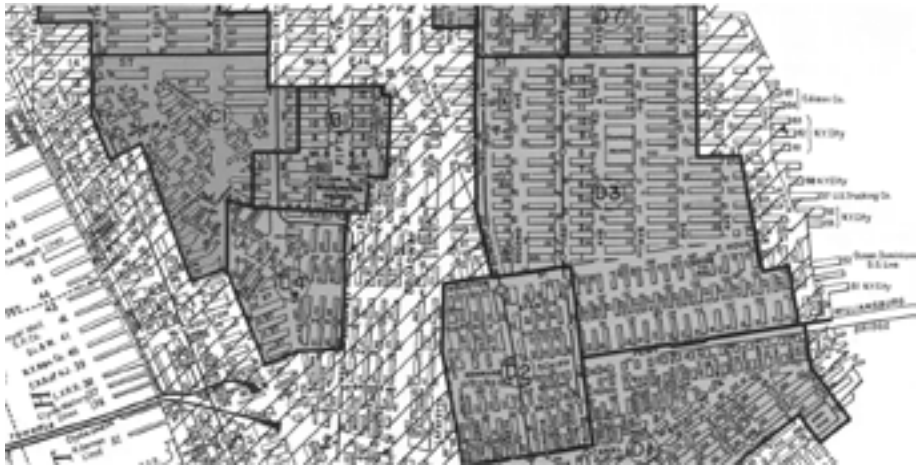
The Two Bridges demonstration district was a predominantly Asian and Latino neighborhood, two identities I have an affinity with and take pride in being a part of. Yet, like many other marginalized groups, Asian and Latino histories are continuously excluded from American school curricula. While some are vaguely familiar with histories of collective organizing like that of the Delano Grape Strike in California, local New York City histories of solidarity between these groups are rarely talked about.

"I've come to understand that the real power of the community control movement lay in the collective action and solidarity between marginalized communities who recognized that their fight for educational reform was inseparable from a broader struggle for racial justice. They took on the responsibility of ensuring their children would have access to an education that both equipped them with knowledge and affirmed their identities. Though their efforts were ultimately undermined by bureaucratic resistance, the legacy of the community control movement is an important one that we all have much to learn from. This project aims to demonstrate the ways in which our fight for educational justice cannot be won until we actively shape an education system that uplifts and empowers students of all backgrounds. I hope to inspire others, particularly other marginalized students, to see the potential for a more equitable future—in New York City and beyond."—Clarissa Kunizaki

Historical Context

New York City has historically had one of the most segregated public school systems in the United States. Scholarly texts have done essential work in disproving the myth of how federal housing policy and the practice of "redlining" created systematically segregated neighborhoods across the nation, including in New York City. Redlining was used as a tool to deny mortgages to people living within "undesirable" areas — i.e., those with large non-white populations that were legally labeled as "less safe" — but it also meant that wealth and resources stayed largely consolidated within wealthier, whiter neighborhoods. This had a direct effect on the school system, as segregated neighborhoods translated into segregated schools.

After the landmark Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954, stated that separating children in public schools on the basis of race was illegal, the NYC Board of Education was expected to lead efforts towards school integration like attempts were made to bus students of color to white schools. Many students of color continued to be assigned to overcrowded, segregated schools, even when they technically lived within a different district.



Parents were pushing school administrators and elected officials to actually make changes in practice. As early as 1957 parents were demanding things like culturally responsive textbooks, appropriate student-to-staff ratios, and city-wide desegregation plan. The City's efforts failed to produce meaningful change which lead to the 1964 school boycott, in which parent-advocates for desegregation organized a city-wide boycott that kept 460,000 students out of school for the day. White parents opposing desegregation responded a month later by marching on City Hall and demanding that the city end their proposed plan to transfer Black and Puerto Rican students to white schools this is one of many ways, educational segregation in NYC actually increased.

Years of this disillusionment ignited the community control movement, which sought to decentralize control of schools and create new structures for community stakeholders to exercise direct, localized power over the schools in their neighborhoods. Advocates of community control advanced the notion that when marginalized community groups have power over what goes on in schools, they are better equipped to create and support successful, empowering educational environments. Advocates pushed for its local schools to be broken up into smaller, autonomous districts, seeking a more immediate and impactful way to transform education with local input. From 1967 to 1969, a coalition of Asian, Black, and Latino working-class families and activists led this fight across three neighborhoods. With funding from the Ford Foundation and support from city leaders, community control demonstration districts were created in three neighborhoods: East Harlem, Ocean-Hill Brownsville, and Two Bridges.

The third district, Two Bridges, a multi-racial, multi-ethnic neighborhood on Manhattan's Lower East Side, located between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges. The perspective of Two Bridges within conversations on community control has been under-researched and under-represented. As a multi-racial district with a distinctly different demographic coalition than the other two community control sites, Two Bridges transcended binary expectations of racial justice, instead leading with an approach undergirded by connection, compromise, and solidarity.

Educational Conditions

in the Demonstration District neighborhoods

Educational inequalities in neighborhoods of color were pervasive across New York City they looked like vercrowded classrooms, inadequate school hours, and shoddy or nonexistent classroom resources. Dolores Torres, a local mother of four boys in the neighborhood of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, recall that children in her district were assigned to attend school on a half-day schedule because of overcrowding: either from 8 AM to 12 PM or from 12 PM to 4 PM rather than make student-to-staff ratios more equitable or transfer children to less crowded schools. Historian Jerald Podair, author of The Strike That Changed New York, reports that between 1957 and 1967, classes of 55 were common in predominantly Black schools, a class size unheard of in majority-white schools. Black students, at the time, also read an average of two years behind the city's white students, and dropped out at a rate double that of the city as a whole.

Many of the teachers assigned to predominantly Black and Latino schools were often less experienced or were substitute teachers. The New York City Board of Examiners, which held an absurd amount of power over teacher licensing and selection, had almost singular discretion to decide what teacher "merit" looked like. They used that power to keep Black and Latino teachers out of the profession through mechanisms that they could then say were "race-neutral." Lack of culturally responsive training and a disconnect between teachers and their students contributed to widespread student underperformance and educational gaps in the predominantly Black and Puerto Rican schools they served. Fela Barclift, who grew up in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, recounted,"There was a way of treating the Black children in those schools as if they were not fully human." Recognizing this, many parent-advocates' work centered on restoring a sense of dignity and humanity to their children which they sought to ensure that their children could receive an education grounded in their cultural identity and responsive to their needs.

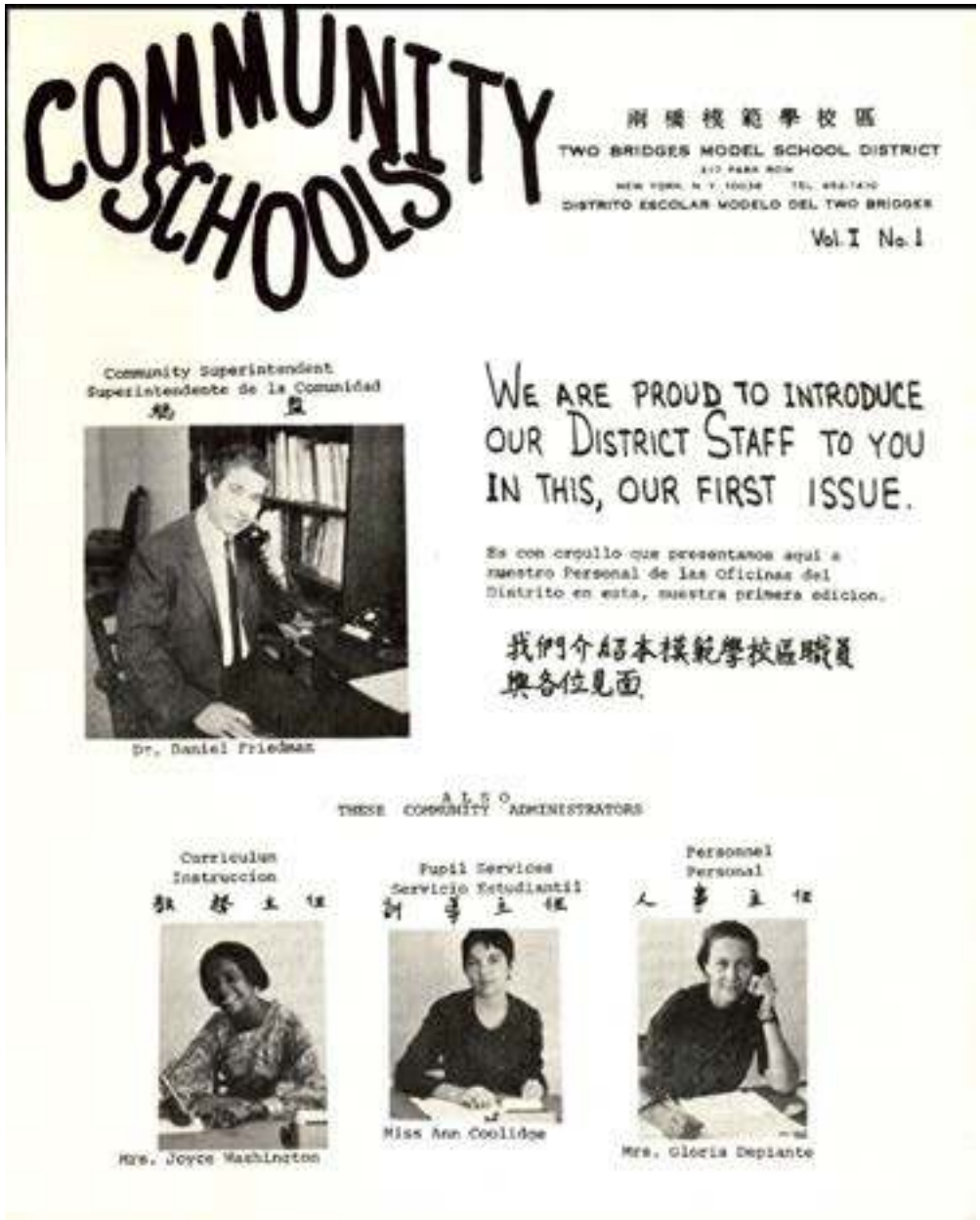
In her dissertation, "The 'Other' Community Control: The Two Bridges Demonstration District and the Challenges of School Reform, 1965-1975," Dr. Maia Merin describes sim https://localizedhistoryproject.org/items/57 ilar conditions to those detailed above in public schools located in Two Bridges. In the late 1950s, one school, P.S. 1, had 18 classes run in double sessions. Half of the teaching was done by substitute teachers due to limited classroom facilities. Furthermore, nearly seventy-five percent of the student population was Puerto Rican, and most teachers did not try to relate to these new students were Spanish-speaking newcomers.

Educational Conditions

in the Demonstration District neighborhoods (continued)

Before community control, bilingual education was nonexistent. This was an issue for their parents as well , who lacked the means to meaningfully participate in shaping their children's education, including school events, parent-teacher conferences, and advocacy on behalf of their children.

Asian and Latino students often faced punishment for speaking their native languages in school. Their cultures were also excluded from school life. Lunch menus lacked Chinese and Puerto Rican foods, libraries had no books representing their communities, and curricula failed to reflect their histories. Instead, textbooks promoted racist stereotypes, portraying Chinese-Americans as the "model minority;" obedient, hardworking, and submissive to labor demands. Chinese-American and Puerto Rican families in Two Bridges shared a common struggle: they knew that their children were beingdenied a quality education and a school environment that honored their identities, and they wanted more for them.


COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

兩橋模範學校區

TWO BRIDGES MODEL SCHOOL DISTRICT

DISTRITO ESCOLAR MODELO DEL TWO BRIDGES

Vol. I No. 1

Community Superintendent
Superintendente de la Comunidad

Dr. Daniel Friedman

WE ARE PROUD TO INTRODUCE OUR DISTRICT STAFF TO YOU IN THIS, OUR FIRST ISSUE.

Es con orgullo que presentamos aqui a nuestro Personal de las Oficinas del Distrito en esta, nuestra primera edicion.

我們介紹本模範學校區職員與各位見面

ALSO
THESE COMMUNITY ADMINISTRATORS

Curriculum
Instruccion

Mrs. Joyce Washington

Pupil Services
Servicio Estudiantil

Miss Ann Coolidge

Personnel
Personal

Mrs. Gloria Depiante

The Parent Development Program

The Two Bridges Demonstration District, or the Two Bridges Model District, as often referred to by the Two Bridges community, included P.S. 1, 2, 42, 126, and Junior High School 65, including around 5,000 students. Unlike the other two model districts, it had a distinctly heterogenous student body: Black, Puerto Rican, and Chinese. Democratic processes within the Two Bridges Governing Council, which oversaw the local demonstration district, were quite robust. Materials related to elections—including by-law approvals and the election of local representatives—were distributed in Chinese, English, and Spanish, ensuring accessibility for community members. Between community members from different backgrounds there were disagreements over the distinct needs of each group in a school setting, and many at the Ford Foundation treated community control as a fundamentally (and solely) Black political issue. we can see evidence of the coalition's commitment, even when complicated, to representation, equity, and participatory governance.

Especially in Two Bridges, local community organizations played an indelible role in leading the community control effort. Local activists, working with appointed administrators and Ford Foundation staffers, were disappointed in the representativity of the Two Bridges planning council, the board which was intended to steward the project. The initial planning council only had one Chinese representative, Goldie Chu. To fill some of these gaps, parent-activists, including Chu, centered their collective efforts within the Parents Development Program (PDP), which adopted a militant, feminist approach to educational reform. Run by local mothers from Two Bridges, the organization embraced a feminist leadership model dedicated to the liberation of working-class Chinese and Puerto Rican women. The PDP believed that improving the educational system required not only the active involvement of families in the classroom, but also beyond it. Advocating for better facilities, culturally responsive teachers, curriculum changes, and more, the PDP demanded a complete overhaul of New York City's education system. "Improving schools meant empowering the very women and families the system had long excluded."


HONEST BALLOT ASSOCIATION

OFFICIAL BALLOT

for

TWO BRIDGES MODEL SCHOOL DISTRICT GOVERNING COUNCIL

ELECTION: DECEMBER 12, 1967 — 8 A.M. TO 9 P.M.

RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVES
(Vote for Four)

RESIDENTES EN GENERAL
(Vote For Cuatro)

居民代表

選四名

1 ☐ S. W. SEID
2 ☐ HELEN HOVAK
3 ☐ ELINOR CAMPBELL
4 ☐ DORIS HARRIS
5 ☐ NATALIE SOSINSKY
6 ☐ ARLENE MERRILL
7 ☐ HERBERT GREENBERG
8 ☐ GOLDIE CHU

Language access was a paramount concern for the PDP. Not only did many parents in Two Bridges lack English proficiency, making it difficult for them to advocate for their children in school, but many Asian and Latino students were not receiving the language assistance they needed in their schools. Parent groups had long been told that ceding space in the classroom for one group's particular needs would mean that they would have to give up something for their own children. But the PDP offered an alternative: that with organizing and coordination, the resources and services that each group needed could be had without sacrific- es. The organization helped hire teacher assistants from underrepresented backgrounds, ensuring that staff better reflected the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Two Bridges student body to better support families. The PDP also organized workshops to empower working-class parents, specifically targeting Chinese and Spanish-speaking families. These workshops helped parents overcome language barriers and more actively participate in their children's education, fostering solidarity among Asian, Black, and Latino families.

The 1968 Teachers' Strike

In May of 1968, in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, thirteen teachers and six administrators were transferred by the local community board to the Central Board for reassignment. The community board justified the decision by accusing the group of white teachers of undermining community control. However, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) argued the transfers violated the teachers' collective bargaining rights and due process claiming their professional authority was unjustly stripped away. There was great tension between the demonstration districts' right to self-determination and the teachers' right to professional autonomy and job security.

Albert Shanker, who was then the president of the UFT, framed the conflict as a violation of professional expertise. He argued that community control disregarded the "power and integrity of the professional teacher." The UFT also alleged that antisemitism was rampant in the community control movement, and argued that the community board's actions were an unjust attack on Jewish educators. Shanker leveraged these accusations to call for an end to community control, ultimately culminating in the teachers' strike in the fall of 1968. On the other hand, the local governing board maintained that it had acted responsibly to protect the community control experiment, removing teachers that they believed were sabotaging the initiative by refusing to respect Black leadership in the schools. These advocates of community control defended their right to control their schools as inseparable from their responsibility to ensure that education reflected the needs and values of their children.

Jitu Weusi, an educator at JHS 271 in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, rejected the UFT's claims of antisemitism and highlighted the active involvement of Jewish community members in the Community Control movement. "Many of the persons who supported Ocean Hill-Brownsville were Jews… [antisemitism] was a means for the teachers' union to deflect criticism of their role from them to the community." Charles Isaac was a Jewish teacher who opposed the UFT's position, crossing the picket line to teach at JHS 271. He viewed the strike as an act of hostility against the community and its children. To counter media portrayals framing the teachers' transfer as an antisemitic attack, Isaac wrote a rebuttal, gaining signatories in support from about half of the Jewish teachers at JHS 271:"We see this absurd attack as… one more strategy of the educational establishment to destroy the concept of Community Control, and to repress the self-determination of Black and Puerto Rican people. This is nonsense, and we are tired of it."

The 1968 Teachers' Strike Extended


COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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Isaac further attributed the narrative of a split between the Black and Jewish communities as "totally manufactured by the UFT" as part of its efforts to dismantle Community Control and restore its bureaucratic authority. Marc Pessin, a rank-and-file UFT educator at Ocean-Hill Brownsville, noted that "Teachers like myself came to the conclusion that this was a racist strike and the teacher's union was not fighting for salaries and working conditions or a health plan, but to keep Black people [and other teachers of color] from running their own schools."

Teachers were on strike from September 9th, 1968, which was supposed to be the first day of school, to November 17th, 1968, pushing more than one million affected students out of classrooms. Amid this turmoil, resistance emerged. In some schools, non-striking teachers and community members took over classrooms, sleeping in schools on weekends to keep them open. Windows were smashed and locked doors were forced open in efforts to reopen schools. During the chaos, human relations teams were assigned to each school in Two Bridges to work with pupils, parents, staff members, and district residents on complaints, concerns, threats, and actions stemming from the strike. When community members at P.S. 125-67 reopened the school themselves during the strike, only to find no food available, parents swiftly organized 200 lunches for children who depended on school meals. Just as they had many times before, when official structures failed — whether schools, unions, or government agencies — community stepped in to fill the gaps.

The End of Community Control

Quickly following the teachers' strike in 1968, the New York State Decentralization Law of 1969 was passed. Creating 31 new "community school districts" with elected boards, the law did not empower local communities. Instead, it re-centralized authority by subordinating these districts under the control of the Central Board of Education. The authority previously held by the experimental community boards was transferred to a system of decentralized local school board appointees and elected officials. The teachers' strike played a major factor in the legislature's decision to abolish the three demonstration districts. The law was largely influenced by Albert Shanker who sought to move away from the "radicalism" of the demonstration districts and to re-centralize the UFT's bargaining power.

Decentralized community school districts wielded much less power than the community control districts, which was far from the educational self-determination that marginalized communities had been seeking. United Bronx Parents, an organization supporting Puerto Rican mothers in advocating for better education for their children, strongly opposed the decentralization law. They argued that community control was a far better option for their children. Many community members in Two Bridges also spoke out against the law. Decentralization limited local community members' power over curriculum, staff employment, and school budgets. It also granted the central board substantial control over all aspects of school instruction, reducing local input and authority.

The Legacy of Community Control

Author and Civil Rights activist James Baldwin observed: "When the experimental schools began, only a handful of people, outside of the people directly involved, believed the experiment could possibly succeed. And the experiment was discontinued after three years, not because it failed, but because it did not fail."

Here, Baldwin pushes back on the idea that community control "failed," shedding light on his own experiences as a Black New York City public high school student who constantly felt undermined, as well as the empowerment he saw firsthand of children experiencing schooling in the East Harlem Demonstration District. He also touches on the history of segregation in education, especially in the North, and the revolutionary role that community control played in countering systemic oppression.

Though community control faced significant obstacles, that ultimately led to its end, its achievements had a lasting impact on New York City. Historian Sonia Song-Ha Lee notes that "Despite the presence of internal divisions within the community control movement, nobody could deny that the movement had created a new political force in the education field by the early 1970s." Militant parent-activists like Goldie Chu, who had come into their own as organizers in Two Bridges, continued to stay involved in social movements, from the continuation of the struggle for Civil Rights to the burgeoning feminist movement.

The movement's advancements in bilingual education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and increased access to higher education are just a few of its enduring legacies. The history of community control serves as a reminder that inequality in public education has long been contested, and that meaningful change can emerge when marginalized communities assert their rights against entrenched structural forces. The success of the movement in empowering New Yorkers of color threatened the centralized power structures that sought to maintain the status quo of educational inequality. Given the marginalization of Asian Americans in political histories, its legacy reminds us that the fight for educational justice is not merely about access: it's about the responsibility to dismantle systemic barriers and create systems that uplift and empower all students, which must be guided by the practice of solidarity. As we confront persistent segregation and inequity in schools today, we are challenged to carry forward its vision by demanding both the rights and the responsibilities necessary to build a more just and equitable future for education.

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