

STATE OF EMPOWERMENT

Low-Income Families and
the New Welfare State



CAROLYN BARNES

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On weekday afternoons, dismissal bells ring at thousands of schools across the country. These bells signal not just the end of the school day but also the beginning of another important enriching activity: federally funded after-school programs offering tutoring, homework help, and basic supervision. After-school care reflects major shifts in social policy toward social services that support youth development and help low-income parents maintain employment. The scope of after-school programs has grown significantly in the last two decades—nearly one in four low-income families enroll a child in an after-school program. Beyond sharpening students' math and reading skills, these programs also teach important lessons to parents. In a remarkable turn of events—especially given the long history of social policies that leave recipients feeling policed, distrusted, and alienated—government funded after-school programs have quietly become powerful forces for political and civic engagement. Using ethnographic accounts of three organizations, Carolyn Barnes reveals how interactions with government-funded after-school programs can enhance the civic and political lives of low-income citizens.

Reversing the “gatekeeping” design of most programs targeting low-income citizens, after-school policy shifts power away from organizations and bureaucrats and puts it back in the hands of parents. After-school policy design rewards the inclusion of low-income parents—in program participation and decision-making—and elevates their status to parent-citizens.

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New Welfare State

Carolyn Barnes

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1 • A New Kind of Safety Net

At around 3:00 on weekday afternoons, dismissal bells ring at thousands of schools across the country. For millions of students, these bells signal not just the end of the school day but also the beginning of another important educational activity: federally funded after-school programs offering tutoring, homework help, and basic supervision.

At Jackson Elementary¹ in Chicago, the end of the day is an “all hands on deck” exercise, as staff watch for what they call “riffraff,” fights between students from rival schools or gangs. Teachers stand outside their classrooms monitoring lines of students while parents stream into the school’s front doors. Older students leave first to pick up younger siblings as staff members announce each parent’s arrival over walkie-talkies. While this carefully managed sequence unfolds, a few dozen students climb the stairs for English tutoring with Mr. William and Ms. Cynthia, or math instruction with Mr. Michael.

A few blocks away, the after-school program at a nonprofit—Progress Youth Development Corp—is already underway. Parent volunteers are copying worksheets, counseling misbehaving students, and sharing gossip with one another and the staff. Ms. Brandy, a longtime Progress parent, snacks on an orange at the welcome desk alongside Lauren, a staff member, as the two work on a portfolio of student artwork for an upcoming awards ceremony. As they sort through the colorful construction paper, Brandy enthusiastically sings along to a gospel song playing in the background. Lauren seems unfazed by Brandy’s high-pitched singing—she looks over at Brandy and grins. Soon, students trickle in downstairs, scribbling their names on sign-in sheets and rushing to the playground, basketball court, and computer lab.

Meanwhile, at South End Community Center in Chicago’s Southside, dozens of after-school students dressed in uniforms—polos and khakis—sit at the homework table. Pencils and worksheets are out and backpacks are tucked under seats. Furrowed brows and concentrated looks are interrupted by giggles and restless energy as staff members struggle to keep students on task. Students who have completed their homework leave the table to play

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with their friends; in the center of the room, a half dozen students huddle on the floor near two large crates filled with oversized Lego blocks, dolls, and puzzles. A third grader slides crumpled worksheets into his backpack and then announces his plan to stay in touch with his classmates over the summer: “You know school is shutting down in a month, so I want to keep in touch with every boy. . . . I dunno about the girls.”

After-school programs like these are part of a vast but seldom discussed trend in social policy. In 2014, 10.2 million children participated in an after-school program, up from 8.4 million in 2009, 6.5 million in 2004, and 1.7 million in 1991.² In 2014, nearly one in four families enrolled a child in an after-school program.³ And nearly one out of four low-income school-aged children participates in an after-school program.⁴ In 2015, federal and state governments spent roughly \$25 million—nearly twice the amount spent on cash assistance—to support after-school programs, which aim to enrich youth development and boost academic performance through recreational activities, homework help, and extra instruction.⁵

The main contention of this book is that these programs do more than sharpen students’ math and reading skills; they also teach important lessons to *parents*. In a remarkable turn of events—especially given the long history of punitive social policies that leave recipients feeling policed, distrusted, and alienated⁶—government-funded after-school programs quietly become powerful forces for political and civic engagement. Through personal interactions with staff, volunteer opportunities, and formal leadership roles, low-income parents are drawn into community affairs, local government, and American civic life. By mobilizing those least likely to participate, after-school programs can close the gaps in political participation between the advantaged and the disadvantaged and strengthen democratic citizenship for the most vulnerable. The purpose of this book is to explain how these programs empower the disadvantaged.

Rebecca—a single mother of four—attributes her civic and political engagement to her involvement in a local nonprofit that provides after-school childcare to her four children. Despite her neighborhood’s climbing crime rate and deteriorating conditions, the program gave her hope that her community could change. Since enrolling her children in the after-school program, Rebecca has organized support groups; volunteered as a teacher’s assistant; and gained experience with Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. Today, she votes, runs a book club for kids in her neighborhood, and has organized a petition to keep the neighborhood library open. Anita tells a similar story. The volunteer opportunities at Jackson Elementary’s after-school program taught her communication and organizing skills. She used

her new skills and confidence to work with neighbors to address violence on her block.

Of course, not all after-school programs equally prepare parents for civic and political activity. One after-school program I studied—South End—did little to motivate or equip parents for civic and political life. Staff at this program rarely asked parents to volunteer or assume leadership roles, and parents took note. For example, when the program failed to make much of an impact in her declining neighborhood, Sharon took it as a sign that there was little hope for change in her community. On the whole, her experiences reinforced her apathy about participation and politics.

In many cases, the effects of after-school programs on parents' civic and political orientation are profound and even surprising. How do some after-school programs—which are designed to bolster children's academic success—wind up teaching parents lessons about democracy?

At first blush, it is tempting to reduce these mothers' accounts to textbook stories of political mobilization. One could argue that organizations implementing these programs intentionally encouraged participation, each varying in its strategies and how well it mobilized parents.⁷ But during my time at these after-school programs, I learned that the political lessons parents gleaned were largely unintentional. Rebecca's and Anita's paths to participation and Sharon's road to political (dis)engagement represent a more nuanced story about the unintended consequences of public policy: how public policy, once diffused through organizations, can influence citizens' interest and capacity for participation.⁸

Policy's ability to shape whether and how citizens participate is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, scholars have long surmised that “new policies create politics”⁹ and demonstrated how types of policies reconfigure the political landscape and mobilize organized interest groups.¹⁰ In recent years, the intersection of public policy and mass political behavior has been an emerging topic of study in political science.¹¹ Political scientists have begun to explore how policy influences the political behavior of everyday people. These “policy feedback” scholars suggest that citizens' interpret their encounters with the state (e.g., public bureaucracies such as a Social Security Administration office, welfare agency, or the police) as a “microcosm of government.”¹²

The nature and quality of these encounters with the state influence whether citizens can or want to participate. Policies can provide resources and incentives for participation or “resource effects” and policies can have “interpretive effects,” sending important messages to citizens about how the government works, their political and social standing, and how the government responds to people like them.¹³

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Policy features—whether policies are generous, universal, and bureaucratic or meager, targeted, and stigmatizing—convey these messages. For example, studies suggest that generous programs like the GI Bill and universal programs like Social Security confer ample resources for political participation and convey elevated political standing to the advantaged with simple application procedures that legitimize their claims on the state.¹⁴ In contrast, the meager benefits of many targeted means-tested programs undermine capacity for participation. Further, burdensome stigma-laden eligibility processes, directive program requirements, and caseworkers' intrusive supervision dampen political engagement among the poor.¹⁵

While demonstrating how policy shapes politics, this body of research has largely focused on public bureaucracies as venues of political learning.¹⁶ Scholars have not yet explained how the after-school programs Rebecca, Anita, and Sharon encountered influence their capacity and desire to participate. These after-school programs—though created and supported by policy—do not resemble the centralized public bureaucracies or cash assistance programs that have been the topic of policy feedback research. Key features of after-school programs represent important shifts in social policy that complicate how we currently understand policy's effects on political participation.

The Emergence of Social Services

Most policy feedback studies on low-income citizens focus on the negative political consequences of cash-based assistance and larger “in-kind aid,” means-tested programs delivered through large bureaucracies.¹⁷ But the after-school programs in this study are part of a new class of assistance programs—work supports—which have assumed an important role in social policy since welfare reform. Since the passage of welfare reform in the mid-1990s, cash assistance has been replaced with publicly funded social services designed to help low-income citizens find and maintain employment.¹⁸ Many of these services do more than determine eligibility or distribute benefits. The after-school programs that are the focus of this book aim to support low-income parents as they work, nurture child and youth development, and improve academic performance. In keeping with these goals, after-school policies require new program features, new kinds of relationships between staff and clients, and ultimately new feedback processes that counter conventional wisdom about the demobilizing consequences of programs that target the poor.

The Rise of New Public Management

Along with reflecting the growing trend in social services, after-school programs are also subject to new public management reforms, a set of policy tools¹⁹ that are prominent in social policy governance but seldom studied in policy feedback research. Over the last three decades, governments have transformed the welfare state²⁰ by delegating service delivery to nonstate actors, infusing market logic into service delivery, and implementing new systems of accountability. These tools are designed to create leaner and more responsive safety-net programs.

In theory, delegated governance, or the delegation of policy implementation to nonstate actors, should reduce the size of the state and harness market dynamics to produce more efficient service delivery. Nonstate actors are not subject to civil service regulations and salary requirements that increase production costs of services, and thus should deliver services at less cost.²¹ Further, competitive government contracts and grants processes disrupt the government's monopoly on service provision and incentivize organizations to drive down the cost of service delivery to win funding.²² Finally, vouchers that allow citizens to choose service providers create a quasi-market for services. Ideally, this competition for clients would encourage providers to offer cheaper services that match client preferences.

Along with cost savings, proponents of delegated governance claim that service delivery through nonstate actors offers flexibility and innovation. Contracts and grants can be cut back or changed quickly as government priorities shift, and delegated governance allows organizations to tailor services to community needs.²³

Performance and accountability became an important component of policy implementation alongside delegated governance especially during the Clinton Administration with the enactment of the U.S. Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993. Aimed at correcting the "insufficient attention to program performance" and reducing "waste and inefficiency" in federal programs, GPRA required federal agencies to outline performance goals and annually report agency success and reasons for program failures. Since the passage of GPRA, performance monitoring systems and accountability regimes have emerged across a range of policy contexts—from welfare to education policy—and influence policy implementation in public, private for-profit, and nonprofit agencies.²⁴

Taken together, these new public management tools—delegated governance, market logic, and performance and accountability regimes—have permeated social policy. Now, states, counties, and municipalities have ad-

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ministrative authority to devise a range of programs, and a host of nonstate actors deliver these programs. All of these entities face pressures to perform and are subject to accountability structures that measure and reward progress and—in many cases—punish failure.

While nearly ubiquitous across policy contexts, studies are inconclusive on whether new public management tools are effective in social policy. Some studies suggest that delegated governance, market incentives, and performance pressures undermine policy objectives and create perverse incentives for organizations and bureaucrats.

On delegated governance, critics question whether nonstate actors actually deliver more efficient services. The market for services is rarely competitive—only a few well-established service providers win contracts and grants. These established service providers further limit competition by building relationships with government agencies that ensures them a stream of grants and contracts in the future.²⁵ Further undermining market competition, consumers seldom choose the highest quality services or leave poor service providers because they lack information about options or—in some cases—have too many options to choose from.²⁶ As a result, the threat of market discipline doesn't always prompt providers to offer high-quality cost-effective services that match citizens' preferences.

Performance standards and accountability regimes similarly fall short in practice. In theory, specifying measures to ensure that policies are implemented in ways that reflect policy aims should solve the age-old principal-agent problem—agencies' propensity to drift from policy objectives. However, creating measures that match policy aims—especially in complex human services—proves difficult²⁷ and, as policy implementation becomes more diffuse, performance becomes increasingly difficult to monitor. Further, evidence suggests that performance and accountability pressures negatively affect bureaucrats' behavior toward citizens. For example, studies show that caseload reduction benchmarks in the cash-based assistance program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), pressure bureaucrats to move former welfare clients into work without regard to the quality of job placements or work activities. They also encourage workers to sanction clients at higher rates to “make the numbers.”²⁸

After-school programs have been subject to the same policy tools: ones of delegated governance, marketization, and growing accountability. But much of this research has focused on student outcomes and shows mixed results. Some studies point to marginal improvement in math and reading scores among elementary students²⁹ or no significant changes at all. It is also unclear whether delegated governance and competitive markets lead to better and more efficient programs.³⁰ As mentioned, the market for contracts and grants

are not as competitive as they seem and parents and students lack complete information about the market to evaluate program quality.³¹ Finally, outsourcing service delivery to private organizations can “lengthen the chains of delegation,” diminishing the government’s ability to monitor or reward service providers.³²

These studies rarely examine how new public management tools influence parents’ experiences with these programs. After-school programs have substantial guidelines on how to engage parents. When these guidelines work in tandem with new public management tools, they can positively shape parents’ experience with these programs.

What about Democratic Citizenship?

Nascent evidence paints an even grimmer picture of how elements of new public management—delegated governance and market accountability—shapes mass politics. Scholars cast these less visible forms of governance as undermining democratic accountability because citizens cannot readily perceive the government’s work in their everyday lives enough to evaluate it. Because governance is diffuse and policy is enacted and delivered through “smoke and mirrors” of the tax code, subsidies, and delegated governance, citizens cannot recognize how they benefit from policies.³³ As a result, the “hollow state”³⁴ ends up fostering confusion about government, resentment about government responsiveness, or passivity.³⁵

This book tells a more positive story about how features of the seemingly hidden welfare state can strengthen democratic citizenship for the disadvantaged. Previous accounts of delegated governance focus on policies that offer less direct services and limited interactions with service providers. For example, Morgan and Campbell’s study of seniors’ use of the Medicare Advantage program and the Part D drug benefit demonstrates the pitfalls of delegated governance and consumer choice models of service delivery.³⁶ They find little change in attitudes toward government involvement in health care or any change in solidarity among seniors, despite their dissatisfaction with plans and the markets’ inefficiency. Instead, the complex web of nonstate providers demobilized citizens, who might otherwise call for greater health-care reform, and mobilized interest groups and commercial stakeholders who have a vested interest in protecting the consumer choice feature of the policy.

But with Medicare Advantage and the Part D drug benefits, seniors’ interactions with providers are limited to open enrollment periods and individual claims. As mentioned, after-school care is a social service designed to

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enable parents to work and to support the development and academic enrichment of school-aged children. After-school programs are typically long-term and require consistent interactions with service providers. Parents may communicate with service providers daily for months or years. Thus service providers are especially visible to parents even if the policies behind the programs are not.

Given the intensive and visible nature of service delivery, it is important to understand how policies influence the way these programs work on the ground. We need to understand how shifts in governance and the emergence of performance and accountability regimes influence key elements of program experiences that are crucial to how citizens evaluate program experiences and choose to engage in civic and political activity.

For instance, how do forms of delegated governance influence the kinds of civic and political lessons parents learn from these programs? And in what ways do performance and accountability pressures inform how staff members treat parents? As this book will show, forms of indirect or hidden governance aren't always bad, in so far as they encourage more supportive ways of engaging disadvantaged citizens. As chapters 2 and 3 will demonstrate, these tools do not always have negative effects but can produce both inclusive programs that incorporate parents into service delivery and positive empowering relationships between parents and staff.

This book argues that the shift toward social services and new public management in social policy can produce new kinds of policy feedback processes that empower rather than alienate low-income citizens. To be clear, this book does not evaluate the efficiency of the market for after-school care, nor does it examine how well performance measures and accountability measures keep programs in line with policy aims. Other scholars have written volumes on these topics.³⁷

Instead, as a case of both social service delivery and new public management tools, I show how low-income parents encounter a "state of empowerment" through after-school policy. I demonstrate how after-school policy can politically empower parents through capacity-building roles within programs, supportive relationships with staff members, and by the way policy empowers organizations to uniquely serve neighborhoods.

Empowerment through Capacity-Building Roles

After-school policy rules require parent involvement roles that can equip low-income parents with skills for political participation. Scholars have long

examined the costs of political and civic participation as a barrier for the disadvantaged. Low-income citizens lack the time to participate, money to contribute to political campaigns and causes, or civic skills—communication, leadership, and organizational skills relevant to political participation.³⁸ Although settings like schools, workplaces, churches, and voluntary organizations inculcate civic skills and interests, policies themselves can fill these resource gaps. For example, the GI Bill and higher education policies boost citizens' capacity for involvement through education resources that enhance civic skills and economic resources for political activity.³⁹

Policy can also enhance civic and political resources by prescribing participatory roles—or what I call capacity-building roles—for recipients. In particular, sharing decision-making power with recipients signals the value of their voice in service delivery. However, participatory roles can also provide opportunities to practice civic skills. Guidelines prescribed by policies like Title I and the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant require staff to partner with parents in service delivery through parent advisory boards and volunteer roles. As chapter 5 will explore, these opportunities teach parents how to write letters, engage in decision-making, give speeches and presentations, and organize program activities. Far from being just a setting that enriches children, after-school programs also teach parents the skills needed for civic and political participation in their communities.

Empowerment through Relationships

Along with empowering program design, after-school policy encourages empowering relationships between low-income citizens and bureaucrats. After-school policy rules require cooperative long-term interactions between parents and staff rather than impersonal or contentious exchanges. Further, new public management tools like market competition, accountability, and performance metrics incentivize these personal relationships by tying organizational resources to student enrollment, retention, and attendance. Instead of deterring program use, staff work to attract and keep families in programs. No study has examined how these kinds of incentives shape program experiences or explored the political consequences of these new kinds of relationships.

Supportive rather than alienating relationships between parents and staff can be politically empowering to parents as avenues of recruitment into skill-building parental involvement roles and civic and political activity. As politi-

cal scientists note, relationships are the way ordinary citizens are drawn into political participation and civic life.⁴⁰ Political recruiters use personal relationships with individuals to identify prospects for political participation and use nonpolitical organizations as venues of recruitment.⁴¹ In the same way, staff members in these after-school programs can leverage relationships with parents to recruit ideal candidates for both participatory roles within the program and civic and political activity outside of it. In this sense, after-school policy can mirror the recruitment and resource effects of universal programs like Social Security that draws low-income seniors into politics by connecting them to organizations like the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and to senior centers, sites of political recruitment.⁴²

Empowerment through Place-Based Organizations

Finally, parents experience empowerment through the ways organizations interact with neighborhoods. Because of the new public management shift toward decentralization and delegated governance, community-based organizations now deliver the bulk of social services.⁴³ How these place-based organizations uniquely deliver services can influence the kinds of civic and political lessons parents draw from policy. These organizations, whether public or private, are not impartial conduits of policy. They have distinct identities—who they view themselves to be and how they construe the boundaries of their work—that can shape how they implement policy. Organizations' identities are constructed by organizational leadership and through the interactions and shared discourse of its members. These members draw from their own characteristics—in the case of these programs, their social identities, professional experiences, and, in some instances, faith backgrounds—to arrive at a consensus of who the organization is and what the organization does.⁴⁴

As “place-based organizations,” after-school programs may develop identities that reflect their collective understanding of the organization's role within community contexts and deliver services with these roles in mind. Indeed, sociologist Celeste Watkins-Hayes notes, “welfare bureaucracies do not operate in a vacuum; environmental context matters.”⁴⁵ And, as Smith and Lipsky note, tailoring programs to fit local conditions is a key intent of delegated governance. Organizations can design programs “in accord with community need and sentiment.”⁴⁶ Organizations can be outward facing, adopting community-building objectives, or insular, adopting narrow service delivery aims.⁴⁷ And these “place-based” roles can convey distinct messages about local forms of political and civic engagement.

Feedback studies are only beginning to explore how place shapes the way individuals experience programs and interpret politics.⁴⁸ And studies that do take up this question focus on how state variation in eligibility rules and benefits affects political participation.⁴⁹ But neighborhood contexts can influence how individuals experience policy and act as a powerful lens through which citizens make sense of politics.⁵⁰ Community contexts can amplify intersecting identities of race and class in ways that influence citizens' views of government responsiveness (external political efficacy) and their own capacity to participate (internal political efficacy).⁵¹

Place or neighborhood contexts can determine opportunities for participation,⁵² compounding the resources and advantages of the affluent and reinforcing resource deficits experienced by low-income citizens. Social isolation coupled with dwindling elements of civic society can constrain political participation in inner-city communities. Deteriorating neighborhood conditions such as crime, unemployment, high mortality rates, and residential instability further diminish participation by eroding forms of collective and political efficacy.⁵³

If place informs the way citizens think and act politically, then how service providers engage communities may have spillover effects on political participation. This book begins to examine how place matters for policy implementation, program experiences, and political participation.

Taken together, after-school policy as an illustrative case of the emergence of social services and new public management tools offers new opportunities to understand policy feedback: how the implementation of policies affects beneficiaries' relationship with the state and their civic and political lives. Figure 1.1 summarizes the empowerment processes of after-school policy discussed above.

To summarize the empowerment process, I argue that policy—through policy rules and tools—determine whether parents experience *empowering program design* by requiring capacity-building roles in the form of parental involvement opportunities. Policy rules and tools prescribe *empowering relationships*, supportive interactions between parents and staff that boost parents' agency in programs.

In addition, policy *empowers organizations* with the latitude to implement services through the lens of their own identities, which often incorporates the needs of the communities they serve. Organizations develop their own community roles and implement programs that correspond to these roles.

I argue that parents experience empowerment through program design, relationships, and organizations in three ways: through *resource* feedback, through *recruitment* feedback, and through *place-based interpretive* feedback processes. Through their relationships with staff members, a select group of

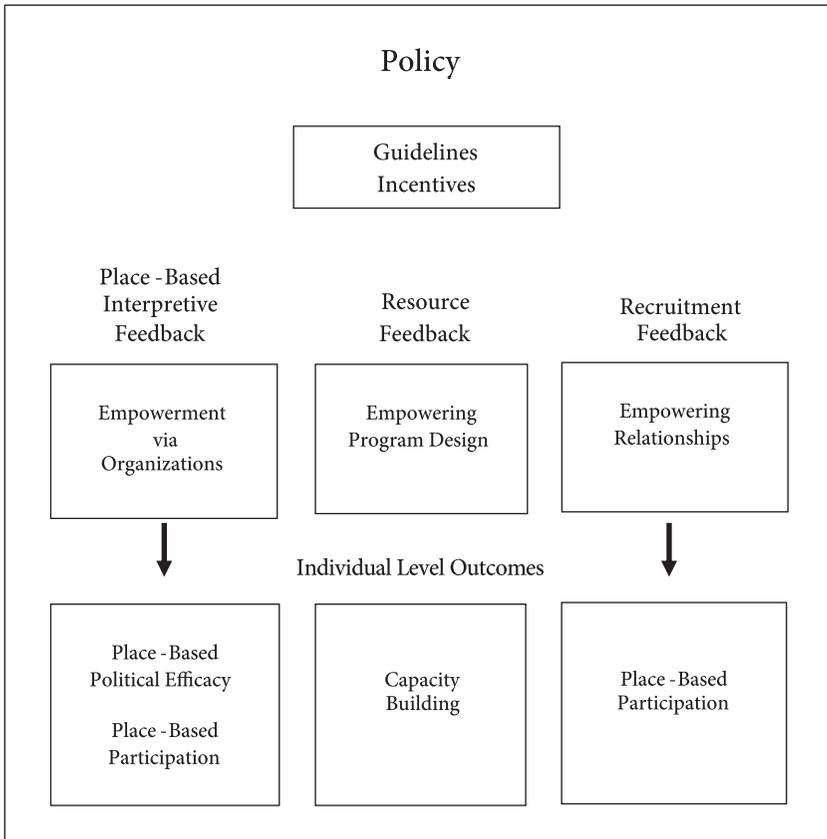


Fig. 1.1. The Empowerment Process

parents are recruited into parental involvement roles where they gain civic skills—an important resource for participation—and become more interested in community affairs and participation. On *recruitment* feedback processes, parents who are recruited into parent involvement roles are often asked to participate in local forms of civic and political activity. Finally, for *place-based interpretive* feedback, the scope of program design—whether programs work to the improve neighborhood conditions or narrowly target students and families—can convey powerful messages on whether neighborhood change is feasible and model effective forms of political engagement that can bring about that change. The coming chapters flesh out these processes in greater detail.

Methodological Approach: Comparative Ethnographic Case Study

Data for this book comes from participant observations and parent and staff interviews from three after-school programs: Jackson Elementary's after-school program and the after-school programs at Progress Youth Development Corp and South End Community Center. I selected these programs because each was subject to a different policy that has its own rules prescribing student and—for the purposes of this book—parent activities and its own distinct policy tools to ensure compliance to rules. Jackson Elementary's after-school program is funded by Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which broadly supports schools serving low-income students and specifically targets after-school programs that serve low-income students at risk of failing to meet state achievement standards.⁵⁴ Title I guidelines prescribe specific parental involvement opportunities (e.g., school-wide Title I parent meetings, Parent Advisory Councils, School Compacts, and parent volunteer roles) as a way to support students' academic success.⁵⁵ Title I's primary policy tool is public accountability through monitoring (e.g., audits) and reporting requirements.

I chose Progress Youth Development Corp's after-school program because it is funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) grant, which targets low-income at-risk students to boost standardized test scores. Much like Title I funding, the 21st CCLC grant also encourages parental involvement opportunities. However, Progress is a case of delegated governance and the 21st CCLC grant has looser parameters for student and parent programming. Nevertheless, 21st CCLC similarly monitors compliance to policy rules through an annual reporting requirement, where staff must report progress against a set of performance measures. Finally, I selected South End Community Center's after-school program because most of its operating budget comes from Child Care Subsidy reimbursements. The Child Care Subsidy requires close adherence to staff-to-student ratios and health and safety guidelines, but it does not require parental involvement roles.⁵⁶ In addition, the Child Care Subsidy implements a consumer choice model through parent vouchers for services. Providers must compete for students.⁵⁷

By selecting programs that are governed by distinct policies, I could trace processes within and across cases⁵⁸ to examine how each policy's rules and tools determined formal elements of program design and the civic and political lessons parents learned from programs.

To collect the data for this study, I spent 15 to 20 hours a week over the course of two years, as a volunteer and researcher. I worked as an eighth-

grade tutor and a music teacher and coordinated program events including block parties, coat drives, and basketball tournaments in the community. I also assisted with classroom management, chaperoned daily bus trips from schools to the program, and monitored parent pick-up. I shadowed the staff and took on their responsibilities to understand how they managed limited resources, scarce time, and challenging circumstances with families. As a consistent long-term volunteer, I also became personally acquainted with parents and talked with them about students' behavior and academic progress, family, and weekend plans.

I immersed myself in the day-to-day life of these programs in hopes of developing detailed or “thick descriptions” of how parents and staff constructed meaning in these settings and how behaviors were “produced, perceived, and interpreted.”⁵⁹ Through immersion, I learned the daily rhythm of these programs—how workers delivered after-school care and how parents and students experienced these programs. In appendix A I describe this process in great detail—how I selected programs, how I got to know programs, how I recruited study participants and the questions I asked them. Parent and staff members' demographic characteristics are described in the coming chapters but are also in the appendix.

As I analyzed field notes and interview transcripts, I inductively arrived at

Table 1.1. The Cases

	Jackson Elementary	Progress Youth Development Corp	South End Community Center
Policy			
GUIDELINES	Title I	21st CCLC	CCDBG
TOOLS	Accountability	Accountability	Market competition
GOVERNANCE	Direct	Delegated	Delegated
Organizational Factors			
COMMUNITY ROLE	Preventative Stop Gap	Change Catalyst	Safe Haven
PROGRAM SCOPE	Narrow	Broad	Narrow
PROGRAM DESIGN	Selective Participatory	Selective Participatory	Bureaucratic
STAFF-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS	Personal	Personal	Personal
Individual Outcomes			
PLACE-BASED EFFICACY	Low	High	Low
CAPACITY BUILDING	Moderate	High	Low
PLACE-BASED PARTICIPATION	Low	High	Low

new variables, hypotheses, causal mechanisms, and causal paths.⁶⁰ The end result was not statistical inference, in which hypotheses are inductively developed from a set of cases and generalizable to wider populations. Instead, inferences stemming from case studies yielded “logical” connections between actors and outcomes that could be tested across other cases.⁶¹ In short, I wanted to know the plausible connections between policy, programs, and participation in this new and important policy context. I pose these processes as new concepts and plausible causal links that can be tested in larger quantitative research and qualitative research. Table 1.1 summarizes the cases along the key policy features and processes discussed in this book.

This book does not give a comprehensive account of experiences with the social safety net. To be clear, I do not argue that interactions with these organizations are the only venue for political learning. Indeed, low-income individuals interact with a number of public and private assistance programs. Nor do I contend that these experiences offer the most salient lessons about politics. Rather, the book illustrates how policies can promote political participation among a group who is often considered alienated from political and civic life.

Organization of the Book

I organize the chapters by the empowerment mechanism I observe: program design, relationships, and organizations within neighborhoods. I begin by discussing the policy parameters related to implementation. I then shift to how staff at each program respond to these parameters in day-to-day activities and conclude by tracing these decisions to how parents experience policy.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on how policy empowers parents by creating and incentivizing inclusive programs that incorporate parents into service delivery through parent involvement roles. Chapter 2 introduces the three cases in this study: Jackson Elementary, Progress Youth Development Corp, and the South End Community Center. I outline key differences between Title I funds from the ESEA, 21st CCLC, and the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) or the Child Care Subsidy program and describe how these distinct policies—through guidelines and incentives—shape the inner workings of each program. Guidelines determine what kinds of activities students experience and whether each organization in this study creates participatory roles for parents. Accountability mechanisms such as market competition, perfor-

mance standards, and monitoring incentivize compliance with policy guidelines. Chapter 3 demonstrates how policy rules and public management tools give rise to new types of relationships between staff and parents.

Chapter 4 shifts to a broader discussion of how policy shapes the scope of civic and political lessons gleaned from programs by empowering organizations with discretion to determine the scope of their programs. I suggest that, while staff deliver programs to meet policy guidelines, organizations also have distinct identities that often incorporate surrounding neighborhoods. These “place-based” identities informed—to a degree—the scope of program activities, whether parents encountered a program that engaged in community-building efforts or a program that provided narrowly targeted services.

Chapter 5 shifts from policy’s effects on program design, staff-parent relationships, and organizations to focus on parents’ participation outcomes. I show how parents gain political interest, civic skills, and recruitment into political activity through capacity-building roles in programs, empowering relationships, and each organization’s work in neighborhoods. I introduce place-based interpretive feedback processes as a new theoretical concept, which illustrates how parents draw lessons from the scope and impact of program design at each organization to inform their own political efficacy beliefs regarding local forms of civic and political participation. I also examine the resource and recruitment effects of these programs. I show how recruitment of parents into participatory roles cultivated their political interest and organizational, leadership, and communication skills, providing activities for parents who would otherwise lack skill-building opportunities. These roles were also paths to civic and political participation. Once recruited into these roles, these parents often became politically active *through* these organizations.

The final chapter summarizes the central findings and discusses their implications for how we understand the political consequences of public policy. I discuss how the unintended ways these programs shape participation outcomes raise new questions for policy feedback research and how we understand citizens’ relationship with the state. For example, as delegated governance and market incentives become increasingly common in social policy implementation, how might these trends shift the ways disadvantaged citizens experience the social safety net? How do distinct policy objectives, rules, and tools meet to create program experiences? And in what ways does client, rather than staff, discretion influence program experiences and participation outcomes? Finally, what roles do community contexts play in implementation and program experiences?

2 • Empowering Program Design

This chapter unpacks the first component of the multilevel feedback model—how policy rules and new public management tools create empowering program design. I introduce the three main policies governing after-school care and the various policy rules and tools across these three policies that shape the inner workings of the programs in this study. While many programs targeting low-income families diminish beneficiaries’ power, after-school policy encourages program design that incorporates parents’ perspectives into service delivery. Understanding the connection between policy and programs helps reveal how policy, working through these after-school programs, shapes the civic and political life of the disadvantaged.

Policy Design, Civic Incorporation, and Punitive New Public Management

Political scientists have long examined how “policies create politics” and point to how key features of policy design shape citizens’ participation outcomes. Scholars argue that centrally administered universal programs with easy claiming processes boost participation, while stigmatizing burdensome programs that target the poor attenuate civic and political engagement.¹

Some research distinguishes authority structures across means-tested programs and finds that the extent to which policies share decision-making power with beneficiaries can distinctly shape their political participation outcomes. As Bruch and colleagues note, “paternalist designs can deepen civic marginality,” while “more democratic designs that enable recipients to participate in decision processes and check the arbitrary exercise of authority” can foster “civic incorporation.”²

Participatory programs like Community Action Programs and Head Start incorporate beneficiaries’ input into programs through governing boards, advisory councils, volunteer opportunities, and employment roles.

These participatory roles send the message that beneficiaries' perspectives are valued and boost beneficiaries' political engagement.³ In contrast, paternalistic programs are directive and supervisory, designed to impose order and work obligations.⁴ Most commonly reflected in means-tested programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), paternalistic programs deter external political efficacy and voting.⁵ Intrusive, autonomous caseworkers, complicated eligibility requirements, and punitive sanctions place clients in a position of vulnerability and powerlessness. Beneficiaries' diminished power within these programs translates into dampened political voice.

In recent years, studies note that political marginalization driven by policy design has only deepened since welfare reform. The rise of new public management has undermined policy objectives and ushered in a punitive turn in welfare programs.⁶ To be sure, growing evidence suggests that new public management tools like decentralized service delivery, market discipline, performance, and accountability increase political inequality, burden under-resourced organizations,⁷ or worse, lead organizations to shift their objectives, cheat, and create negative experiences for clients.⁸

For example, decentralized policy administration hasn't promoted innovation and tailored service delivery but instead created county and state variation in how generous and accessible safety-net programs are for the disadvantaged. Conservative, high-poverty states, with limited resources, implement stringent eligibility processes that increase the costs of claiming benefits and disproportionately affect racial minorities.⁹

Other studies show how the new public management emphasis on performance standards can undermine policy goals. In the case of TANF and welfare-to-work programs, studies show that performance standards designed to move welfare clients into viable work and out of poverty, in practice, resulted in job displacement or placement in low-wage, low-skilled work.¹⁰ Brodtkin describes how performance standards for caseload reductions and work placements led workers to "make the numbers," focusing on quantity over the quality of placements. She explains that management reforms "created an organizational environment that virtually gave free reign to discretionary practices that could produce caseload decline no matter how it was achieved."¹¹ As a result, clients are pushed into poor-quality jobs and work activities.¹²

Moreover, several studies document how performance standards create more punitive program experiences for clients. For example, Soss and colleagues find that performance standards that link monetary incentives and penalties to caseload reduction punish poor-performing organizations that,

in turn, develop cultures and practices that punish or burden clients through sanctions or by raising the costs of accessing benefits.¹³

These negative consequences of new public management extend to both direct and delegated forms of governance. While private for-profit and nonprofit agencies are subject to various stakeholders (e.g., government authorities, donors, collaborators, shareholders), complicating the reach of government influence,¹⁴ policy drives the delivery of services by nonstate actors. Many nonprofit welfare-to-work programs are indistinct from public agencies in service delivery and the way bureaucrats treat clients—a chief concern of critics of privatization who argue that government grants co-opt the civic nature of these organizations.¹⁵

Taken together, this growing body of work reveals the negative consequences of new public management tools when implemented in paternalistic means-tested programs. With new public management policy tools at the helm, the disciplinary turn of means-tested programs further depresses political engagement among low-income citizens. This results in a widening gap between the disadvantaged and the state.¹⁶

While revealing the flaws of new public management, very few studies examine how new public management tools operate to shape experiences in bureaucratic or participatory programs. The studies that do examine new public management tools in policy areas like education and after-school care focus almost exclusively on student outcomes and report mixed results.¹⁷ This chapter departs from these lines of inquiry to examine how after-school policy rules and new public management policy tools work together to create inclusive participatory program experiences for parents.

In what follows, I introduce three policies and organizations. I demonstrate how after-school policies create participatory roles for parents and show how the threat of market discipline and accountability pressure staff to incorporate parents into service delivery in ways that can boost rather than deter civic and political engagement. I tease out how variation in policy rules and tools lead to a range of participatory opportunities for parents.

Degrees of Participation

The federal after-school policies in this book reflect a spectrum of parent incorporation, policy tools, and governance structures. Table 2.1 summarizes the key policy and case details discussed in this book.

In contrast to many means-tested programs, after-school policy encourages programs to share decision-making power with recipients through pa-

rental involvement roles. But the after-school policies described in the book varied in the extent to which they prescribed participatory roles for parents in program activities. Title I required the most parental involvement opportunities, while the Child Care Subsidy required the least amount of parent engagement.

The policy rules of Title I strongly influenced Jackson Elementary’s focus on supplemental math and reading instruction for low-performing students. In addition, Title I policy rules narrowly defined parental involvement opportunities and subjected Jackson Elementary to layers of accountability and compliance reporting requirements.

In contrast, 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) rules loosely prescribed parental involvement roles at Progress Youth Development Corp (hereafter referred to as Progress), allowing the organization to develop parent programming in fulfillment of broader guidelines. Performance and accountability structures informed Progress’s compliance by requiring staff to monitor and report parent involvement.

Lastly, the Child Care Subsidy subjected South End Community Center’s after-school program to the fewest and broadest rules for student activities and parental involvement. However, market competition facilitated by the parent choice provision of the subsidy led the program director to incorporate parent input in service delivery through informal avenues.

Table 2.1. Policy and Program Design

Cases	Policy			Program Design
	Governance	Guidelines	Incentives	Participatory Roles
Jackson	Direct	Title I Improve Test Scores Parent Involvement	Accountability	Parent Advisory Council Parent Meetings
Progress	Delegated	21st CCLC Pro-social Behavior Higher Test Scores Attendance/Retention Family and Community Engagement	Accountability	Parent Volunteer Parent Advisory Council Parent Employment
South End	Delegated	Child Care Subsidy Health and Safety Standards	Competition	Limited Parental Involvement

With regards to the effects of delegated governance, Jackson does not differ much from South End and Progress in how it responds to policy rules and tools. All three organizations similarly respond to policy rules in designing the formal elements of program design. The degree to which each policy prescribed parent roles and implemented accountability measures shaped variation in program design. Jackson Elementary's program—a case of direct governance—tightly adhered to Title I guidelines to develop formal elements of program design. Title I's academic achievement objectives permeated the mission and day-to-day practices of the program. Indeed, boosting student test scores was the sole reason the program existed. Jackson's conformity to Title I goals was due in part to the policy's narrow description of program success and specific guidelines for parent activities. Title I also required Jackson to report compliance to rules, and various state and local agencies also monitored the program's performance. In contrast, Progress and South End retained some autonomy and latitude in creating programs. For Progress, the 21st CCLC grant required the program to report outcomes and monitor progress. However, 21st CCLC had broader guidelines for family engagement that allowed Progress staff to develop their own parent activities to meet these requirements. Finally, the Child Care Subsidy program did not require parental involvement roles at all.

In what follows, I provide more detailed descriptions of each policy and program case. I illustrate how policy guidelines and tools broadly produce program designs that incorporate parents into service delivery. As chapter 5 will demonstrate, these participatory roles can boost parents' capacity for civic and political engagement.

Jackson Elementary: A Title I School

Jackson Elementary has been around for nearly a century and weathered white flight, riots, the economic decline of a once booming industrial district, and the emergence of crime and gang violence. Most of the neighborhood's residents spent their formative years in Jackson's classrooms. Jackson is also a Title I school that receives additional funding to support the academic achievement of low-income, low-performing students.

As a part of the War on Poverty, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 set aside funds for low-income schools with the aim of narrowing the black-white achievement gap and reducing racial inequality in education.¹⁸ Initially, Title I funds did not require states or schools to adhere to curriculum or instruction guidelines. Title I objectives shifted toward stu-

dent performance during the 1980s as evidence suggested that the students targeted through the policy showed little academic improvement.¹⁹

The 1988 Hawkins-Stafford amendments to Title I tied federal funding to student performance. The amendments offered whole school grants to high-poverty schools to encourage organizational change and improve instruction. Narrowing the achievement gap through academic performance standards and school accountability became the central aim of the policy during the Clinton Administration.²⁰

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) continued in this tradition but raised performance standards and enforced more stringent accountability measures. In exchange for federal dollars, the legislation required states to test students from third through eighth grade every year in math, reading, and science, and to develop plans to ensure academic proficiency of all students by 2014.²¹ States were also tasked with hiring highly qualified teachers and ensuring that students made yearly progress toward state standards of proficiency. Schools that failed to demonstrate improvement or compliance risked losing funds and undergoing reorganization.²²

In addition to these changes, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) amendments to Title I Part A increased funding to school districts to fund after-school services, tutoring, or summer school programming for low-income children at risk of failing to meet state achievement standards. Schools with more than 40 percent low-income students could use funds for school-wide grants to improve curricula and instruction or direct targeted assistance grants to fund tutoring and after-school instruction for students who were failing or at risk of failing. In 2016, \$15 billion of Title I funding went to high-poverty schools to provide supplemental assistance to low-performing students.

Jackson benefits from Title I dollars, but the school has been in academic trouble in recent years. Student academic progress has been inconsistent—with brief stints of rising test scores and declines in truancy followed by dips in student performance and turnover among faculty and staff. Consequently, Jackson has been on the list of schools slated for closure. At the time of these interviews, Jackson's quality rating had dropped. It is a low-rated school in need of provisional support—a set of interventions prompted by the CEO of Chicago Public Schools to further monitor and train school administrators and teachers. If test scores do not improve, Chicago Public School (CPS) administrators may step in to revise the school's budget and work plan and change staffing and professional development practices.

A walk around the neighborhood surrounding Jackson Elementary reveals something that CPS school ratings do not. Jackson's administrators and teachers manage more than classroom instruction—they work to protect

students from Westfield's violence. The school sits between two blocks in the Westfield community where loitering, brawls, shootings, and drug transactions occur every day. Safety is certainly a priority for Mrs. Williams, the school's principal. She and her staff carefully monitor who enters and leaves the building, and they manage the dismissal process to diffuse potential fights between rival gangs.

I met Mrs. Williams during her routine patrol of the school. Rarely in her office, she watched over Jackson's hallways with a nurturing presence, interjecting warm greetings and hugs to students, parents, and visitors. She and a half dozen other African American women acted as maternal figures nurturing Jackson students, whom they affectionately called their "babies."

When I met Mrs. Williams for our interview, she was doing what I had often observed—consoling troubled students and putting out fires started by parents and misbehaving pupils. While the protective, nurturing role was a significant and unsung part of her role as principal, Mrs. Williams kept Jackson's doors open by closely monitoring students' performance and adjusting instruction to comply with the guidelines of her Title I funds. She used Title I money to restructure school staffing, improve instruction, and fund the after-school program for students who were falling behind.

Midway through our interview, Mrs. Williams described the academic hurdles facing the school and her efforts to bring students to proficiency in math and reading, all of which closely followed the Title I guidelines. First, she encouraged specialization and training. When she started in her previous role as Jackson's assistant principal, only 32 percent of her students were at grade-level reading. In her words, the scores "were in the toilet." She "departmentalized" the third to eighth grades and encouraged teachers to specialize in one subject to meet state benchmarks and new common core standards:

So my first year as assistant principal, our reading scores were, like, 32 percent. So they were in the toilet. So that year, my principal allowed me to departmentalize our whole building with third through eighth grade, which was one of the best moves we made.

In keeping with No Child Left Behind's emphasis on teacher qualifications, Mrs. Williams pushed her staff to pursue additional credentials: "I also encourage my teachers to go back—like, my math teachers to go back to school to get those endorsements or to pick up any math skills that we could." Specialization and additional training worked. Math scores improved.

Shoring up the skills of her staff was just one of the ways Mrs. Williams worked to boost students' test scores; she also organized a data team to criti-

cally analyze the data and pinpoint weaknesses in instruction—a strategy recommended by Title I guidelines:²³

But our math department has tremendous gains within the last six years, but that's all due to the time that the teachers put in, critically thinking it, analyzing our data. We had a data team that I—we ended up putting together to just analyze data. . . . We're really diving deep and saying what's different about this data? What's going on in instruction?

Title I and the After-School Program

The after-school program is one of the ways Jackson Elementary met state benchmarks for academic achievement. Mrs. Williams used her discretionary funds to operate the after-school program for “students who need that extra support.” She consulted the data to develop a program that targeted students “almost at grade level” and those students who were excelling but risked losing skills. Forty percent of the student population fell under that umbrella. The program was designed “to really push those ones that are right there on the edge that just need it.”

Parental Involvement

Along with focusing on supplemental instruction for at-risk students, Jackson Elementary complied with Title I guidelines by creating parent leadership and volunteer roles. Mrs. Williams convened an annual Title I parents' meeting that provided information about the school's Title I services and parental involvement opportunities. Mrs. Williams also supported a school Parent Advisory Council (PAC) by helping the committee organize monthly meetings that allowed parents to provide feedback on how to use Title I funds. Throughout, Mrs. Williams had to ensure that the PAC supported parents as “equal partners in their children's education under the terms and standards of the ESEA act” through activities that improved parent literacy, parenting skills, and parents' capacity to promote their children's academic progress.²⁴ Mrs. Williams encouraged after-school staff members to share these opportunities to parents.

Policy Tool: Accountability

Accountability mechanisms such as reporting requirements and audits kept Jackson in line with Title I guidelines. Mrs. Williams and her team of ad-

ministrators and teachers developed a CIWP—Continuous Improvement Work Plan—that laid out benchmarks for improvement in math and reading scores, professional development, school climate, technology integration, and science achievement.²⁵

Mrs. Williams reported Jackson’s progress on this work plan to her network within District 299 of CPS. CPS then rated Jackson Elementary according to a quality rating system and offered recommendations or interventions to improve student outcomes. If Jackson shows little improvement, CPS could decide to restructure the school by firing administrators and teachers or consolidating Jackson with another better-performing school.²⁶

Accountability also influenced Jackson Elementary’s compliance with parent involvement guidelines. Mrs. Williams had to keep public records of the school’s compliance with Title I standards for inspection and the school was subject to Title I compliance audits from Chicago’s Board of Education and the Office of Local School Council Relations.²⁷

In sum, Title I influenced Jackson Elementary’s after-school program through policy rules that directed student activities—supplemental math and reading instruction—and required parental involvement. Policy tools like accountability required Jackson to measure and report compliance with policy rules.

Progress Youth Development Corp: A 21st Century Community Learning Center

Progress Youth Community Development Corp is tucked away in the Westfield community on Chicago’s Westside. Anne Jenkins initially started the organization as a church soup kitchen for homeless men on the north side of Chicago 25 years earlier, but in the late 1990s she moved the organization to Westfield. Since then, Progress’s services expanded in scope. The organization now offers comprehensive community services that include homeless shelters, a youth development program, food and clothing services, workforce development programs, legal aid, and technology classes.

Progress began in the late 1990s as a combined effort of David and Claire Jones and Anne Jenkins, the founder of Progress Community Development Corp. David, the director of the youth program, explained that this program began as a set of small and informal Bible study classes coupled with an after-school homework club of 20 students. The program initially aimed to prepare “the next generation of leaders in the neighborhood.”

By the time of my interviews, the scope of services provided had expanded

to serve more than 600 students in its 32-block catchment. In our interview, David also noted that the organization's focus evolved as well. The program aimed to transform the neighborhood through the next generation. The organization would achieve this goal through a comprehensive set of enrichment programs run by a network of positive adults. David explained the youth program as follows:

A collection of parents, staff, volunteers, and donors working together to create learning environments for the children of Westfield . . . [through] . . . holistic services: academic, athletic, artistic, science, life skills, faith development, and technology.

Taken together, these services and positive adult mentoring should

invest in the young people of Westfield . . . so that they can become the change agents in our neighborhood, where they become the transformers in our neighborhood to where our neighborhood becomes a place where success becomes the norm and families prosper.

Progress shifted its strategy from short-term individualistic goals to a long-term community-wide aim of neighborhood transformation over time. The objective was to serve a cohort of students that could create a tipping point in the neighborhood—changing its culture to one in which success in the form of high school and college graduation rates, viable employment, and healthy families becomes the norm for Westfield.

The After-School Program

The after-school program found its home in an old, rehabbed brake factory. The building's modest exterior of yellow, aged brick and opaque windows obscured the bustling activity of the after-school program. Before 3:00 p.m., the building functioned as a quiet day center for homeless women. Around 2:00 p.m., it quickly transformed into a youth center that housed 90 children, ages 5 to 14, in the Progress after-school program. Once enrolled, students received 40 minutes of in-depth literacy instruction, one half hour of one-on-one tutoring, and homework help free of charge to parents.

On Mondays and Fridays, the program's structure changed. Mondays involved optional character education days for which staff adapted the "Character Counts" curriculum and integrated biblical themes and scriptures

around a particular character trait such as respect, trustworthiness, caring, or kindness. Fridays were dedicated to creative arts and science classes in lieu of literacy instruction. Students could choose from a set of classes ranging from “yoga and art” to “cooking.”

Policy and Program Design

The organization’s approach to after-school care was not just the product of David and Claire’s creativity. The two strategically designed the program to meet the guidelines of its funder, the 21st CCLC program. This program began in the mid-1990s as a small operation providing grants for literacy education programs to rural and urban low-income schools. The program became part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and received \$750,000 in 1995²⁸ and grew to \$40 million in 1998. An additional \$1 billion went to 1,520 programs in 6,800 rural and inner-city schools in 2002²⁹ under Title IV Part B of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Originally designed to fund “projects that benefit the education, health, social service, cultural, and recreation needs”³⁰ of urban and rural communities, the NCLB shifted the program’s purpose to improving student performance on state-standardized tests in low-income, low-performing schools. The law also expanded the program’s scope to fund partnerships between local schools and community organizations. The 21st CCLC grant now supports:

the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs; and offers literacy and other educational services to the families of participating children.³¹

The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) awards grants to states that manage a statewide competition for funding to nonprofits and local education agencies (local schools). To receive this funding, organizations must develop programs that enhance the education and social benefits for participants. This includes increasing the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state academic standards in reading and math and decreasing truancy, sus-

pensions, and behavioral problems. The grant encourages the development of programs that offer character education, focused academic assistance for students, and parental involvement opportunities.³² In 2016, more than one million students were enrolled in a 21st CCLC funded program.

Forty-five percent of the \$220,000 that funds the Progress after-school program came from the 21st CCLC grant. The rest of the budget came from a mix of private donations. In 2007, Progress submitted a proposal to a state-wide competition for awards. Claire and David proposed a program that met the federal government's objective of providing "opportunities for academic enrichment" and "tutorial services to help students, particularly students who attend low-performing schools, to meet the challenging State academic standards."³³ More importantly, they created a program that met the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) 21st CCLC objectives. The DOE devolved authority to ISBE to set state priorities and to manage an award competition. Its plan included more specific objectives, performance measures, and evaluation and audit processes for awardees.³⁴ For example, the state plan noted that programs should

- 1) improve student achievement in core academic subjects as measured by the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT)
- 2) increase student attendance
- 3) increase students' social-emotional skills
- 4) collaborate with the community
- 5) provide ongoing professional development for staff
- 6) collaborate with schools and community organizations
- 7) create sustainability plans to continue programs beyond federal funding periods³⁵

The Progress after-school program's emphasis on literacy, math skills, and tutoring met the state's objective of improving student performance on standardized tests. The program likewise met the state's goal of "increasing student's social-emotional skills" by teaching the "Character Counts" curriculum, which aimed to instill "positive academic, social, and emotional values, mindsets, and character traits."³⁶

Parental Involvement

Along with guiding student activities, the state plan also provided broad rules for how Progress could incorporate parental involvement into pro-

grams. Illinois's state plan required parental involvement to fulfill goal 4: community collaborations. ISBE required programs to “increase family involvement of participating children”: “All families of students in programs [should] have opportunities to be involved in their children's education and increase their children's learning opportunities.” Programs had to describe “the type and extent of collaborations” and administer a “parent/adult satisfaction survey.”³⁷

Progress developed “parent partnership” activities—monthly efforts to reach out to parents and themed events such as holiday parties, student showcases, and award ceremonies—to meet this guideline. Progress also incorporated parents as a key element of its community transformation mission. Parental involvement was central to the success of the neighborhood youth and ultimately to community change. David likened parental involvement to a hinge on the “door of opportunity”: “Parents have to have commitment and—at that point—the staff can use the keys to help open up the door.” Accordingly, the program offered parent volunteer and leadership roles. Parents were a part of the day-to-day activities of the program—they attended staff meetings, took on clerical roles, and assisted teachers with classroom management. Parents also chaperoned field trips or kept score at program-sponsored basketball tournaments.

Parents could also serve on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC)—a committee of eight to ten parents who had decision-making power in the program. In David's words, the PAC gave parents the “chance to help shape the program,” rather than “just having a program that's delivered to your kids.”

Lauren—the kindergarten to second-grade program director—described the PAC as giving parents a chance to weigh in on how the program could “strengthen its involvement in the lives of the youth and the community.” Through the PAC, parents informed the after-school program's “mission and vision for the future.”

The PAC met once a month to deliberate on a “big question” posed by staff, which usually led to changes in program policy. Within the past year, the PAC implemented new changes in the program's behavior policy and safety procedures. Amanda, the third to eighth-grade after-school director, explained:

We really try to, you know, just work through some tangible issues that we have in the program and let them brainstorm on how they should be fixed. . . . So the behavior policy was one of the things the parent committee wanted to change about Progress.

30 • State of Empowerment

What started as a small Bible study and homework club evolved into a larger, formal academic program with active roles for parents. Although program features reflect how the program evolved to meet parent and community needs, these features also stemmed from Claire and David's efforts over time to maintain legitimacy before important institutions (e.g., the DOE and ISBE) and maintain funding.

Policy Tool: Accountability

Much like Jackson Elementary's after-school program, Progress's program was subject to monitoring and reporting requirements. The staff tracked several academic and behavioral benchmarks to fulfill the grant's academic enrichment objectives. First, the program aimed to improve students' reading by one grade level and monitored student progress through computer-based reading, math programs, and literacy assessments. Second, the program monitored improvements in grade point average (GPA) by tracking report card grades over the course of the year. Third, with regard to social-emotional skills, students needed to show improvement in staff-administered behavioral assessments (BESS) and have fewer disciplinary problems in schools. Staff reported changes along these indicators in an annual evaluation report.

More important for parental involvement, Progress offered detailed descriptions of parent volunteer and leadership roles and measured parent participation in these opportunities. ISBE also conducted audits and site visits to monitor compliance.

South End Community Center: A Subsidized Childcare Provider

South End Community sits along a main corridor of the South End neighborhood in Chicago. The center is a branch of a network of community centers and has occupied a central intersection in South End for nearly 30 years. During this time, the South End neighborhood lost an active park district program and a Boys and Girls Club, leaving the South End Community Center as the last source of recreational activities and youth programs for the neighborhood.

On my first day at South End, the youthful staff "showed me the ropes" and initiated me into their group on a bus ride to pick up students. Bianca, the bus driver, assured her friend and coworker Kayla that I was "cool." She announced to me, "we gon' treat you like you one of us." I could tell the youth workers had been together for a long time—not just as coworkers but also as

classmates, neighbors, and former students in the after-school program. Ms. Celeste, the director of the program, acted as a steady hand of guidance for the after-school staff. Her stoic yet gentle demeanor contrasted with the noisy and gregarious bunch of 20-somethings she managed. But her workers respected her expertise and direction—they deferred to her in nearly every situation and problem that arose. There was no question of who was in charge and what was expected of them. Celeste ran a tight ship.

Student Activities

The program hosted 75 elementary students ages 6 to 12 from 2:30 to 6:30 p.m. Monday through Friday in a large dance studio coined “The After-School Room.” Lined with educational bulletin boards on vibrant red, blue, and purple walls, the room was divided into three main sections according to activity. One section was dedicated for group play, another corner for homework, and a desk for student check-in and parent pickup.

The South End after-school program’s mission was to provide a safe, positive, and stimulating after-school environment that fostered positive youth development. The staff offered age-appropriate social, physical, and creative opportunities. Students were “an integral part of the curriculum planning and implementation and were empowered to make their own choices regarding how they spent their after-school care.” Staff picked up students from nine neighborhood schools and bused them to the center. Upon arriving, students completed homework and played group games with staff until parents arrived.

The Policy: Child Care Development Block Grant

The federal Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) made up nearly 80 percent of South End’s budget. Prior to welfare reform, the federal government offered piecemeal support for childcare to AFDC recipients seeking employment and some subsidies for working families who were not on AFDC.³⁸ Welfare reform consolidated these programs to create one childcare program with standard federal guidelines. The program also increased the income eligibility guideline from 75 percent of the state’s median income to 85 percent and expanded the program’s scope to low-income families regardless of whether they received welfare.³⁹

The Administration of Children and Families (ACF) awards grants to states to provide childcare. States often match these funds with TANF dollars. Federal law gives states latitude to administer the subsidy and to develop

eligibility guidelines, but federal regulations require states to comply with income guidelines and maximize parent choice.⁴⁰ States can offer parents childcare through a contracted provider and/or offer parents vouchers to purchase childcare. States develop their own eligibility rules as well but generally comply with federal income guidelines. Family size, employment status, and income determine program eligibility and parent co-pays.

Congress reauthorized the Child Care Development Block Grant Act in 2014 with new emphasis on health and safety guidelines for providers, improved consumer education, quality improvement, and family-friendly policies that increase continuity in childcare arrangements for children.⁴¹ The policy extended eligibility periods to 12 months regardless of temporary changes in work or income and required states to invest in quality improvements. Together, these provisions were designed to improve families' access to high-quality affordable childcare.

Despite these new measures, federal spending for childcare has remained stagnant and slightly declined since the inception of the program. Nevertheless, the childcare subsidy still remains an important resource for low-income working families. In 2016, the subsidy helped provide childcare to more than 1.4 million children each month. And 40 percent of these children were enrolled in school-aged before- and after-school care.⁴²

In Illinois, eligibility for the childcare subsidy program was determined by family size and income, with income thresholds no less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level for each family size. To qualify, parents had to be employed or enrolled in school or a training program. Once eligibility was determined, parent co-pays were based on income and family size.⁴³ States then allowed parents to purchase childcare at a reduced rate from a range of providers that met state regulations. Providers were reimbursed by the state at a set rate determined by the type of care provided.

In Illinois, a group of nonprofit organizations designated as Child Care Resource and Referral Centers managed intake processes and determined eligibility for the program. In Chicago, families applied for the subsidy through Illinois Action for Children, an advocacy nonprofit, and went through a six-month redetermination process where recipients had to provide paycheck stubs, work schedules, and additional supporting documents to prove eligibility for the program.⁴⁴

To receive state reimbursements, South End had to comply with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services' licensing requirements for school-aged center-based care.⁴⁵ Staff had to maintain ratios (1 staff member to 20 children) and comply with health and safety standards. South End's after-school program operated on roughly \$150,000 per year, with \$75,000

covering the salaries of part-time staff. The remaining funds supplemented program activities and operating costs. The after-school program depended on parent vouchers. Eighty percent of the after-school budget was supported by a combination of parent co-pays and reimbursements from the state for childcare. The program received a set reimbursement rate from the state for every subsidized child enrolled in the program. The remaining 20 percent of its funding was supplied by private donations.

Beyond these basic guidelines, Ms. Celeste had few rules to follow to keep funding. However, policy still shaped the activities Celeste offered parents and students through market competition. The Child Care Development Block Grant maximized parent choice in selecting providers by giving parents the option to enroll their child in a contracted provider or to purchase childcare—via a voucher—from a provider of their choice.⁴⁶ South End’s funding depended on Celeste’s efforts to attract and keep students. As a result, she tailored program activities to meet parent preferences. For example, Celeste shifted student activities from recreation and play to homework help in order to “keep” parents in her program. She explained:

For the most part I always change a lot of things around and just try to, meet the needs. . . . So I try to, you know go with what they want. So, for me, um, after-school we . . . didn’t focus on homework and things like that, cause we tried to give them a little more activity cause they’re in schools a long time. But the need was, they really want them to finish they homework then do activities. So, you know, it’s just about working with your parents . . . to pretty much keep them in your program.

Limited Parental Involvement

While market competition kept Celeste attuned to parent preferences, the childcare subsidy provided little guidance on whether and how to incorporate parental involvement into program design. Celeste offered very few volunteer or leadership opportunities for parents and parents seldom reported volunteering in the program. Staff were equally unaware of volunteer roles for parents. If parents did express interest in volunteering, the Illinois state licensing standards required staff to allow parents to “sit in” and observe the after-school program but only one parent took advantage of this opportunity.

With few rules regarding formal parent involvement roles, Celeste developed her own way of incorporating parent feedback: a suggestion box. She

used a suggestion box at the end of the year where, “parents are able to put in ideas, suggestions, wants, and needs.” Parents’ suggestions usually led to small changes in the program, such as “brightening up” the bulletin boards and streamlining parent pick-up processes. But beyond these marginal ways of influencing the program, South End’s after-school program offered few formal parental involvement roles. It did offer “family nights”—themed evening events for parents and students that involved showing a popular movie or setting up board games. But these events were not required by the childcare subsidy or the state’s licensing guidelines; they were Celeste and her staff’s own doing.

Does Delegated Governance Matter?

As a case of direct governance, policy funding guidelines and incentives are especially salient to Jackson Elementary, permeating most of the school’s activities and driving after-school program design. Jackson Elementary created an after-school program with the sole purpose of boosting test scores to meet the performance standards of the ESEA Title I component. The immense influence of accountability extended to parent involvement opportunities. Per Title I guidelines, the school had to incorporate parent feedback into school programs and after-school activities and create a parent advisory council. The school was subject to local audits from the Chicago School Board to ensure compliance with these standards, and the principal had to publicly share documents that demonstrated the school’s compliance.

For Progress and South End, two nonprofits delivering after-school care, the connection between policy and programming was less strong. Each organization had an identity of its own and used public funding to support the organization’s distinct aims. In other words, Progress and South End had greater latitude in responding to broader policy guidelines and incentives. They could interpret policies in their own ways to create student and parent activities.

At Progress, staff members met the state 21st CCLC’s objectives through a program that incorporated tutoring, literacy instruction, and character development activities. On parents’ roles within programs, staff members developed “parent partnership”—a combination of formal parental involvement, open-door policies, family events, and routine communication with parents—to fulfill the parental involvement guidelines of the 21st CCLC grant.

South End's program was only required to meet health and safety standards and the Illinois Child Care Subsidy program offered few guidelines on student activities or parental involvement roles. Consequently, the program lacked such opportunities for parents. Nevertheless, market competition kept Ms. Celeste in tune with parent preferences and her efforts to cater to parents aligned with the childcare subsidy's objective to empower "working parents to make their own decisions regarding the childcare services that best suit their family's needs."⁴⁷

Conclusion

This chapter connects policy—governance, guidelines, and incentives—to the design of Jackson's, Progress's, and South End's after-school programs. After-school policy is distinct from most targeted programs because it encourages inclusive participatory program design. Each policy required organizations to incorporate parents' perspectives into service delivery, albeit to varying degrees. For Jackson, Title I guidelines directed the school to create parental involvement opportunities. Progress was similarly responsive to the 21st CCLC policy, developing parent volunteer and leadership roles to meet the policy's family engagement guideline. South End's focus on recreation and homework along with minimal parental involvement roles reflect the childcare subsidy's general program guidelines and sparse parental involvement requirements.

Policy tools kept all three programs in line with policy. Accountability measures, such as reporting requirements and monitoring, kept Jackson's and Progress's programs aligned with policy guidelines. For South End, market competition kept Ms. Celeste attuned to parents' preferences—she tailored the program design to fit their wants and needs.

The distinction between delegated and direct governance in program design is subtle but important. In the case of Jackson Elementary's program—a case of direct governance—program design tightly adhered to Title I guidelines. Title I's academic achievement objectives permeated the mission and day-to-day practices of the program. Indeed, boosting student test scores was the sole reason the program existed. In contrast, Progress and South End had greater latitude to create programs that fulfilled guidelines in part because government funds only partially supported their after-school programming and because policy guidelines were less specific or stringent. The next chapter turns to how policy structures empower relationships between staff and parents.

3 • Empowering Relationships

Ms. Amanda, Ms. Linda, and Ms. Nadine sit at the welcome desk—the administrative hub of Progress’s after-school program where parents copy lesson plans and permissions forms and occasionally counsel misbehaving students. Amanda oversees the third- to eighth-grade after-school program. She is sorting papers while Ms. Linda and Ms. Nadine—two parent volunteers—get settled. The two moms commiserate over the weather and errands as they shuffle their handbags, scarfs, and coats. Nadine greets Linda with “How you doing Ms. Linda?” Linda sighs, “Hanging in there, feeling drained.” Nadine nods sympathetically, “It’s the weather too. . . . It was cool this morning, I sat down earlier and that just did it.” For Linda, errands have worn her down. She explains, “Some days, I just got a lot of things to do . . . it’s the first of the month . . . gotta figure out what’s going to go here and what’s going there . . . making sure you pay everyone you need to pay.” Amanda nods and exclaims, “You all are so busy!” The conversation turns to hairdressers and manicures. Linda mentions how she used to work acrylic nails into her budget, “I used to get them done all the time” but “got tired of doing it.” Amanda interjects, “I only got them once . . . and I couldn’t figure out how to use my hands.” Leslie—a fourth grader—interrupts them—she’s visibly upset and pouting. Amanda directs her to Ms. Linda, “Talk to Ms. Linda, she’s a really good listener.” While Linda comforts Leslie, Nadine pulls out her cell phone to show Amanda pictures of her children.

Similar scenes unfolded at Jackson Elementary’s program. Parents huddled around the check-in desk and classrooms, gossiping among themselves or swapping stories about weekend plans with staff, all the while fulfilling their volunteer roles. At South End, mothers streamed in and out of Celeste’s office to “sit and chat” about the latest tabloid news, shopping, and romantic relationships.

One theme emerged from these observations that challenges our current view of programs targeting low-income families. First, the personal interac-

tions described above sharply contrast the impersonal or contentious staff-client relationships in many means-tested programs.¹

To be sure, scholars have emphasized how social policy constrains personal supportive relationships between bureaucrats and beneficiaries.² Bureaucrats often face trade-offs between forging supportive relationships with clients and fulfilling professional roles. They often construct relationships that “will not routinely produce emotionally draining or time-consuming demands, questions, and confrontations.”³ Clients anticipate “civil and detached” bureaucrats who subject them to “blistering scrutiny” and do not “engage them on any aspect of their lives beyond mere eligibility.”⁴

Moreover, research documents how these negative interactions attenuate beneficiaries’ power within programs and dampen civic and political engagement.⁵ But parents across all three programs studied here regularly socialized with staff and often described staff members as “lifelong friends,” their “support network,” or “like family.” For example, Sarah from South End described the staff as “family” to her and her children:

I mean, they’re like family to me. Even though I didn’t know them when I first came here. . . . You know, it’s just, I guess because I’ve known them so long and I trust them so much. Even with my kids, they’ve grown to love me and my kids the same.

As a single mother of four, Rebecca from Progress regarded staff as a “support system” that “pushed” her and her children forward:

I’m a single mother with four kids and a full-time student. I know I have a support system here. [. . .] if I go to Amanda and say I need help they’ll help me. . . . So it’s me a great support system because it’s not just one person it’s not just two people I have a whole staff of people that’s behind me to push me forward and to push my kids forward.

This departure from prevailing descriptions of means-tested program experiences raises questions about program design in after-school care. First, how does policy cultivate rather than constrain personal relationships between staff and parents? How do these personal relationships shape what parents actually experience in programs?

In some ways, my initial observations are not surprising. Scholars of human service agencies have long described program design as a dynamic negotiation between staff and clients. Indeed, Sandfort describes organizational forms as a product of human action and interaction—how staff members

interact with broader institutional contexts, one another, and clients.⁶ “People” are the raw material of human service agencies,⁷ but bureaucrats need client cooperation and compliance that requires trusting relationships.⁸ As Hasenfeld notes, these relationships are the “core” of human service agencies.⁹ Even still, this research does not capture the kinds of personal relationships parents forge with staff at these programs, how they develop, and the broader benefits these relationships offer to low-income parents.

Further, these perspectives focus primarily on *staff* roles in creating policy on the ground¹⁰ and typically frame means-tested programs as constraining clients’ ability to shape their own program experiences. New public management reforms have further limited clients’ power in their interactions with bureaucrats. Yet policy guidelines and new public management tools like accountability, performance, and market competition in these after-school programs encouraged staff-parent relationships that were personal and empowering for parents.

First, policy prescribed interactions that were not centered on determining eligibility or monitoring compliance. After-school policy guidelines directed staff to cooperate with parents to meet policy aims—improving test scores and positive youth development. Staff partnered with parents to enroll students in programs, ensure their children regularly attend programs, and encourage good behavior and academic progress. Second, market competition and accountability tie program resources to parents’ choices—through vouchers that deliver funding to organizations or performance standards that reward recruitment and retention of students. Instead of limiting access to programs, policy incentivized staff to recruit and retain students.

These policy features influence staff behavior in ways that empower parents like Linda and Nadine with a kind of agency that has not been explored by previous research. Because policy incentivizes organizations to retain parents, Nadine and Linda’s access to the program was not conditioned on mandatory meetings with staff or following program directives like many other means-tested programs. Nadine and Linda could engage programs in ways that suit their preferences without the threat of losing services. This chapter unpacks how parents’ relationships with staff members inform how they experience the programs described in the previous chapter. I show how after-school policy fosters positive relationships between staff and parents.

Policy Guidelines: Personal Staff-Client Relationships

Unlike Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or welfare-to-work programs where enrollment is designed to be short to deter program

use,¹¹ after-school policy requires long-term cooperative interactions with parents to meet academic achievement and youth development goals.¹² Staff work with parents to ensure students' positive behavior, homework completion, and regular attendance.

For example, Title I guidelines required Jackson to develop a school-parent compact that outlined the shared responsibility of parents, teachers, and students in supporting academic achievement. The policy also encouraged Mrs. Williams, Jackson's principal, to promote open, routine communication between parents and teachers. Mrs. Williams framed regular communication with parents as the "foundation of effective parental involvement" and a key factor in promoting student success.¹³ Teachers were required to communicate with parents on a regular basis beyond parent-teacher conferences to encourage parents to help with homework, monitor school attendance, and limit time spent watching television and using electronic devices. Further, teachers were required to target parents of the lowest-achieving students.¹⁴ The after-school teachers at Jackson Elementary complied with these guidelines by regularly calling parents about students' academic progress.

The 21st Century Community Learning Center grant similarly required routine communication between staff and parents. To fulfill family engagement guidelines, Progress staff called parents monthly and tracked parent contact for their annual evaluation report. Staff used these monthly phone calls to build relationships with parents so that "parents feel like Progress cares." Indeed, David, the youth program director, viewed parents as living in a "system [that] isn't built around listening to them and what happened in their day," and he regarded staff's roles as a listening ear to parents as the "single greatest asset that [Progress] has for parents."

For South End, the parent choice provision of the Child Care Subsidy informed how Celeste, South End's after-school program director, interacted with parents. To meet parents' preferences for service delivery, Celeste connected with parents monthly to gauge their satisfaction with the program and student progress.

These routine cooperative interactions often led to personal relationships between staff and parents. Many parents used these routine interactions to either casually converse with staff about pop culture, family, and weekend plans or to disclose more serious matters like divorce and economic hardships. For example, Ms. Beverly at Jackson's after-school program experienced this—noting that about half the parents just "cling" to her. This was the case for Sarah, who talked to Ms. Beverly about "a lot of personal stuff," which included her separation and divorce—family dynamics that she worried negatively affected her son. Kayla shared a similar experience. She de-

scribed Ms. Beverly as a confidante and someone she could “just sit and talk to” about “anything”:

Like anything that I’m going through personally, I can just sit and talk to Ms. Beverly about. . . . I don’t want to get into detail about it because it’s like husband-wife situation, but it was very personal and she always listens. She always gives her advice . . . off the record we talk. If I need to talk to her I can—like if I’m coming—I come in, I’m feeling down . . . if I need to talk to her, I can go to her and talk to her.

These kinds of personal exchanges were common at Progress as well. Alice—a fourth- and fifth-grade after-school teacher—commented that parents used regular check-ins to “shoot the breeze” with staff. She explained, “We can just interact and shoot the breeze of what’s going on with them at home or the latest movie that we’ve seen or places to shop or the new grocery store that’s being built down the street.”

Rita is one parent who chose to shoot the breeze. A mother of five and recently divorced, Rita discovered Progress when she stumbled upon a basketball tournament hosted by the organization in the summer. She immediately “hit it off” with Claire, the former director of the program.

We hit it off the very first time we met. Claire . . . she thinks I’m this fashionista, diva, whatever. I don’t know. I have my eyelashes on. . . . So you know, we hit it off real nice. We hit it off real good and then we began to develop a really, really good relationship over the past two years.

Since she began the program three years ago, Rita routinely connected with Progress staff on personal matters during parent pickup. She described her most recent conversations with Tammy—her daughter’s after-school teacher, “I always keep Tammy updated on little things, little accomplishments because it had been a really, really struggle for a while. And so, so we were just talking about my job and just rejoicing in the Lord over some things.”

Staff at South End also described a set of parents who broke professional boundaries by “hanging out” with staff. Briana, an after-school staff member, explained these relationships in further detail:

I would say that they’re a little bit more personable. . . . So, you’ve just kind of established a rapport with them. So, they, they come in, they sit down for a minute, they not in a rush to grab their kids and go. But

they, you know, they kinda hang out. They let the kids take they time getting they stuff. They'll, you know, ask us how we doing, how everybody doing, what's going on, ask how the weekend went.

Regina—a mother of two boys—often socialized with after-school staff members during her pickup routine, describing social media as the “big topic” of conversations. She explained, “All the kids and all the parents they have Instagram and Facebook. So if you post something before you come in, everybody wants to know what it was about or what's going on.”

For many parents, these kinds of personal relationships yielded forms of social support. This is the case for Rita, who socialized with Progress staff. Through her relationships with staff members, she gained critical material assistance for her family.

In the excerpt below, she describes an instance when staff members helped provide beds for her children as her family moved from a homeless shelter into more permanent housing.

I had just moved out of a shelter. I was in transitional housing . . . for a year. . . . One bedroom, two bunk beds with all five kids, but we made it. We made it. So, when we moved out I was blessed with a four-bedroom home, and so the children needed some beds and I mentioned it to Claire and the next Sunday she was calling me saying I had got an email from somebody that wanted to be a blessing to somebody in need and all five of your beds to be delivered from Sears by the end of the week. And all five beds came and Alan and his wife came and put 'em up for me.

In addition to beds, Rita also received clothing, school supplies, and access to a private school education for her children from Progress staff.

Jackson's after-school parents reported similar forms of support. Jamie, a recent divorcee, commented on Ms. Beverly's efforts to provide bus cards and uniforms for her children. Jamie gained access to these resources through her frequent check-ins with Ms. Beverly. She explained:

I talked to her about that, that I'm not working. I don't have nothing right now. And she told me the program that would fit me that I'd be eligible for and she put us in the program because even some days, they didn't even have a way to get to school. So now they get the bus cards to come to school every day. . . .

Celeste, South End's program director, described how she used her routine check-ins with parents to gauge their needs. For many of South End's parents, personal relationships with the director led to emotional support, leniency around payment, and resources within and outside of the organization. She refers to a resource book that has job and apartment listings and information about other programs and also "asks around" for parents when a specific need arises: "If a person is looking for an apartment or a person is looking for somewhere to buy healthy something, you know, I have a resource binder, but I try to just, I ask around for them, you know. I'll try to connect them in some type of way."

In sum, after-school policy rules required staff to routinely contact parents. In contrast to staff-client interactions in welfare bureaucracies, these interactions were not centered on determining eligibility but were cooperative and designed to assess satisfaction with services and discuss student progress in programs. Staff and parents used these interactions to develop strong personal ties.

These relationships counter our expectations of staff-parent exchanges in targeted programs. Conventional wisdom would suggest that parents' interactions with staff should be professional and distant—especially as programs become more dependent on government funding to deliver services¹⁵—or contentious and demeaning. But for these after-school programs, policy encouraged routine interactions between parents and staff that cultivated positive, supportive relationships.

Policy Tools and Parent Empowerment

Like after-school policy rules, policy tools also empowered parents with the agency to decide how they would engage staff and programs. This kind of agency counters extensive research pointing to the diminished power low-income citizens experience when interacting with government bureaucrats.¹⁶ Indeed, the power differential between welfare bureaucrats and clients is a distinct feature of many means-tested programs. Clients are beholden to caseworkers' discretionary authority to determine the outcomes of claims; scarce alternatives to services and benefits only amplifies the power of bureaucrats.¹⁷

As Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald observe, low-income "clients come to expect less, believe they have no influence over officials, and face greater risk of having their requests denied."¹⁸ Soss's later work on AFDC shores up these observations. He finds that clients feel pressured to be deferential, apprecia-

tive, and “not assertive in dealing with workers.”¹⁹ They learn from agency directives that “they should accept whatever happens and that they would not be asked for much input in the future.”²⁰

But parents at Progress, South End, and Jackson do not face pressures to appear appreciative, deferential, and compliant to worker demands, nor do they face the risk of losing after-school care for failing to do so. After-school policy tools shift power from workers to parents by tying organizational resources to recruitment and retention. For Jackson and Progress, retaining students and promoting regular attendance was essential to meeting the program objectives of improved student performance. Further, policy rules required Progress to report enrollment levels, retention, and attendance annually. South End’s funding depended on enrollment and attendance. The state reimbursed South End for every student enrolled and for each day they attended the program. Thus resources for each program hinged on parents’ choices—whether they decided to enroll their child in the program and made sure their child regularly attended. Parents could engage the program however they preferred without the risk of losing after-school care. Instead of creating perverse incentives to push families out of programs, performance, accountability, and market competition motivated staff to keep children in the program.

Mrs. Williams, from Jackson Elementary, knows firsthand the pressures of performance standards and accountability. She created the after-school program to boost the test scores of struggling students. The after-school program is a part of her broader strategy to keep Jackson Elementary in compliance with NCLB standards and out from under the real threat of school restructuring or closure. To ensure low-achieving students improve their performance on standardized tests, Mrs. Williams and her staff work to keep students enrolled and regularly attending the program.

For example, when I asked Cynthia, one of Jackson’s after-school teachers, what was required of parents to keep their children enrolled, she quickly responded, “attendance.” But even poor attendance did not warrant expulsion. She and other staff “don’t just kick [students] out.” Instead, the staff try to communicate with parents about attendance problems. If parents are hard to reach or do little to improve student attendance, staff can replace students. But expulsion because of poor attendance is rare. In fact, no member of Jackson’s after-school staff reported student expulsion.

Progress faced similar pressures to retain students. The 21st CCLC grant emphasized enrollment and retention as a measure of program success. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) annually evaluated Progress on retention and attendance performance measures. Staff track and report pro-

gram enrollment, student attendance, and their retention strategies to “maximize the number of days a student attends.”²¹ As a result, Progress required students to maintain an 80 percent attendance rate—or four out of five school days per week.

Even still, staff loosely enforced these attendance requirements. Indeed, Amanda at Progress describes her leniency toward parents. She does not “immediately start penalizing families” for students’ poor attendance and gives several warnings to parents before students lose their slot. She explains:

I don’t immediately start penalizing parents and students if they’re not meeting that attendance requirement. What I do is . . . give them some time; then I . . . track how families are doing and then I . . . start making phone calls like, “Hey don’t forget you know your student needs to have 80 percent attendance.”

It takes about 30 days of absence for low attendance to prompt expulsion. Behavioral problems rarely warrant expulsion either—during my two years of fieldwork at Progress only 3 of the 90 students enrolled were expelled for poor behavior.

South End’s dependence on childcare subsidy vouchers similarly shaped how Celeste engaged with parents. Ms. Celeste treated parents as customers who, if dissatisfied with services, could change providers, reducing her program’s resources. Consequently, she tailored the program to “keep them in” and retained students through lax program requirements. Most of South End’s after-school staff noted that there are no “rules” for parents to follow to maintain care. As Ms. Celeste shared, the program only required parents to have students attend three days a week: “That’s pretty much it . . . the only qualifications for them to stay—they must send their child.” The emphasis on attendance as the sole requirement is not surprising. The state only reimburses Celeste when a child attends the program. She keeps a regular attendance log that she submits to the state at the end of the month to process payment.²²

Each organization’s dependence on parents for resources, rather than parents’ reliance on staff for after-school care, enhanced parents’ agency in shaping their program experiences. This became increasingly evident in interviews when I asked parents to describe program requirements and their interactions with staff members. When asked how they could lose after-school care, most parents looked puzzled. Those who paid a small co-pay for care at South End mentioned losing services if they failed to make payments, but even these parents described instances when Ms. Celeste “worked with

you,” waiving fees altogether or accepting late payments.²³ Parents seldom reported mandatory meetings with staff members as a program requirement and described program rules as focusing on student attendance and behavior. Unless their child had persistent behavior problems or poor attendance, parents could keep after-school care for as long as they needed.

Given the limited risk of losing after-school care, most interactions with staff reflected parents’ preferences rather than staff or agency directives. Indeed, the staff noted parents’ agency in choosing levels of program engagement—distinguishing parents program experiences by their preferences for personal or professional interactions. Table 3.1 describes variation in parents’ experiences. Parents fell into three categories: customers, friends, and active parents. *Customers* approached staff as childcare professionals and sought out cursory interactions with staff that were limited to updates on their child’s behavior and academic progress. As Lauren from Progress’s after-school program explained, “some parents are quick in and out and don’t really have the time and attention to spare for small talk as much as you try to reach out to them.” Elaine, a South End parent, described herself as a “customer,” and remarked, “I’m the customer and you’re providing a service because you are keeping my child.” She and other “customers” opted for brief interactions with staff.

In contrast, *friends* preferred personal relationships with staff members, viewing them as members of their social network. For example, Regina from South End shared that she mingled with the staff because her family had always been warm and engaging. She noted, “not all moms, or parents period do it but it’s just something my family does.” But Regina also confessed that her casual conversations depended on her preference that day—sometimes she wanted to “get in and get out.” Like Regina, Lisa engaged in small talk with the South End staff as well. Lisa—a mother of two—built rapport with

Table 3.1. Parent Program Experiences

Customers	Friends	Active Parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brief parent pickup • Brief child-centered conversations with staff • Rarely picked up children in person • Seldom attended program events • Seldom responded to staff phone calls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended casual conversations with staff • Routine visits before or after program hours • Personal rapport with staff members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff roles • Volunteer roles • Parent leadership

staff members because she wanted to foster a “family atmosphere.” Lisa remarked, “I mean, if your child is going to be here, why not . . . be friends and with everybody.”

Finally, *active* parents were involved in the day-to-day activities of the programs. For example, Erica served on the parent advisory council and as a school representative on the city-wide school council. She also assisted Ms. Beverly with classroom management, served as an informal substitute teacher, and monitored parent pickup. She stated:

If Ms. Beverly ever needs you, it'll be to stand by security or wait for the kids to go home, parents to pick up the kids or help . . . when they do have their little snack time. I have actually had to sit with the class for her because the teacher didn't show up. So I try to be head and hand with after-school if she needs it.

Claudine, at Progress, fit this category—she was both a member of Progress's parent advisory council and a worker at the after-school program's parent organization, Progress Community Development Corporation, as the coordinator of the food pantry. Claudine was introduced to Progress's after-school program through the organization's basketball league. All five of her children grew up in Progress's after-school program. Claudine started as a parent volunteer and through her volunteer experiences she realized she wanted to “work with more parents” and engaged “people [she] would normally run into in her community.” At the time, Claudine worked as an administrative assistant downtown. She gave her resume to David, Progress's youth program director, and waited for the right position to open:

I knew right away . . . the fact that I felt so comfortable with my children being there. . . . It's a place I would want to work and didn't know what capacity. David and I, we really got to be really good friends, Claire too. I was like I want to work at Progress, but there was never a good fit, there was never a good position. Finally in 2009, David said he thinks . . . he might have a position, send me your resume. I sent it, long story short I'm here and it was just seamless.

Among the active parents, the choice to pursue personal interactions with staff was most crucial because staff often used their personal relationships with parents to recruit them into the parental involvement roles. Parents who were friends of the program were not always active parents, but those

who were active parents consistently reported personal long-term relationships with staff members, a point we will revisit in chapter 5.

Conclusion

Across these three programs, policy creates empowering relationships for low-income parents. Unlike many means-tested programs, after-school staff members do not navigate tensions between developing supportive relationships and their professional roles. Policy rules require frequent interpersonal contact as a way to support the policy aims—youth development and academic achievement. To this end, these policies draw parents in. Parents are not alienated from or stigmatized by staff members, but instead they regard staff as sources of emotional support and—in some instances—material assistance.

For policymakers, these insights illuminate key features of policy design that may augment rather than diminish client agency in programs. This chapter shows the weight of policy rules and new public management tools in incentivizing positive relationships between low-income citizens and the state. Policy rules can prescribe the content of bureaucrat-citizen interactions, whether these interactions are cooperative and centered on client needs or are contentious exchanges that emphasize bureaucrats' gatekeeping and rationing roles over dwindling public resources and, consequently, citizens' imperative to prove eligibility. After-school policy reflects a positive alternative to the conventional interactions between bureaucrats and low-income citizens.

Policy rules prescribe routine interactions with parents that are centered on family needs, children's progress, and parents' satisfaction with services. These interactions are the building blocks of supportive relationships between staff members and parents—relationships that provide material resources and emotional support for low-income families that often lack these resources.

New public management tools like market competition, performance, and accountability structures further empower parents by boosting their agency in shaping their own program experiences. Because these policy tools link funding to parents' choices—whether they enroll their children and ensure regular attendance—staff across all three programs work to recruit and retain students and encourage attendance. For Jackson, the Illinois Board of Education measures student performance on standardized tests. As a result,

Jackson enrolls, retains, and encourages attendance among low-performing students. In keeping with new public management emphasis on performance and accountability, the 21st CCLC grant requires Progress to measure and report recruitment, attendance, and retention in its after-school program. Finally, the market competition reflected in vouchers that enable parents' choice of providers leads Celeste at South End to focus on minimum student attendance standards and to cater to parents.

Staff members across all three programs develop lax program requirements for parents. As such, parents do very little to maintain after-school care and seldom experience the risk of losing access to programs. As a result, they are free to engage programs in whatever manner they choose, a latitude uncharacteristic of targeted means-tested programs and one that holds potential for the political empowerment of low-income citizens. For example, policy feedback research demonstrates that authority structures within programs influence how clients exercise voice and confirm the presence and discretion of bureaucrats as a focal point of authority for clients in means-tested programs. While the traceability of after-school policy complicates how parents connect these programs to the welfare state, the act of choosing levels of program involvement, in light of experiences with a myriad of programs that don't permit those choices, may be powerful in itself. If exercising agency in one setting can have broader positive spillover effects as policy feedback studies have demonstrated, then parents' power to shape their program experiences may positively influence how they exercise political voice outside of programs.

Most importantly, these social ties can lead to participatory opportunities within and outside of the program, a process that chapter 5 will flesh out in greater detail. The next chapter shifts to the organizational factors in the multilevel policy feedback model. I examine how after-school policy empowers organizations with the latitude to uniquely deliver services with community contexts in mind. As later chapters will show, these distinct approaches in service delivery can influence how parents view their own capacity to participate in local forms of civic and political activity.

4 • Organizational Identities and Community Contexts

[South End] . . . provides a healthy environment that a lot of kids are not familiar with, especially in this community. . . . It's not one of those high-class communities, that, you know, the environment is great and everything is hunky dory. It's not, it's, it's a community that needs some improvements . . . but if they come here . . . they get a meal, they get to laugh, they get to play. It makes all that go away for a second. So if we can provide that light or that atmosphere, where the kids feel like they can grow, then that's what we try to do.

John, South End Youth Worker

These comments are John's reflections about the role of South End's after-school program. A native of the South Side and a former student of the program, John left a corporate job downtown several years ago to take on what he views as more meaningful work with the children at South End. When we began the interview, I asked John to share the program's objectives and his response surprised me. Instead of outlining specific benchmarks tied to students' academic achievement, John launched into a detailed description of the neighborhood's problems. He talked of dilapidated buildings, blocks in disarray, and crime in South End, noting that the neighborhood is "not one of those high-class communities" and "needs some improvements." For John, "place" or neighborhood context shaped the way he interpreted the role of the after-school program. The "meals" and "play" provided by the program were a response to South End's social and physical disorder—they made the problems of South End "go away."

John's comments are both enlightening and puzzling. From the policy feedback perspective, I would expect John to elaborate on the children and families who benefit from the center. John would talk about whether families are deserving of after-school care, frame families along dimensions of social and economic power, and likely discuss whether mothers and fathers fit the popular stereotypes of low-income parents.¹ But he doesn't. Instead John

referenced neighborhood conditions to define the boundaries of the organization's work. His comments pointed to an important question not yet considered in policy feedback research—how the organizations tasked with implementing policy respond to community contexts.

The rise of new public management in social policy has brought about greater decentralization and delegated governance. As a result, policy is increasingly delivered through organizations that serve neighborhoods. These “place-based” organizations have the latitude to deliver policy with community contexts in mind.

Until now, I have discussed how policy shapes the inner workings of these organizations. I have demonstrated how policy influences program activities and the staff's relationships with parents. This chapter shifts focus to the organizational factors that shape policy implementation. I examine how organizational identities shape the way they deliver services to communities and the potential civic and political lessons parents learn from programs.

The organizations in this study develop distinct identities—“who” they are and “what they do”²—that incorporate their role within communities. As John's comments reveal, staff defined the boundaries of each organization's work by community needs. Staff members situate their organizations within these distressed neighborhood contexts and develop narratives that describe the organization's role, viewing organizations as responses to social disorder (loitering, drug dealing, and crime) and physical decay (abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and litter) in neighborhoods.

Organizational Identity

Organizational theorists define “organizational identity” as a shared understanding of the central, enduring, and distinctive features of an organization.³ Whetten further conceptualizes organizational identities into three components—ideational, definitional, and phenomenological.⁴ The ideational component refers to members' shared beliefs on the question, “Who are we as an organization?” The definitional aspect of organizational identity refers to enduring features of the organization that distinguish it from others. Finally, the phenomenological element of organizational identity reflects the identity-related discourse occurring within organizations that clarifies the boundaries of organizational action—what it means for the organization to “act in character.”⁵ Organizational identities can be socially constructed by the organization's leadership and its members as both an expression of the leadership's values and emergent through the interactions and shared discourse of the organization's members.⁶

Organizational identity matters when organizations make decisions that may alter the collective understanding of “who” the organization is and “what” the organization does. Accordingly, management scholars use this concept to understand organizational change, which usually occurs alongside changes in external environments—for example, external stakeholders, institutions, and other organizations.⁷

Policy feedback scholars have not yet explored organizational identities as mediating policy implementation. Scholars broadly describe policy implementation in welfare *bureaucracies*, noting whether programs have centralized or decentralized administration, are rule-oriented or discretion-laden, or have high levels of bureaucratic autonomy at the expense of client agency.⁸ Very few policy feedback analyses delve into organizational identities as a defining feature of welfare bureaucracies or street-level organizations or examine how organizational identities might consider place-based needs.⁹

How organizations define themselves in community contexts can influence the kinds of policies that are created on the ground, shaping whether organizations adopt community-building objectives or narrow service provision aims, whether organizations design programs to “empower” individuals to address neighborhood conditions,¹⁰ and how workers respond to demographic changes in communities.¹¹

This chapter extends these insights to explore how organizations uniquely respond to community contexts when delivering after-school programs. I examine staff members’ shared understanding of each organization’s identity within community contexts with close attention to staff’s self-referencing discourse—how they describe the organization’s role within neighborhoods. Staff members across all three programs arrive at place-based organizational identities, what I call “community roles.” Community roles, while sometimes aligned with program missions, are also distinct from formal program missions and objectives. Indeed, staff across all three programs reinterpreted narrow program objectives to consider neighborhood conditions, framing organizational identities as distinct responses to distressed communities. These place-based identities correspond with the scope of program activities.

Neighborhood Disorder and Organizational Identities

Scholars have long explored physical and social disorder in communities. A rich literature in sociology, criminology, and urban studies draws attention to the “stigma” of neighborhoods and the factors that shape perceived disorder.¹² For example, Wilson and Kelling’s “broken windows” theory suggests that objective cues of disorder such as abandoned property, smashed

windows, and litter lead to urban decay and crime.¹³ Other scholars distinguish perceived social disorder from objective indicators of crime and disorder and characterize neighborhoods as socially constructed and imbued with stereotypes related to race, disorder, and crime.¹⁴

Along these lines, I find that staff views of neighborhood disorder were rooted in the actual dangers and decline of each of these neighborhoods. Table 4.1 compares Westfield and South End to Chicago.

Both Westfield and South End are predominately African American communities that are deeply impoverished with high levels of unemployment. At the time of these interviews, Westfield's per capita income was nearly half of Chicago's and the unemployment rate was nearly double the city's rate. South End also fared poorly when compared to the rest of Chicago. The neighborhood's per capita income was almost \$10,000 less than the city's and the community had a significantly higher unemployment rate.

Violence is especially prevalent in Westfield and South End. At the time of most of these interviews, the homicide rate for Westfield was 38.1 per 100,000 residents—double that of Chicago. South End's homicide rate was 31.1 in comparison to Chicago's 18.6.

Situated in a neighborhood distressed by unemployment and gang violence, John is keenly aware of these realities and his comments at the beginning of this chapter make sense. South End really is a dangerous place for children. His view that the center provided a positive and safe environment for children amid South End's disorder is not surprising; we would expect staff from Jackson and Progress to arrive at the same conclusions about Westfield. What is surprising is that staff at each organization held distinct views of their surrounding neighborhoods. And staff at each organization developed a shared understanding of the organization's identity in light of dis-

Table 4.1. Neighborhood Characteristics

	Westfield	South End	Chicago
Population	20,000	24,000	2,695,598
African American	90%	87%	32.9%
Per Capita Income	\$14,000	\$19,900	\$27,148
Without High School Diploma	26%	18%	20%
Unemployment Rate	17%	17%	11.1%
Below Poverty Line	40%	28%	18.7%
Homicide Rate	38	31	18.6

Source: Data retrieved from the 2010 U.S. Census.

Note: Estimates are approximate to de-identify Westfield and South End.

tressed neighborhood conditions. Staff described “who” the organization is and “what” the organization does in light of “where” they are; they developed narratives about the organization’s role in the neighborhood, and these shaped the scope of program design. Table 4.2 summarizes the valence of staff’s views of neighborhoods, organizational identity, and the scope of program design across the three organizations.

South End’s staff perceived the neighborhood as a threat to the safety of children and families and described the after-school program as a safe haven amid South End’s dangers. This protectionist narrative corresponds with the narrowly targeted activities staff offered to parents and children inside the center.

The after-school staff at Jackson perceived Westfield as a dangerous and hostile environment that pulled students into gangs, drugs, and violence. The after-school program dampened that pull for as long as possible by meeting students’ basic needs and providing enriching after-school instruction. In contrast, the staff at the Progress after-school program viewed the neighborhood as an opportunity for transformation and regarded the program as a catalyst for neighborhood change.

South End After-School Program: A Safe Haven in a Challenged Community

When I asked staff at South End’s after-school program to describe the program, two things became clear. First, staff viewed the South End neighborhood as a dangerous place for children. They emphasized physical and social disorder in the community as a threat to children and families. Second, deteriorating conditions informed how staff perceived the program’s identity within South End. Staff shared an informal narrative, distinct from the

Table 4.2. Neighborhood Valence, Organizational Identity, and Program Design

Organization	Valence	Identity	Program Design
South End	Negative: Threat	Safe Haven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted activities for children and families
Jackson Elementary	Negative: Hostile	Alternative and Stop Gap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted academic and material support for students
Progress	Positive: Potential	Catalyst for Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic support for students, community events, and advocacy

program's mission, that emphasized the threat of danger in South End and the role of the after-school program as a safe haven for children. John's perspective presented in the beginning of this chapter illustrates how most of the staff perceived the community. John began his description of South End by emphasizing its problems. He highlighted incidents of neighborhood violence and then described physical signs of decay such as boarded-up buildings and abandoned blocks:

You have the South End area. . . . Where a couple of months ago a 6-month baby was killed. Things that's, that's down the street from these kids. It's a community that needs some improvements, that needs some buildings not boarded up, needs some people, some, some grass, some, some things that's in place.

John's description shifted from his impressions of neighborhood conditions to his views of South End residents. He contrasted the values and behavior of South End residents with the positive work of the after-school program. Indeed, John distinguished the after-school program from neighborhood residents by labeling residents as "the people outside." For John, the neighborhood was a "challenged community" in part because the "people on the outside" could "care less" about "recreational things," "school," "behavior," and broadly "anything in life":

Well, this is what you call a challenged community. So, you have people on the outside that could care less about recreational things, could care less about school, could care less about behavior, could care less about anything in life. And so, they can be influences to people that's trying to do something, or trying to make something happen, or trying to be encouraging and so forth. And so you have a community that's like that, and then you have kids that's like that, like "Why you go to South End Center? What's the purpose?" and so, it sort of deteriorates what you're trying to do and what you're trying to accomplish, when you don't have a community that's backing it. When you got everybody that's against it.

Other South End after-school staff echoed John's description. The safe haven identity emerged in the way staff described the program's mission; while the formal objective of the after-school program is to

Provide children a safe, stimulating environment after-school where they can develop in a positive manner through age-appropriate activities that include social, physical, creative, and emotional opportunities,

staff reinterpreted this general mission to emphasize the threat of neighborhood violence. South End's program provided a safe haven for neighborhood children so they would not be harmed by the violence of "the streets." For example, Melanie described the program's mission as ensuring "there's a place for the children to go once they out of school . . . so they won't be in the streets, you know, being harmed" because there is "a lot of stuff going around. A lot of killing." Ms. Kayla also held this view and emphasized the threat of violence when describing the program:

It's kind of like a safe haven for kids so they won't be like out on street just doing anything. So I mean, I'm just gonna be real with you. It's a lot of shootings and stuff going around. Kids be fighting each other. We done had fights that had to come in here. We had to break up some stuff, like, I don't know. I live in this community, but it ain't the best community, now. So, it's kind of like a safe haven for the kids.

As a safe haven, the South End after-school program rarely engaged in community work outside of the center. To be sure, no staff member reported community outreach or events. Instead the program reached the community by inviting South End residents to participate in activities inside the center. These activities included "free days"—the center invited the neighborhood residents to use the basketball court and playground—and family nights that gave parents and children opportunities to spend quality time together. Ms. Celeste described family nights in greater detail: "Yeah, we . . . offer family nights . . . sometimes it'll be a family movie night. . . . On some family nights, you bring your family and you come in and we have a game day. And we play all board games." But free days and family nights are the extent of South End's outreach efforts. As a safe haven from the dangers of the South End community, the program does very little outside its walls.

Jackson Elementary: A Preventative Stopgap in a Hostile Neighborhood

In the same way that South End's after-school staff negatively view the surrounding neighborhood, Jackson's staff also described Westfield as a dangerous place. As one teacher remarked, "We love this school, just not what's going on in this community . . . if we could just pick up the school and move it somewhere else." Around the time of the interviews, two events left many staff questioning whether Westfield residents valued the school. Arsonists burned down the school's playground and a turf war between two gangs led to a shooting outside the school's gates.

Some staff expressed concern about how incidents like these affect their

students. William's comments exemplified this perspective. William, the fifth- and sixth-grade English instructor in the after-school program, concluded that Westfield was a "pretty bad" neighborhood by noting its signs of social disorder: loitering, gang affiliations, and drug dealing. He commented, "You know the corners are packed. There's guys standing by the speed humps. So you got to slow down and pass them. You know, they're throwing up gang signs and I see it. I see the drug transactions on the corner sometimes in the morning in broad daylight." Unlike South End's after-school staff, William did not interpret Westfield's social disorder as a threat to children's safety. He was concerned that exposure to Westfield's disorder—drugs, violence, and sex—caused children to grow up too quickly.¹⁵ He remarked, "It's sad that it's so much around these little kids," and he likened his conversations with his sixth-grade students to "talking to adults": "These kids have seen things and know things about life that you wouldn't think a regular sixth grader knows."

Other after-school staff worried most about how Westfield's disorder undermined students' academic progress. Westfield's broader social patterns created complicated "home-life problems" that hindered student success. Ms. Burns explained that disruptive home environments leave students without homework help: "In the past couple of months, we've had a couple of parents arrested, they're fighting each other and kids are just left alone. So who's gonna help them with their homework?" Because of Westfield's deep poverty, students often lack school uniforms, supplies, and meals at home, all of which support students' academic performance. Puzzled by her first graders' lagging academic performance, Ms. Burns discovered why this was so—students lacked meals at home. She explained, "It will come out after a while what really is the underlying problem. Well, they didn't eat dinner last night."

Along with noting students' experiences with poverty, some staff viewed youth as socialized into gangs and violence early on by parents, older siblings, and relatives who modeled destructive lifestyles. Michael, a seventh- and eighth-grade math instructor in the program, held this view. When describing his work in the after-school program, Michael drew parallels between his own upbringing and his students' experiences to describe how "the city" affected families and created environments that negatively influence youth.

A self-proclaimed "product of the city," Michael described Westfield as an environment where poverty, single parenthood, and gang involvement are the norm. Because his single mom worked two jobs, leaving him and his brother unsupervised, Michael was influenced by his uncles, whom he described as "gang bangers" and "drug dealers." He explained how his environment or city life encouraged bad decisions: "I made bad decisions and choices and hung out with the wrong people because I was a product of my environ-

ment; you know what I'm saying? I was repeating the cycle with my family, my uncles who were gang bangers and drug dealers.”

Michael viewed his students in the after-school program as facing similar pressures to join gangs and sell drugs. He hoped to dampen Westfield's pull on students by encouraging his students to view themselves as distinct from the neighborhood's chaotic environment. He explained: “I'm like, you don't have to be a product of your environment. You know, you are responsible for your decisions that you make and the choices that you make and nobody else, regardless of what's around you and who's influencing you.”

Michael's aim to positively influence his students reflected a key aspect of how staff understood Jackson's identity within Westfield. Although the neighborhood encouraged behaviors that reinforced patterns of disorder, the program could act as an alternative to Westfield's violence and gang involvement by counseling students against destructive lifestyles. Ms. Burns's discussion of recent incidents of neighborhood violence demonstrated this role. She explained to her first-grade after-school students that neighborhood violence stemmed from “not having a good education and problem-solving skills and knowing when to walk away.” Ms. Burns further conveyed to her young students that education is the key to better decision-making and assured them that “they don't have to be out doing bad stuff.”

Interestingly, Ms. Burns had another underlying motive in counseling her students—she hoped to protect the school from Westfield's disorder. Ms. Burns hoped that students' pride in the school would encourage residents to “build it up” rather than “tear it down.” She explained, “if these kids are going home and proud of their school and proud of what they have done in it, maybe that'll trickle out and they'll leave Jackson alone. Leave this area alone. Go somewhere else.”

In addition to providing an alternative path to violence, staff viewed the program as supporting student success by meeting their basic needs. Jackson's staff offered no remedies to Westfield's deep poverty but acted as a “stopgap”—meeting students' temporary material needs. Ms. Burns's description of the program's role illustrated this stopgap narrative. The after-school program assured her that students “at least got to go home eating dinner” and “have some time to finish homework”:

So keeping those kids in the after-school program is also important because you knew they at least got to go home eating dinner. And they at least got to have some time to finish some homework or work that they haven't done in the class or to get those extra few minutes of help with one-on-one.

Other staff commented on this stopgap role by describing the program as an extension of the broader supports Jackson elementary offered families. For example, Michael remarked, “we do so much for the parents” and added that the school met students’ needs by feeding “them breakfast, lunch, and dinner Monday through Thursday.” Ms. Pan elaborated on Jackson’s supports for students:

We have the bus cards for those . . . who needed them. We have the t-shirts if they’re—if you’re not able to have uniforms, they give them uniforms. If . . . if you don’t have any school supplies, we have school supplies. You know, socks. Or if they don’t have any socks, we give them to the kids. And we have—during wintertime, we had a coat drive, scarf, hat, mittens for the kids.

The school also opened its food pantry to Jackson parents and Westfield residents every Tuesday and provided a washer and dryer for families to wash clothing.

In rare instances, staff’s descriptions of the program diverged from this stopgap narrative to align with the program’s formal academic mission. In these cases, neighborhood conditions were less central to how some staff understood the role of the after-school program. For example, Cynthia described the key aims of Jackson’s program as supporting students whose standardized test scores were on the margins of proficiency: “The objective that was stipulated to us from administration was to pull those kids—who were on the bubble, like they could go either low or they can go average/high.” These students were recommended for an hour of math tutoring and an hour of reading support—Monday through Friday. Still, most staff incorporated perceptions of how neighborhood disorder affected student success in defining the role of the program.

Progress After-School Program: A Change Catalyst in a Promising Neighborhood

Much like the staff at South End and Jackson Elementary, Progress staff acknowledged the problems of the surrounding neighborhood, describing Westfield as deeply affected by unemployment, drug activity, gangs, and high incarceration rates. However, Progress staff perceived Westfield’s poverty and social disorder as potential for transformation. Anne’s and Lauren’s comments on Westfield provide examples of this perspective. Anne noted that Westfield’s economic decline poised the community for a “resur-

rection.” Lauren shared Anne’s optimism, describing Westfield as a “rising” community “where kids and families love to learn and grow and find new possibilities for themselves and life.”

Other staff at Progress described Westfield residents in a positive light as well, casting residents as hardworking survivalists who faced systemic forces that led to Westfield’s decline. David described families who were “barely making it” in the face of limited job opportunities in Westfield that reinforced the “cycle of poverty.” He explained,

They’re working two or three part-time jobs. There’s not a real end in sight . . . [they ask], “When will my family achieve a measure of financial stability?” It’s like they’re working these jobs and they’re barely making it. You know? And so when that’s the case, it’s really, really, really hard to make the sacrifices that are required to break the cycle of poverty.

Parents are “barely making it” because of broader inequality. Anne, the founder of Progress Community Development Corporation, blamed Westfield’s decline to a complicated combination of racial profiling, oppression, and injustice. These three factors created barriers to employment in Westfield, a pressing concern for residents. She explained, “If I were to go out and ask people today—they would say ‘jobs, we need jobs. We need jobs, we need jobs, there’s a lot of barriers for people to have a stable economic base.’”

She went on to comment on how racial profiling by the police increased incarceration rates and deepened Westfield’s poverty:

Someone said recently seven out of ten African American men in our community have a felony . . . but there’s a lot of profiling of young people in our neighborhood so you know if they’re standing in groups on a corner maybe just having a good time, they could get slapped up against the building, frisked, and sometimes hauled into jail . . . it increases the poverty in the community because once someone has a record it’s harder for them to get a job, they can’t get subsidized housing, if they are in prison, the families are disrupted, the financial base of the families is disrupted.

But the cycle of poverty does not start there. Anne explained that the cycle begins with limited activities for neighborhood youth who end up loitering on corners: “so there’s a sense of if a young person does not have activities and a sense of purpose and direction and if they are not busy with their . . . mean-

ingful pursuits, then they kind of end up on the streets.” Gangs and drug trafficking become survival strategies to cope with deep poverty: “once you are on the corner maybe you’ve got a gang affiliation and might want to make a quick buck because you are living in extreme poverty otherwise and so then the drug trafficking becomes alluring and so we lose these young people.”

Claire’s view of Westfield mirrors Anne’s broader understanding of inequality. She traced the violence in Westfield to unemployment—youth are idle and lack “meaningful work.” She explained to me that “the guys in the corner who are causing this violence are obviously unemployed . . . you know how can we address the unemployment in the community and, you know, get the fellas some meaningful work so that they have a reason to live.”

In light of this systemic inequality, Progress staff viewed the after-school program as a catalyst for neighborhood change. Anne’s forecast of Progress’s impact on Westfield illustrates this catalyst role:

In twenty years, this neighborhood will probably be a lot different than it is now. But I hope that they will see that Progress was a part of a resurrection of a community that experienced a lot of disinvestment; that there’s safe housing and adequate livable housing. I hope that they see that the economy has turned around, that it is a mixed-income, multiracial community, where people care for each other and neighbors are neighbors. And I would hope they would see that Progress was a catalyst for that; that Progress came at a moment into the community and began to partner with the residents who are already in the community to create this future for Westfield that makes it a place where people desire to be.

Some staff described the program’s catalyst role in terms of the scope of services provided. Academic tutoring, literacy instruction, and positive adult mentoring are supposed to equip a cohort of “change agents” to transform Westfield into a “place where success is the norm and families prosper.” Amanda, the director of the kindergarten to eighth-grade after-school program, expressed this view. Progress’s services help youth “become healthy students.” She added, “as they grow up, they have healthy families that can really make a difference in our neighborhood and can really just change those cycles of poverty that we currently see.”

Other staff viewed the change catalyst identity through the lens of faith. Alice shared that transformation occurs as the program works to be the “hands and feet” of Jesus to bring about the “Kingdom of God. I think it’s pretty much to be kind of be the hands and feet quote unquote of Jesus . . .

by offering . . . a place to come alongside people in the 70843 zip code . . . to kind of better bring about the Kingdom of God in Westfield.” Alice viewed community transformation as a part of the church’s larger mission and the gospel message: “I think it’s parallel to the mission and the vision of the church at large just um narrowing its focus to a specific zip code and a specific catchment.” In her view, the after-school program “walks alongside students” in a pipeline from preschool to college.” Through consistent student support, the program hoped to impart critical-thinking skills and the resources needed for self-sufficiency. She hoped students would return as models to other Westfield residents who could not see God’s larger vision for the community.

Keeping with the organization’s identity as catalyst for change, staff described the scope of the program as broader than after-school activities. As Claire remarked, program activities are “a part of transformation” but not all of it because “when you think of the community, there’s so much more work to be done.” Unlike youth workers at South End, who provided safety to children, and the staff at Jackson, who met students’ basic needs, Progress staff members envisioned programs as a way to improve Westfield’s conditions.

Claire shared that to accomplish this transformation objective, staff adopted a “broader macro view of the community,” in which they worked to make the “community a place where people prosper—economically, spiritually, and socially.” The emphasis on community transformation evolved from a narrow focus on students’ safety and academic success. Claire explained that Progress’s current approach involved staff envisioning “what a healthy community is supposed to look like in [Westfield]” and brainstorming about what the program could do to “make sure that a child who’s born in the community can legitimately have a chance at life—a successful chance at life right here in [Westfield].”

Claire also shared that this broader objective redefined the program’s work from targeting individual students to “coordinated efforts” between residents, schools, and social services. Coordinated efforts included community outreach events such as the program’s winter and summer basketball leagues, which led to a reduction in crime in the neighborhood and improvements to the neighborhood park.

Coordinated efforts also took the form of community activism. In the spring of 2013, the after-school program convened local church leaders, Jackson Elementary teachers and administrators, local elected officials, and representatives from the Chicago Police Department for a peace march along the major thoroughfares of Westfield. The march was a preemptive effort to

bring awareness of neighborhood violence and encourage a neighborhood-wide commitment against violence.

Finally, coordinated efforts included hosting community forums to bring long-term residents and local officials together to discuss pressing concerns. In the spring of 2016, the after-school program hosted a community-policing forum in response to a recent wave of neighborhood violence. The program brought together Westfield residents, aldermen, Illinois state representatives, and representatives from the Chicago Police Department to discuss strategies to strengthen communication between police and residents.

Despite Progress's efforts to improve Westfield, Claire viewed advocacy as the program's greatest weakness. Progress had not lobbied legislators for better jobs or actively worked to bring about policy change. Further, Progress had not addressed Westfield's unemployment and limited affordable housing. But at the time of the interview, Claire shared plans of partnering with local businesses to bring jobs to Westfield and collaborating with real estate developers to provide affordable housing for families.

In sum, Progress attributed Westfield's deep poverty and crime to broader systemic issues of economic divestment, unemployment, and oppression. In light of systemic issues, staff defined the after-school program as a catalyst for neighborhood transformation. The program's scope ranged from direct supports to students in the form of tutoring and mentoring to community outreach efforts that incorporated neighborhood residents, community actors, and public officials.

Where Do These Identities Come From?

Staff accounts point to place-based organizational identities; but where do these identities come from? As mentioned earlier, organization theorists and management scholars point to the organization's leadership and its members as constructing organizational identities. Accordingly, organizational identities reflect a combination of the leader's values and members' discourse about the organization's essential features and work.¹⁶

With this in mind, these distinct identities may stem from staff characteristics. Scholars of street-level bureaucracy affirm this point by showing how bureaucrats' social identities influence their approach to service delivery and beneficiaries.¹⁷ Staff characteristics may similarly shape how staff understand community contexts and construct the organization's identity in the neighborhood.

At Jackson, organizational identity was a mix of top-down influence

on the performance and accountability regime of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and staff's understanding of the various challenges posed by Westfield's crime and poverty. The NCLB emphasis on teacher credentials, curriculum and instruction, and student achievement can help explain staff's narrow view of the program's role. With the exception of Michael, who drew from his personal background to describe his role and the program's impact, most staff focused primarily on curriculum goals and their professional credentials. The after-school staff at Jackson Elementary regarded themselves as teachers first. Remedying the broader factors that influenced student success—neighborhood problems and family instability—exceeded the boundaries of staff's professional expertise. Staff members' ability to ensure students' academic success was their chief concern.

For example, Ms. Pan prided herself at being a veteran teacher when we discussed the program. She had "17 years of experience" teaching kindergarten and pre-K students: "I've been teaching for 17 years . . . I taught kindergarten for a long, long time." When describing the purpose of the after-school program, Ms. Pan stressed gains in Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scores, an early literacy skills test: "the goal to make them go up on their reading level and on their DIBELS." She then detailed her strategy to improve DIBELS's scores:

So I went over the list. I went over their DIBELS scores to see—to find out what I needed to teach them, like some of them needed their letter sounds and some were just blending or segmenting. So I had small groups with me. I just grouped those who did certain skills. So sight words too and the other ones who were in the centers doing sight words or blending or reading books.

In the same way Ms. Pan stressed her experience, William cautioned that he was a novice to teaching. He remarked, "I'm pretty new. I started teaching pretty late. . . . I'm just ending my second year of teaching." Despite his relative inexperience, he also described the program and his role in narrow technical terms. William taught fifth- and sixth-grade English language arts in the after-school program and was tasked with improving reading scores.

When describing his role, William focused on improving his students' writing skills. He crafted his lessons plans by drawing from the standards he teaches in class during regular school hours. He explained, "so the way I was doing it, I was supporting the standards I taught in class. . . . If it was a lesson—if it was something brand new I taught that day, I would go back and

reinforce it with the kids.” William then went on to describe how he reinforced writing skills:

You know, I focused a lot on writing. The students struggle a lot with writing, especially the students that I have. Some of them are writing maybe at a second-, third-grade level and they’re in sixth grade. So they’re struggling with basic things like capitalization. They don’t know what a proper noun is; they don’t know what a verb is; adjective. So I was hitting those types of things. Main idea, point of view, stuff like that.

Ms. Cynthia also talked at length about her professional experiences and training. When I asked her to describe what drew her to Jackson, she commented on her desire to teach: “I’ve always wanted to be a teacher.” Cynthia was raised in a large, close-knit family—she served as the “usual babysitter” for the family. Her desire to teach stemmed from tutoring a younger cousin who came to live with her family:

And when she came to live with us, I was the one who went to the parent/teacher conference for her; I was about twenty years old. And at one parent/teacher conference, the teacher said—the first one of the year would say how she was in danger of failing, she’s going to probably fail, she might need it—and she needs a lot of support. Well, that year we worked our butt off and she ended up passing and went to second grade.

Cynthia was inspired by her cousin’s academic progress. After a long stint as a bookkeeper, Cynthia went back to school for a teaching certificate and completed a master’s degree in educational leadership.

Given staff members’ emphasis on their professional motivations, credentials, and experience as teachers, most staff grappled with how Westfield’s poverty and social disorder interfered with their efforts to teach students. For example, William discussed the challenges of teaching after-school students in light of limited parental support. He commented, “I don’t know if the parents are just as lost as the kids or if they’re not helping them at all or what.” He added,

I have kids coming back that are just totally lost. And I asked them, did you sit down with your parents and look at this homework and they tell me no. And I think—we have them for these amount of

hours, there has to be some kind of reinforcement once they leave the door.

William attributed students' lack of home support to parents' instability, noting, "some parents are more stable than others." He used the after-school program to give students "support since they are not getting it so much at home." But he acknowledged the limitations of his efforts: "But I mean, like I said, I can only do so much."

In sum, Jackson's staff couched their ability to do their jobs well within broader contexts such as neighborhood conditions and home life. The supports the program offered—meals, counseling, and material aid—were second to instruction. Indeed, these stopgap supports helped staff meet the academic goal of the program.

At Progress, program leadership strongly influenced the bounds of the program's identity—Claire and David envisioned a program with greater reach beyond student safety, gains in test scores, and student attendance. David's description of the program illustrated this point. He distinguished the program's focus on long-term community transformation from that of other youth programs that work to keep students "safe" and "off the streets." At Progress, staff aimed to "see kids create their own community where success becomes the norm and families prosper. That's a long-range vision." Anything short of this broader objective is "short-sighted":

Most youth programs that I'm aware of are, in urban areas and in particular in Chicago, are trying to figure out how to keep kids safe from the violence of the streets. And that's noble, but keeping kids alive longer to suffer in their poverty that they're growing up in, economic poverty, to always have to look over their shoulder because their community thirty years from now is the same that it is now is just like, to me is just too short-sighted.

For David, the program was "not just trying to help them read" or "trying to help them stay safe" and "off the streets." He regarded these aims as "not acceptable if you're trying to turn a community around." Claire and David frequently communicated this change catalyst identity to staff in meetings.

For Progress, the leaders' identities as practicing Christians also informed the organization's focus on community transformation. David's focus on long-term community transformation stemmed from the influence of mentors and the philosophies of a Christian association of urban social service providers who integrated theology, biblical narratives, and community de-

velopment. The association aimed to train Christians to advance the Kingdom of God by restoring distressed neighborhoods. Annual conferences, quarterly training sessions, and materials encouraged staff to perceive neighborhoods as objects of spiritual transformation and revival. Progress was a flagship organization within this association and received resources and guidance about best practices for communities such as Westfield.

Claire and David hired staff members who shared similar faith backgrounds and views on community building. David described his staff as having an “overwhelming commitment” to the program and as viewing their roles in Westfield and at Progress as a “calling or passion.” Staff members’ perspectives demonstrate this point. Most staff members cited their Christian faith as motivating their work at Progress and viewed working in a low-income neighborhood as a way to live out their faith. Lauren described the staff as feeling “a calling of sorts to follow their faith.” She added, “it’s very important to [staff] to live out their faith through . . . their interactions in the community with their job and where they work.” As a result, staff were “dedicated and passionate” and “really serious about seeing people’s lives change.”

Derrick, a fourth-grade teacher, joined the Progress staff because he “always had a passion for people” and wanted to “show Christ” by loving people and building relationships. Others, such as Alice, viewed their work in Westfield as exemplifying the gospel message and principles of serving the “downtrodden” and the “orphan or the widow.” She explained:

I reflected upon the gospel message and what I understand to be the ways in which to follow the life of Christ as well as an understanding of what’s important to him. And finding a place in which I could bring resources to the under-resourced and learn from and explore the Kingdom of God with those who might be seen as the quote on quote downtrodden or the orphan or the widow.

Along with distinct, faith-based motivations, Progress staff were also skilled and experienced. In David’s words, “they’re not just passionate. They’re also smart and trained and getting more trained, in an ongoing way.” Most staff had previous experience working in low-income, inner-city communities—through either previous employment or college internships. All of the staff reported previous experiences working with disadvantaged youth in after-school programs, youth mentoring programs, or homeless shelters. Most staff members ($n = 9$) held degrees in education, child development, non-profit management, or related fields. At the time of the interview, three staff

members were pursuing graduate-level degrees in education leadership and nonprofit management.

Taken together, the organization's identity as a change catalyst stemmed from David and Claire's unique vision for the program and staff's related faith-based motivations and professional experiences. As organization scholars suggest, David and Claire as founders and leaders conveyed a coherent organizational identity and hired staff members with the motivation and experience that supported this change catalyst role.

For South End, the program's identity emerged from staff members' experiences as employees, long-term residents of the South End community, and former students. The safe haven identity is distinct from the identity of its umbrella organization, the South End Community Center, which encourages community building by emphasizing "stronger" and "vibrant" communities. However, South End's after-school staff did not expand the scope of programming to match this focus. As shown in chapter 2, Celeste had the discretion to create activities unencumbered by institutional hurdles or demands of funders, but she chose not to. Collectively, she and her staff viewed the program as a protective safe haven that was very much reflected in the narrowly targeted programs.

The after-school staff at South End rarely referred to any formal training or educational experiences when describing the program. Only two of the seven workers interviewed held a college degree. And, at the time of the interviews, few staff members were pursuing degrees or training in fields related to child development or childcare.

Although staff lacked formal training, most had long-term experiences at the center and lifelong experiences in South End. Five of the seven staff members interviewed—including the program's director—"grew up" at the center and took on part-time jobs in the summer programs in high school. This summer work led to part-time employment during the school year. When I asked Zach to explain how he took on his position at South End, he remarked, "well I actually grew up here at the center." Zach went on to describe his personal history with South End's program:

I started coming here when I was like six and been around since now.
I started working here my junior year in high school, like in '07, '08.
So it was like, the center been a part of my life, like all my life. Yeah.
Been around for a long time.

Ms. Celeste, the program's director, had a similar story. She attended high school down the street from the center. Once she graduated, she stopped by

the center and applied for a job as a youth worker in the summer program. She has been working at the center ever since. Celeste never attended college; she advanced through the organization over the years. She explained:

I've been here with the center, it'll be coming up to fifteen years on, in June . . . I came in one summer, just stopped in soon as I finished high school, and I was like, um, "Are you all hiring?" They're like, "Yeah." And, you know, I did some training and I was working in the next week or so. So, yep . . . I just pretty much worked my way up.

Staff referred to their own experiences as residents of South End, employees of the after-school program, and former students. Two of the seven staff members adhered to the program's formal mission when describing the role of the after-school program. In contrast, most leaned on their experiences as neighborhood residents and former students of the program. For example, Zach's view of the program as keeping students safe from the streets stemmed from his own experiences with violence as a resident and as a student who benefited from the program. John's understanding of the program stemmed from what he had seen and experienced in the South End neighborhood.

In sum, staff members' background as lifelong residents and former students filtered the way they viewed the community and the role of the center. Deeply acquainted with South End's dangers and the center as a resource, South End staff constructed a "safe-haven" identity to describe the program's role in the neighborhood.

Place, Organizational Identities, and Program Design

This chapter opened with John's striking reflections about the role of South End's after-school program. His remarks demonstrated a novel insight that has not been explored by scholars of policy feedback—namely how organizations deliver services with neighborhood contexts in mind. Staff across these programs held unique perspectives about the neighborhoods they served that formed the basis of how they interpreted each program's identity, and—in many ways—the scope of program design.

The staff at South End and Jackson viewed their surrounding neighborhoods as dangerous, chaotic contexts but differed in how they viewed the program's role. South End staff viewed the surrounding neighborhood as a threat to the safety of children and families. As a result, staff viewed the program as a safe haven for neighborhood children. Jackson Elementary after-

school staff viewed Westfield as a negative influence on students' development. Westfield was perceived as exposing young children to lifestyles that perpetuated social disorder in the neighborhood. And Westfield's deep poverty left many students without basic needs for student success—meals, school supplies, and homework help. Consequently, staff members' narratives about the organization's role emphasized how the program met students' basic needs and dampened the pull of gang, drugs, and violence.

For staff at Progress, Westfield's deteriorating conditions were not the fault of residents. External factors including economic divestment, racism, and oppression brought about Westfield's decline. But Westfield's disorder was not insurmountable—staff perceived deteriorating conditions as an opportunity for transformation. Staff incorporated Christian narratives of redemption and resurrection to describe the program's services as a change catalyst in Westfield. Community transformation was imperative to the program's success—students could not succeed without a safe and healthy neighborhood. Those who did succeed would not return to Westfield unless the community was a safe and productive neighborhood. Staff surmised that achieving neighborhood change required individual-level supports for students *and* broader community activities that targeted the Westfield neighborhood.

Place-based organizational identities introduce a new way to understand program design in policy feedback studies. Scholars previously tied the constructed valence and power of policy targets to the burdens of accessing benefits, the generosity of benefits, and the political vulnerability of policies. But the evidence presented here suggests place-based identities can influence program design. This analysis demonstrates that organizations are not passive mediators of policy—they have their own unique identities that are shaped by the contexts in which they work. How staff perceived their organization's identity in light of surrounding neighborhood contexts informed the programs that clients and communities experienced. The next chapter illustrates how all three features of program design—empowering relationships, participatory roles, and the scope of programs—work together to influence parents civic and political activity.

5 • Policy, Organizations, Places, and Participation among the Poor

Scholars have long explored the determinants of political participation and have concluded that citizens do not participate “because they can’t, because they don’t want to, or because nobody asked.”¹ Citizens forgo participation because the costs of participating are too high. They lack the time, money, and civic skills—the “communication and organizational capacities that are so essential to political activity.”² Some citizens may not participate because they are not interested in politics—they do not follow politics, view the government as out of touch, have little stake in who wins or loses, or lack information about issues and how the government works.³ Others are outside social networks that lead to recruitment into political participation.⁴

All three “participatory factors”⁵ emerge from involvement in nonpolitical organizations (e.g., civic associations, churches), family background, and personal characteristics.⁶ As discussed in previous chapters, public policy can shape participation too by sending important messages about the government and politics that can motivate or deter political participation.⁷ Public policies can also provide resources and material incentives for participation (beneficiaries may become active on political issues to protect or to expand benefits) or provide benefits that cultivate civic skills.⁸ Finally, a policy can have recruitment effects, drawing citizens into political activities.⁹

As the previous chapter showed, policies are not implemented in a vacuum. They are delivered through organizations that serve communities. These communities can influence political interests, participatory resources, and recruitment networks. Soss and Jacobs (2009) contend that neighborhoods structure political interest and participatory opportunities. They describe political participation as a social act that “emerges from an ecology of social relations that is . . . local in nature.”¹⁰ For low-income citizens, neighborhoods reinforce resource deficits that undermine participation: inner-city neighborhoods lack the organizations and social networks that facilitate participation,

and deteriorating conditions and residential instability undermine political and collective efficacy.¹¹ Taken together, distressed neighborhoods make political engagement inaccessible and unlikely for the disadvantaged.

For the parents discussed in this book, these three factors—resources, motivation, and recruitment—are formidable barriers to participation. As recipients of means-tested programs, they are likely underrepresented in every political activity¹² in part because of unfavorable views of government responsiveness¹³ and doubts about their own capacity to participate. For many, the costs of participation are too high and recruitment networks are out of reach.¹⁴ The low-income parents in this book lack resources such as time, money, and civic skills to participate. What’s more, they are rarely asked to get involved.¹⁵

As table 5.1 shows, participatory resources in the form of income, education, and civic skills are scarce among Jackson, Progress, and South End parents. These parents in my sample had little education beyond a high school diploma, which constrains access to skill-building opportunities that accompany high-skilled work.¹⁶ With large families (three children on average), an average annual household income of less than \$30,000, and a heavy reliance on public assistance (e.g., food stamps; Medicaid; Women, Infants, and Children, Section 8; and other means-tested programs), parents in my sample were unlikely to contribute money to electoral campaigns or issue-based causes. And very few parents reported skill-building opportunities in church contexts.¹⁷ Church involvement was sporadic and parents who were regular church attendees did not actively serve on committees or participate in church-related activities.¹⁸

Table 5.1. Parent Characteristics

	Progress Youth Development Corp (<i>n</i> = 15)	South End Community Center (<i>n</i> = 15)	Jackson Elementary (<i>n</i> = 17)
Mean Age	33	30	33
Race	100% African American	100% African American	100% African American
Marital Status ^a	60% single	71% single	100% single
Number of Children (mean)	4	3	3
Age of Children (mean)	12	9	9
Education Level	13.8	14.5	11.3
Income	\$26,000	\$28,000	\$8,000
Public Assistance	86%	86%	80%

^a“Single” refers to both never married and divorced households.

Furthermore, the parents interviewed resided in the two most dangerous and impoverished communities in Chicago, neighborhoods that lacked the civic associations and organizations that could encourage participation. Moreover, parent interviews suggested that they derived their political efficacy beliefs—beliefs about whether the government would respond to people like them and whether they had the capacity to understand and contribute to politics—from the quality of life in their neighborhoods.

Parents' criteria for good, responsive government were locally based and narrowly defined. Most parents described their neighborhoods as central to family life; neighborhoods determined which schools their children could attend and whether loitering, gang violence, and neglected parks threatened their children's safety. Neighborhoods also determined whether day camps, basketball leagues, and other recreational activities could occupy their children after school, on weekends, or during the summer. Parents' external efficacy beliefs depended on how well the "government" ensured these things.

Remarks from Jackie, a South End parent, illustrated this perspective. When I first asked her whether the government cared about people like her, she quipped, "No!" In my follow-up question, I asked how the government could demonstrate care. Jackie immediately listed government actions that addressed physical disorder in her neighborhood:

Clean up the neighborhoods . . . when something looks good it makes the people in it feel good. When something looks bad and depressing it makes the people in it feel bad and depressed, right? So, I mean, all of those empty lots that are, you know, with trash in it. It's one thing to like pick up the trash, but then to not mow the lawn or keep the lawn up or even put a fence around it so people don't just go through the lot, or whatever. Or just make it look better. You know, fix the viaducts. Fix the streets down certain blocks. Shovel the snow down certain blocks.

In many cases, deteriorating conditions diminished parents' views of their own political efficacy. Parents were reluctant to participate because they did not think they could "make a difference." Marion's comments regarding her neighborhood and political participation illustrate this perspective. Marion—a Jackson parent—shared that she no longer voted in any election because Westfield was not a safe place to live. I probed further for things the government could do to change her mind. "Keeping everybody safe" was her chief concern:

Make our kids safe in going to school. Make it safe for our kids to get to school. When our kids leave home, they outside of school. They should be safe coming to school, much less leaving school or being in school. . . . Keeping the parents, everybody safe. I want to see everybody safe. I want to be able to walk out my house and be safe and go here or let my kids go to the park instead of saying I want to move from where I've been all my life and move somewhere.

Marion was concerned about her children's safety when going to and from school because the police rarely patrolled the neighborhood and the school lacked a "safe passage" attendant or a crossing guard for students. At one time, Marion was involved in Westfield's block club. But in light of the wave of violence in the past year, she stopped attending meetings for fear of being "out and about" in the neighborhood. She explained, "I don't think I'm going to be involved. I'm not, no. . . . I'll just stay away."

From these accounts, the parents interviewed were the least likely to participate. They lived in distressed neighborhood contexts; they expressed serious doubts about government responsiveness and their own ability to make a difference, had very few resources, and were far removed from political recruitment networks.

Yet parents across these programs varied in political efficacy, capacity, and participation. These differences corresponded to program participation. Table 5.2 displays parent efficacy, capacity-building opportunities, and place-based participation. As the "Place-based Efficacy" column of the table illustrates, parents differed considerably in their political efficacy views. At

Table 5.2. Parent Participation Outcomes

	Place-based Efficacy	Political Capacity	Place-based Participation
Jackson	Low Doubt social change Low political efficacy	Moderate Skill building	Low Low involvement
Progress	High Hopeful about social change High political efficacy	High Skill building	High Recruitment High involvement
South End	Low Doubt social change Low political efficacy	Low No skill building	Low No recruitment Low involvement

Jackson and South End, most parents expressed doubts about the feasibility of change in Westfield and government's willingness to respond to their interests and concerns. In contrast, many of the Progress parents expressed hope and optimism about neighborhood change and confidence that they could take part in community projects to improve Westfield.

Concerning political capacity, only a select few respondents at Jackson reported practicing civic skills through community involvement, participation in other organizations, or the after-school program. South End parents seldom mentioned civic skill-building opportunities. At Progress, nearly half the parents shared that they had gained these skills through their involvement in the after-school program.

Parents also varied in whether they engaged in local forms of political participation (e.g., contacting local elected officials, voting in local elections, or engaging in community work). Progress parents reported the highest level of participation, while Jackson and South End parents rarely took part in local civic and political acts.

How Do These Programs Shape Parents' Participation?

Parent and staff interviews suggest that differences in program design across these programs can account for parents' varied willingness and capacity to participate. These after-school programs taught parents important lessons about government and politics that influenced their political efficacy beliefs and, in some cases, created opportunities for participation and facilitated access to political elites.

First, Jackson, Progress, and South End were viewed as institutions that could improve their neighborhoods—a salient aspect of how parents formed their political efficacy beliefs. As a result, what each program did for the neighborhood conveyed important messages about the feasibility of neighborhood change and the responsiveness of public officials. In other words, parents took note of each program's reach in the community. And many parents observed these organizations' impact on neighborhood disorder to assess whether change was possible in their neighborhood and how change could occur.

In some instances, parents' experiences with programs also strengthened their interest in local forms of participation and positive beliefs about their ability to make a difference. By being involved, parents could see how their decisions led to positive outcomes, whether their efforts led to changes in the after-school program or changes in their neighborhood. In addition, pro-

grams also provided a sense of identity for parents—especially when parents shifted from being consumers of after-school care to becoming members of the organization through parental involvement.

Second, the after-school programs provided resources for participation through parent involvement roles. Staff leveraged their relationships with parents to recruit ideal candidates for parent volunteer, leadership, and employment roles. Through these opportunities, parents participated in decision-making, organized the activities of other parents and students, and delivered speeches and presentations—important skills that are useful for civic and political engagement.

Finally, these organizations were embedded in social and political networks that gave parents access to political elites and created opportunities for participation. Parents were introduced to elected officials through programs or invited to participate in local forms of political activity.

The extent to which each organization conveyed positive interpretive cues about politics, shored up parent resources, or recruited parents into political activity depended on program design. Here, policy guidelines (see chapter 2) and organizational identities (see chapter 4) work together to create programs that can either attenuate or encourage participation. Policy guidelines determined whether parental involvement roles were available to parents, and the organization's identity within each neighborhood shaped the scope of program design. This chapter describes how these programs shaped participation outcomes in greater detail.

Place-Based Interpretive Effects: Cues about Local Participation

One important way public policy can inform political participation is by conveying information and meaning.¹⁹ Policies can send cues that help groups “develop political identities, goals, and strategies.”²⁰ At the individual level, interactions with the state can teach citizens important lessons about their value as citizens, which in turn influences their willingness to participate.²¹

As small place-based organizations, Jackson, Progress, and South End are empowered by policy to send messages about communities—an important part of how parents' derive political efficacy beliefs—and model worthwhile strategies that bring about neighborhood change.

These place-based cues depend on the scope of program design. How each organization defined its identity within its community could convey powerful messages that shaped parents' willingness to participate. While

parents expressed strong views about their neighborhoods, the government, and politics, these views were not rigid. Parents looked to these organizations to model strategies for community change.²² Parents chose to participate in civic and political life in part by assessing the work these programs did in their neighborhood. Parents who experienced organizations with a narrow insular focus, like Jackson and South End, expressed ambivalence and low political efficacy. In contrast, Parents who experienced Progress's emphasis on community change and observed the program's broader community impact expressed hope, optimism, and stronger efficacy beliefs about community change and local forms of political participation.

Jackson Elementary: Ambivalence and Withdrawal

Most of the Jackson parents I interviewed ($n = 15$, 88 percent) reported low external efficacy beliefs, deep cynicism about the government and elected officials, and political apathy. Poor neighborhood conditions deterred participation among Jackson's parents and many viewed voting or attending community meetings as useless because public officials seldom responded.

When asked to describe how Jackson's after-school program informed these views, many parents expressed ambivalence about the program's role in the neighborhood. On the one hand, parents viewed the program as a safe haven for their children. For example, Veronica, a mother of three, shared this perspective. She moved to Westfield to escape gang violence on the North Side. But during her seven years in Westfield, violence remained a constant threat to her family. As a result, Veronica did not allow her children to play "out in the front" to keep them safe—a rule her children "hated."

Given the violence in Westfield, she was thankful for Jackson's after-school program because it provided safety for her children and improved their grades:

I am thankful for it because I'd rather them be doing those type of things versus being outside. I mean, I know the kids they want to go outside. But when they go out, I have to take them somewhere else. I'm thankful for the program for being available to them. Because it keeps them safe.

For other parents, providing safety was not enough; the program had "nothing to do with the neighborhood"; the school and its programs were detached from Westfield and its problems. Moreover, the program had yet to address neighborhood violence. Connie's and Tina's remarks about Jackson's

after-school program reflected this perspective. When I asked how Jackson's program shaped their views about Westfield, both quickly noted that "the program . . . it ain't got nothing to do with the neighborhood," given its narrow scope. Connie remarked that the program helped her son, but Tina commented that this individual help did not address broader neighborhood violence—the program was "helping the kids in the school. It ain't helping the kids get off the block outside."

New to Westfield, Sarah also commented on the program's limited influence in Westfield. After moving to Chicago from St. Louis, she enrolled her first grader and eighth grader in the after-school program. Her reflections on the neighborhood and Jackson's place in Westfield mirrored the ambivalence of Jackson's teachers. Sarah commented, "I like the school; I just don't like the neighborhood." The school supported neighborhood children but could not change the uptick in neighborhood violence. She concluded this because the school was unable to protect itself from arson: "someone burned up the playground just two weeks ago. So I don't think they would change anything, to be honest."

Nearly all of the parents of after-school students at Jackson Elementary expressed intentions to move away from Westfield. And neither the school nor its after-school program could keep them in the neighborhood. Many parents viewed the program as "keeping kids out of trouble" but fell short in addressing Westfield's broader issues—violence and crime among youth who were not enrolled.

Progress Parents: Hope and Community Involvement

In contrast to Jackson's limited reach, the Progress after-school program conveyed the feasibility of change through its broader neighborhood focus. While parents acknowledged the dangers of gang violence and drugs in the neighborhood, they also noted the potential for change in Westfield. As Progress parents saw positive changes in the neighborhood, they became hopeful and invested in Westfield. For instance, Brandy commented on how the changes in Westfield gave her hope for the children in the neighborhood. She explained,

I mean don't get me wrong. Westfield has its issues but to see the impact that Progress alone has on this community. . . . I look at some of the children who just kind of hang out in the streets or the ones who dropped out of school. I see them and then you know on one hand I'm like wow like feeling kind of hopeless for them but then Progress

does this basketball tournament every summer and so the streets are empty because the boys are going to play basketball. So I see how Progress is centered right here but in this radius of this community they're having an impact and so to me it says that it may look this way right now but there's still hope.

Cheryl, a single mother of three and a part-time Progress employee, expressed similar hopes about the neighborhood. Her program experiences gave her confidence that the neighborhood could overcome violence and crime. She emphasized the sacrifices of Progress staff to "raise up" the residents of Westfield and hoped that staff would positively influence neighborhood residents to "care about themselves" and the community at large:

[Progress] gives me hope that as a community we can overcome this, this gang culture, this drug culture, and this, this homicide rate. It lets me know that there are people that move their families in this neighborhood when they don't have to. Clearly, they don't have to be here, but they care enough to try to raise us up. So, [I'm] hoping it'll rub off on somebody and hoping they'll learn to care about themselves, and help these people out that's trying to help them.

Just as Progress staff viewed the organization as a catalyst for neighborhood transformation, parents viewed the organization as a source of change in Westfield. Parents observed the changes in the community that stemmed from Progress, adopted the organization's mission of community transformation, and integrated this message into how they viewed their neighborhood.

South End Parents: Despair, Withdrawal, and Retreat

At South End, many parents expressed a pessimistic view of the neighborhood and cited violent crime as its biggest drawback. Gentrification efforts by organizations, universities, and businesses marginally improved neighborhood conditions. However, many South End parents still considered the neighborhood dangerous and unsafe for children. Tina moved out of the community years ago because of crime despite having strong ties to the neighborhood. She grew up in South End and attended high school near the center. For her the neighborhood had not changed much; it was still "hardcore":

Yeah, I lived on 64th and Evergreen. And the neighborhood really hasn't changed since I was in grammar school. It's still a hardcore neighborhood. And, I'm just not comfortable like, [my children] just being outside riding their bike. It would never happen.

Other South End parents noted gradual changes in the neighborhood but viewed it as not changing fast enough. For example, Christine—a South End native—shared when she compared the neighborhood of her youth to South End's current conditions:

The neighborhood is changing. Not as fast as I would like it to be, but the neighborhood is changing. . . . When I was growing up, you know, I mean, there's still violence and different crimes going on. I think, um, I think it's getting better. Like I said, it's not getting better as fast as I would like it to, but it's starting to change.

The organization's limited influence on neighborhood conditions only reinforced parents' pessimism. For some South End parents, the after-school program represented the scarcity of youth-enriching activities in a dangerous neighborhood.²³ Simply stated, many parents wanted to leave the neighborhood because it had little to offer their children. Further, the after-school program's limited efforts to improve South End's conditions only reinforced parents' negative views of the neighborhood and the prospect of change. Sharon's comments about the center and the neighborhood illustrated how scarcity and poor neighborhood conditions colored her perception of the South End community. In her evaluation of the center and the neighborhood, Sharon remarked,

[The center] really hasn't changed the way I feel about the neighborhood because to me it's still the same. They . . . don't have any type of special activities for children . . . there's no activities in the neighborhood for kids. Like the Park District, they don't, they don't even open Park District hours now. So it's best, the best thing you can get and hope for, is this center or some type of program where they help out in the community, but there are none.

The center's programs haven't changed her pessimistic view of South End because the neighborhood's problems have persisted. Furthermore, scarce activities for neighborhood children amplified her frustration as a parent

and her disappointment with her neighborhood. The center's limited involvement in the South End community made Sharon want to leave, she explained:

[The center] makes me want to move. . . . Yeah, cause it's just, I mean even before then I wanted to move because it's just so violent over there. It's like I cannot let my kids ride they bikes up and down the street without nobody getting shot or anything. Nothing changed. . . . Well, I mean, I just wish our neighborhood was different because, like at this time it's kind of, I don't want my sons to grow up around there. But at, you know, at the same time, it's like, you know, I'm not making enough for us to move. I know nowhere is safer, but you know, it's kind of, real dangerous around in our neighborhood.

Other parents had similar concerns about the safety of the neighborhood but held more nuanced perspectives on the center's role in South End. Some parents' views mirrored staff perspectives. For example, Tiffani described the center as creating safety within the community but this safety was limited to the activities offered inside the center. The center played a limited role in making the South End neighborhood safe. Tiffani did not allow her children to ride their bikes outside, but she regarded the center as "inside," away from the dangers of the neighborhood: "We're inside. You know. Um, they go . . . and play in the park here."

In sum, the South End program's role as a "safe haven" with limited community reach negatively colored parents' perceptions of their neighborhood. South End parents seldom viewed the center as bringing about community change, but rather as one of the few remaining resources for residents coping with persistent violence.

Recruitment into Parent Involvement

As chapter 3 demonstrated, parents in these after-school programs have the agency to choose how to interact with staff—a sharp contrast from studies that describe low-income citizens as relatively powerless and alienated from the state. Staff and parent interviews reveal that these choices have real consequences for how parents experience these programs. They determined whether parents encountered a socially supportive bureaucratic program or a participatory program.

For those who chose to limit their interactions to brief exchanges, the

program was very much a bureaucratic rule-oriented program characteristic of other social programs discussed in the policy feedback literature (Social Security Disability Insurance, Social Security, the GI Bill). And—absent caseworkers who used their discretion to determine access—rules and procedures safeguarded parents' access to these after-school programs.

Among active parents, the choice to pursue personal interactions with staff was most crucial. Only parents who had close relationships with staff members were given participatory roles. Staff often decided who could participate and tapped parents who they viewed as interested in parent involvement roles and capable of participating.²⁴

Staff's recruitment process helped explain why only a select group of parents participated in parent involvement roles. For example, Jackson seemed to offer the most participatory program experiences on paper. As a Title I school, Jackson offers parents the chance to serve on the school's parent advisory council and volunteer opportunities. Yet parents reported very little or infrequent parental involvement because staff were either reluctant to offer parents school-wide participatory roles or did not offer parent involvement opportunities in the after-school program. Those who did report involvement were primarily recruited through their relationships with staff members. Program staff had an informal criterion to recruit parents for participatory roles and used their personal relationships to identify ideal candidates.

This recruitment process played out in counterintuitive ways at Jackson. Rather than recruiting ideal parents into formal roles prescribed by Title I policies, staff avoided providing parental involvement opportunities to parents all together. Staff were reluctant to offer parents opportunities to serve in school-wide participatory roles and rarely encouraged parents to become involved in the after-school program. Many of the staff assumed that because parents rarely responded to staff's efforts to communicate on a regular basis, they would be unwilling to take on greater responsibilities. As Michael, a seventh- and eighth-grade math instructor, commented, "you can talk to the parent, text a parent, but to get them involved is completely different."

Ms. Burns, the director of the after-school program, drew similar conclusions about parents. At the time of the interviews, Ms. Burns had not "opened the program up" to parents because she questioned their commitment and interest in volunteering. She explained that she would only create volunteer opportunities for parents if they had the ideal characteristics for these roles—reliability and focus. Ms. Burns valued reliability because she could not spare time away from instruction and classroom management to train parent volunteers. She explained, "the worst thing is to have somebody who comes once every month. Then I have to re-explain everything," which "takes away"

from program activities. Ms. Burns also expected parents to contribute to the program; she remarked that parents should “be here to help, not to socialize.” To gauge interest, commitment, and skills, Ms. Burns needed to know the parent and how well she would interact with students.²⁵

Be here to help, not socialize with—walking around the building doing whatever kind of other things. If you’re going to be in that room to help, literally help and the ways to help. Every parent isn’t going to be 100 percent scholar in sixth-grade math, but what could you give them as a teacher to help with a group of students? So knowing that parent and knowing which kids would want to work with them and why.

Parent interviews at Jackson confirmed Ms. Burns’s selective criteria; most parents reported that they were unaware of the volunteer and leadership opportunities and had not been asked to participate. Furthermore, very few of these parents reported relationships with Ms. Burns that would lead to participatory roles.

However, there were exceptions. Five parents reported involvement in the after-school program and these opportunities stemmed from their own initiative and staff’s discretion to create volunteer roles. Anita’s experience best illustrates this process. While Anita was originally from a neighboring West Side community, she lived in Atlanta, Georgia, for several years prior to her return to Chicago. In Atlanta, her children attended an elementary school that required parental involvement, and when Anita returned to Chicago she was prepared to get involved at Jackson’s after-school program in similar ways. She approached Jackson’s former principal about volunteering:

I just asked Mr. Davis. I was like, oh, hello. I just want to introduce myself and I’m Anita and my kids are in your class. And he said, oh, well, nice to meet you. He’s like, parents never introduce themselves to me. And I was like, oh, really? So I had a question—where do we sign up to volunteer? He said, oh, you want to volunteer. I thought it was mandatory. He’s like, oh, no one ever volunteers . . . we usually have to beg the parents to come. I was like, oh, I’m across the street. I wouldn’t mind coming over. So it’s like, okay.

Mr. Davis welcomed her enthusiasm and Anita started volunteering in the pre-K and kindergarten after-school program. Throughout her time as a volunteer, her relationships with Mr. Davis and Jackson staff deepened to the

point where she felt comfortable sharing her concerns about the quality of instruction and offering ideas to keep children engaged. Mr. Davis gave Anita the freedom to do additional activities to meet students' learning needs and his encouragement led to more responsibility. She began to monitor parent pickup for the preschool and kindergarten after-school students and offered classroom support for after-school teachers. Anita's relationships with staff members and her own initiative were crucial to her pathway to involvement.

Progress staff members also used their relationships with parents to recruit for parent involvement roles. Progress staff used an informal set of criteria called "committed parents" to identify ideal candidates. Committed parents had a personal rapport with staff members and demonstrated a commitment to the program's mission.

Brandy's and Rita's distinct experiences at Progress demonstrate how relationships with staff members and staff discretion work to create or limit parent involvement opportunities. Brandy often stopped by to "shoot the breeze" and bonded with staff over the challenges of parenting. Because of her rapport-building efforts, Brandy made what she described as "lifelong" friendships with Progress staff. However, her relationships with staff members did not guarantee her access to parental involvement roles. Brandy served on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and occasionally volunteered during program hours because staff members asked her to participate. Brandy was invited to serve on the PAC and her role on the council led to other volunteer opportunities:

I was elated that they asked me to be a part of this committee. So now that we are an official committee of the Progress Youth program they ask that you volunteer more. . . . So now the people who volunteer at the welcome center is the parent advisory committee. So we take turns throughout the week um sitting at the desk.

In contrast, Rita's rapport with several staff members did not lead to deeper levels of involvement. She seldom volunteered and did not participate in leadership roles. Her lack of involvement was not due to disinterest—Rita was not asked to participate. When I asked whether she volunteered or served on the parent advisory board, Rita noted that staff had not asked her to participate and added, "I wish they would. I guess, maybe because I haven't really stepped out and made my voice heard. I mean, Progress knows, and Anne knows me. I need to do something, you know. But I really, really want to." Program observations revealed that despite staff's willingness to provide material assistance to Rita's family, they viewed Rita as inconsistent in pick-

ing up her children and difficult to reach. As a result, the staff concluded that Rita had not demonstrated the kind of commitment required for greater involvement in the program.

South End parents were not actively involved in programs beyond providing general feedback through an annual survey and a suggestion box. Even with limited parental involvement opportunities, Celeste acts as a gatekeeper to greater parental involvement in her reluctance to create participatory roles. Through her relationships with staff, Celeste surmised that parents were disinterested and too busy to get involved. As a result, she did incorporate parents more deeply into service delivery. She explained, “my parents do so much work and they try to be, just try to really be in and out.” However, her perceptions of parents might underestimate their interest in parental involvement roles. Nearly half of the parents interviewed expressed interest in working with children as a way to give back to their community,²⁶ but most were simply unaware of opportunities.²⁷ Thus parents might have become more involved in the program if Celeste had created opportunities and asked parents to participate.

Strengthening Efficacy through Parental Involvement

In some instances, parents’ experiences in these after-school programs cultivated forms of political engagement or interest in politics, political efficacy, and group consciousness.²⁸ This theme was most frequent at Progress, where the organization’s identity centered on improving neighborhood conditions and parental involvement was most extensive.

At Progress, parents described how the program changed the way they viewed Westfield and motivated them to become more active in the community. Similar to Hahn’s concept of agency and identity, program participation allowed parents to see the consequences of their actions in ways that reinforced positive feelings about participation. The program also provided membership and belonging to a group that aimed to bring about community change.²⁹

For others, the organization had both an identity and a “modeling” effect on parents’ willingness to become active—even among parents who played less active roles within the program. For instance, Rita commented on her close-knit ties with Progress and regarded staff members and other parents as family. In a narrow sense, the program shored up her views of herself as a mother; it motivated her to give more to her children. She explained,

I can say that [the program] encouraged me to be a better mother. To spend more time, spend more, you know, quality time . . . and that

gives me, you know, the encouragement to do more, you know, with my children.

More broadly, the program inspired her to give back to the community. Because staff “poured” into her, Rita wanted to contribute in-kind to others. Much like the veterans in Mettler’s 2003 study of the GI Bill, Rita’s positive, supportive program experiences motivated her to get involved beyond*Progress:

It just really encourages me to help others, to help others because I see Progress reaching out and pouring into my life and then it gives me the opportunity to do and do and pour into other people’s lives whichever way I can. So, it just makes me want to get them more involved, you know more involved in other things beyond Progress.

Other parents’ experiences mirrored the power of identity and agency Progress provided. When asked to describe the benefits of participating in Progress, Nadine noted the “new friends” she gained but also commented on a new realization that there are avenues for community change in Westfield:

Yeah I’ve gained new friends and it do, it let you look at the community a little different and it lets you know that there are some things in line to make the community better. You know to help our children and to help us as parents as well too.

In rare instances, program involvement gave parents a sense of status. Some parents regarded the after-school program as an elite program within the neighborhood: being associated with the program signaled status to other Westfield residents. For example, Cheryl commented on how her volunteer and employment role at Progress made her famous in the neighborhood:

Now everybody knows that I’m Cheryl from Progress. And so, people are learning what Progress is, and people are coming in they’s like, you know, they come in and get their services, and now, you know, their head’s a little bit higher. So, I’m like, ok, I’m famous in the community. Yeah, come on down to Progress. So, everybody knows me and this is amazing. Even on my block.

She added that her “fame” helped her serve as a positive role model to her children:

I think it's useful because now people recognize me when I leave, in the community . . . I get a chance to show my children that just because these people look a certain way doesn't mean we're different. Like, you know, they're just going through something so we have to help them. It's our duty. These are our people. This is my community.

South End and Jackson lacked the same kind of positive influences on parent engagement. Without parental involvement opportunities or active community-building efforts, these programs served primarily as a service provider. Aside from noting how the program helped them balance work and family responsibilities—an important benefit to parents—parents did not report the same kinds of broader effects of program participation.

Civic Skill Building

One of the greatest ways these programs influenced parents' capacity to participate is through the skills parents learned through involvement opportunities. While parental involvement was less prevalent at Jackson, those who did gain access to these participatory roles report gaining valuable civic skills and the confidence to take part in politics. This was the case for Erica. After she began volunteering in the after-school program, she took on greater leadership roles within the school. In one year, she participated in fundraisers to purchase school supplies for children and organized a food drive and parent retreats. When I asked Erica to describe what she learned from her involvement at Jackson, she moved quickly through a number of skills. Erica commented that her experiences as a parent leader strengthened her parenting—she has “learned how to be more involved as a parent.” The council also helped her build people skills and computer skills:

I've learned more people skills . . . now I just sit there and have a full conversation with a parent or just any other person. Like I learned actual computer skills because they're sharpened now because I have to type letters. And they showed the proper formats. I learned a lot of stuff.

Erica has also learned how to conduct meetings and how to communicate her views:

I've learned how to run a meeting. I learned how to run a proper LSC [Local School Council] meeting. And that's awesome because then

that gives me the courage to sit up and stand and talk in front of a whole class full of people.

Because of these experiences, Erica gained the confidence to take part in local forms of participation. She explained,

I actually can voice my opinion now. I actually can speak up for other people. And I actually can go and find out what do you need done? What do you need said? And I can go and present that to a person—an alderman or a mayor. I can do that. Or I can present it to the community so we can [inaudible]. I know how to open my mouth and persuade a person. You know, let's do this. That's what I can do.

At Progress, parents who developed strong ties with the staff took on responsibilities in day-to-day program activities and became integrated into staff decision-making processes. Through these roles, parents practiced skills relevant for political participation. For example, the Parent Advisory Council (PAC)—a key deliberative body of the after-school program—allowed parents to build the skill of “attending leadership meetings” through quarterly meetings to create policies that governed the after-school program.

In addition to practicing leadership skills through the PAC, some parents also gained political competence through their volunteer work at Progress. Parents typically volunteered by chaperoning field trips, volunteering at community events, and offering administrative support for the after-school program during program hours. Of my sample of fifteen Progress parents, five parents indicated having regular volunteer roles within the program. For some Progress parents, involvement in the after-school program led to volunteer opportunities in other areas of the organization.

A small group of Progress parents gained civic skills through employment opportunities. Four parents in my sample of fifteen are Progress employees. Three of these mothers were introduced to the organization first as parents, enrolling their children in the Progress after-school program, then as volunteers in the organization. One mother worked specifically with the after-school program as a program assistant, while the remaining three mothers worked in other service areas of the organization as a caseworker in the women's shelter, a program assistant in the day center for homeless women, and as the coordinator of the Progress food pantry. In these roles, parents practiced leadership and organizational skills, gave presentations at staff meetings, and wrote letters on the organization's behalf. Claudine reported considerable skill-building opportunities as an employee of the youth program's umbrella

organization—Progress Community Development Corporation. Her experiences as a Progress employee included skill-building opportunities such as organizing, communicating, and leading volunteers and other employees. She also engaged state-elected officials to advocate for Progress as part of her position. As the director of the food pantry, she coordinated the schedule of more than 800 volunteers, ordered food, managed the budget, and wrote monthly reports to the Chicago Food Depository. Claudine also oversaw “outreach,” which as she explained consisted of connecting “with other agencies in the community to network with and share resources.” Finally, Claudine went to Springfield to lobby for Progress. Taken together, her role as an employee involved practicing the kinds of skills necessary for political participation.

As discussed in previous chapters, South End’s after-school program did not offer participatory roles for parents. Thus parents did not report gaining civic skills through program involvement.

Recruitment: Parent Involvement as an Avenue to Political Participation

Most parents across all three programs indicated that they voted in the previous presidential elections. However, skill-related forms of participation such as protesting, letter writing, contacting elected officials, and community work were less prevalent across parents. With the exception of a group of Progress parents, very few parents reported local participation. For Progress parents who reported political participation, they often became involved *through* the organization. The after-school program created opportunities for parents to take part in community work and connected them to elected officials.

Kevin’s experience illustrated both types of participation. Kevin worked with Progress to get “drugs off the street” and install a speed bump on the block. In doing so, Kevin worked with the local police, called his local alderman, and accompanied David on visits to the alderman’s office:

They did good things for the neighborhood, and it feels good that I was a part of it. Like putting, we was a part of putting the street bump, the speed bump down. We was a part of getting the drugs off the street, getting the signs up, working with the police department. And that’s how it really influenced, cause we all worked together for it. . . . We had to go up there and talk to the alderman, call the alderman of-

fice. The speed bump . . . without the speed bumps, we would have had a tragedy every year here.

A subset of parents at Jackson and Progress contacted elected officials through their involvement in the after-school program. At Jackson, three of the five parents with high levels of involvement were introduced to elected officials through program events. Erica and Anita from Jackson reported meeting the mayor and Westfield's two aldermen.

At Progress more than half of the parents interviewed ($n = 8$) recalled having met an elected official through the organization. Staff selected parents to meet city and state elected officials at press conferences, roundtables, and community events. At the time of my interviews, Progress had recently facilitated parent connections with elected officials through a mayoral roundtable regarding the Chicago Public School system's teacher strike. In the fall of 2012, the Chicago teachers' union waged a seven-day strike that affected 350,000 students. In response to growing public tension around the strike, Mayor Rahm Emmanuel approached the leaders of Progress about conducting a roundtable at the organization. The roundtable would give parents the opportunity to voice their concerns to the mayor directly. David—the director of Progress Youth Development Corp—explained how the idea emerged:

The mayor's office called us at like eleven o'clock on day two of the teachers strike and said: "The mayor is wanting to get out and listen to the stories of parents about how the strike is affecting their families." So, to which I said, like, we, of course, would like to have the mayor here, however, I also don't want three hundred picketers outside our front door either. We're trying to do our job here. So, we're not the bargaining table for that dispute. We'll let them worry about whose fault it is that we don't have a contract. But if you're giving our parents a chance to speak to the mayor, we'll get 'em there, but I don't want this to be some big press event where it's interpreted to be just a photo op or something like that.

The mayor's office agreed and only permitted one reporter and a camera at the event. David instructed his staff to invite working parents in the program to attend. Most of the parents present at the roundtable were parents with long-term relationships with Progress, including those who sat on the advisory council and volunteered within the program. The mayor sat with roughly 15 parents to hear about how the strike affected their families.

Cheryl met the mayor at the roundtable. She had the opportunity to share her son's challenges as a special needs student in the Chicago Public School system and expressed her appreciation of Progress, her concerns about her community, and her desire for better programs:

The mayor came here for a roundtable and he was asking some of the questions that you're asking now. I made it my business to even tell him the story about Ms. Lauren and my son and epilepsy. I was trying to let him know how valuable a program like this is. Like, we need funds for stuff like this. We need to get the kids off the street. Pretty much every parent in that room was saying the same thing. The teachers are on strike. What are you going to do about it? We need more programs like this. My kid needs extra help.

In sum, the Progress after-school program facilitated direct contact with an elected official and offered a venue for deliberation around the issue of public education. While opportunities such as the roundtable did not change critical evaluations of the mayor, the event allowed low-income parents to express concerns and policy preferences to a powerful elected official. Such opportunities were scarce for Progress parents and the residents of Westfield who are isolated from elected officials and seldom the target of political recruitment efforts.

What about Broader Participation?

A few parents attributed their program experiences to their own individual efficacy beliefs and motivation for political and civic action. For example, Rebecca's four children were enrolled in Progress youth programs and she volunteered at the center and in the preschool and after-school programs. For her, the program changed how she perceived Westfield and the children in the neighborhood. Rebecca now viewed children as connected to the long-term welfare of Westfield. Her way of ensuring the future safety of the neighborhood was to change the life paths of neighborhood children through a book club. She explained how and why she started the book club:

I do a lot more work with the kids in my neighborhood. In the summertime, I have a book club. So I go to the library and whatever book I can find . . . like maybe like six or seven copies I'll get them. We'll all read the book together, we'll all talk about the book together. . . . Most of the kids on the block call me mom. If they're not at school then they're hiding from me; they know I'm like "why are you not in school,

go to school” . . . it made me realize that just because my kids are okay today, first of all, they may not be okay tomorrow but the other kids that I’m watching grow up and I’m seeing at this age in twenty years when my kids are thirty these kids are going to also be thirty. So I would rather put fifteen minutes of time in now to steer them on a different path than when they’re thirty I have to worry about them robbing me. So it made me look at the kids and the neighborhood and our surroundings a totally different way.

Rebecca saw investing in children today as an investment in the future safety of her neighborhood and attributed this shift in her perspective to Progress.

Are Active Parents Distinct?

If relationships and staff’s prospecting behavior determine who gets access to participatory roles, then the ideal candidate for parental involvement might have different characteristics than less active parents. Indeed, staff’s descriptions of ideal candidates for “active” roles across all three cases included interest, responsibility, commitment, and reliability, qualities that might be tied to parent characteristics.

However, parents’ demographic characteristics were not associated with their involvement patterns. At both Jackson’s and Progress’s after-school programs, the most involved parents did not differ much from the least active parents in terms of race, education, or income. Nevertheless, staff might tap parents who would say yes—those parents who had previous volunteer and leadership experiences and wanted to participate.³⁰ To examine differences in interests and previous experiences, I coded interviews by whether parents indicated high interest in volunteering or community involvement and whether parents followed local politics or were aware of community issues. These interests in politics and community issues, community involvement, and volunteering might translate into interest in parent involvement roles. I coded parents as “high interest” if they followed local politics, reported awareness of neighborhood issues, and expressed an interest in becoming more involved in their community. Parents were coded as “low interest” if they did not mention any of these things.

Parents with previous volunteer and leadership experiences might be less intimidated by similar parent roles in the program.³¹ To account for this kind of experience, I coded parents’ educational experiences—whether they had some college experience or a college degree. I also coded whether parents had jobs that required them to attend meetings or organize activities and parents’ previous volunteer experiences with nonpolitical organi-

zations and church events, which might involve volunteer and leadership experiences.

The differences between active parents and less active parents are stark at Jackson's after-school program, which aligns with the idea that staff members select parents whom they view most likely to participate. All five of the active parents in the sample reported interest in issues affecting their community or school and a desire to volunteer. None of the remaining parents ($n = 12$) reported interests in politics, community interests, or volunteer roles. Active parents also had experience in participatory roles relative to other parents at Jackson's program. All five active parents reported some sort of volunteer experience—whether in other school settings, church, or their community. Only two of the less active parents (16 percent) at Jackson reported previous volunteer or leadership experiences.

At Progress, active and less active parents looked similar in interest and previous experiences. Three of Progress's active parents ($n = 8$) reported previous experiences and two less active parents reported previous volunteer and leadership experiences. A larger share of less active parents (4, 57 percent) reported high interest in participation in comparison to two active parents (25 percent). Given that most volunteer opportunities stem from personal invitations from staff, it seems that Progress staff members select a set of parents with a range of participatory experiences and backgrounds for parental involvement roles.

When time in the program was considered, a more distinct recruitment pattern emerged that was consistent with the long-term cooperative interactions between parents and staff prescribed by policy. Staff asked parents who had long-term experiences with the program—regardless of previous volunteer and leadership experience or high interest—to participate. Active parents had an average of 8.5 years of experience with staff (these included years of enrollment with multiple children), while the less active parents reported an average of 3 years in the program. Thus long-term experiences fostered relationships that lead to participatory roles. Even though staff valued the notion of “committed parents” as an informal selection criterion, time, which undoubtedly influenced the nature and quality of relationships with parents, might be the deciding factor.

Conclusion

Parents' experiences across Jackson, Progress, and South End suggest that these programs go beyond the role of service provider to become civic and political training grounds for low-income parents who would otherwise forgo participation. More broadly, these program experiences show how

social service providers can take on the role of nonpolitical organizations in cultivating interest in politics, strengthening political efficacy, and inculcating the kinds of skills needed to participate.

Regarding political interest and efficacy, this new era of delegated governance and social service provision introduces new kinds of interpretive effects—or cues about government, politics, and participation—that extend beyond clients' individual interactions with bureaucrats. As parents' accounts demonstrate, the ways in which community-based providers impacted neighborhood conditions influenced whether or not they viewed neighborhood change as feasible and local forms of participation worthwhile.

Although they shared the same zip code and neighborhood blocks, the parents at Jackson were politically apathetic and cynical, whereas Progress parents held positive views of Westfield and were confident in their ability to bring about neighborhood change. South End's parents shared the same disaffected views of Jackson parents. These varied perspectives were tied to the prospect of neighborhood change. Progress parents were part of an organization that viewed itself as a "change catalyst," whose community work conveyed to parents that change in Westfield was possible. Moreover, staff modeled attitudes, perspectives, and strategies that led to neighborhood change and created opportunities to participate. In contrast, the limited reach and scope of Jackson's and South End's after-school programs reinforced parents' diminished efficacy and discontent with their communities.

Along with teaching lessons about local political participation, parents' experiences also complicate prevailing arguments that targeted programs pacify participants and counter the prominent description of the devolved and privatized welfare state as paternalistic and punitive.³² On the contrary, volunteer, leadership, and employment roles empower and train parents in decision-making processes, organizing people and events, and communication skills. While feedback scholars underscore the interpretive messages of participatory programs, namely how these types of programs convey the value of clients' voice,³³ parents' experiences suggest that the consequences of participatory programs extend beyond interpretive messages by giving parents the chance to practice new, politically relevant skills in program contexts.

In addition to cultivating civic competence, these participatory roles also lead to forms of participation that are usually inaccessible to the disadvantaged. Simply stated, these organizations can "ask" low-income parents to engage in political activity. One way the programs recruit parents into political participation is by facilitating contact with elected officials. Highly involved parents are asked to attend program events where elected officials are present.

In many ways these political recruitment effects mirror those of the Social

Security programs. In the same way that Social Security connects low-income seniors to organizations that are targeted by political recruitment efforts,³⁴ low-income parents in these settings become targets of political recruitment. In the case of Progress, the presence of elected officials goes beyond the symbolic political campaign efforts of politicians. The organization structures opportunities for parents to meet elected officials for the purpose of expressing their concerns and policy preferences. In the same way, a policy can, as Pierson notes, “increase access to decision makers” and “enhance the ability of the groups to turn their preferences into government policy.”³⁵ These organizations can make low-income parents visible to elected officials and create opportunities to express policy preferences. Essentially, parents who are otherwise politically marginalized by large resource deficits and distressed neighborhoods have the ear of people in power.

But as these cases demonstrate, the potentially mobilizing effects of after-school programs vary by organization. Place-based cues about participation each program conveys varies by the organization’s community role and scope of program design. Civic skill-building opportunities vary by program design as well. South End and Jackson have lower levels of parental involvement and, consequently, lower levels of civic and political engagement among parents. As this chapter and chapter 4 suggests, limited parental involvement reflects a combination of policy guidelines and staff discretion.

In this sense, Progress represents a unique case of political mobilization in the context of acute resource deficits among parents and the Westfield neighborhood. The organization’s identity as a change catalyst leads to greater parental involvement and community outreach, both of which cultivate interest and skills for participation.

Moreover, not all organizations can attract the attention of powerful elected officials or connect officials and clients. Progress may have social and political capital that makes the organization politically attractive to elected officials. While some research suggests that community-based nonprofits act as constituency-building organizations for elected officials,³⁶ the organizational characteristics that make particular nonprofits salient and attractive to elected officials remain unclear. Exploratory analysis of the Progress volunteer base suggests that the organization attracts high-profile volunteers who leverage their social networks on behalf of Progress. As a result, the organization gains local attention and develops ties to public officials. As social policy becomes increasingly devolved and delegated to human service agencies, analyses of these organizations as nested within a set of social networks may help clarify how they increase access to political elites and make political participation accessible to those least likely to participate.

6 • From Alienated to Empowered

A year after I completed the fieldwork for this study, I returned to Progress to visit Brandy, one of the mothers featured in this book. Her children greeted me with excitement and hugs. As they hurried to their classrooms for after-school instruction, Brandy and I sat down by the “welcome desk” to talk. She described how the youth program had grown and moved into a larger building down the street. Parent activities changed too—now parents could attend a support group, a need that had come out in previous advisory council meetings. Brandy shared how Progress assumed more advocacy work and sent parents and staff members to Springfield to talk with state legislators about funding opportunities. She talked about the community meetings she attended to express her views on gun violence to police officers and alderman. And when zoning ordinances threatened to slow Progress’s transition into a new building, Brandy described how she and other Progress parents attended a community meeting, where they, as she described, “got in the alderman’s face” to forcefully explain how important Progress was to families in Westfield.

I asked Brandy why she devoted so much time to Progress as opposed to her children’s local public elementary school or her church. Her response somewhat surprised me. She regarded her school as out of touch and beholden to the state’s and Rahm Emanuel’s interests, which she distrusted. Brandy also viewed teachers as “out for a paycheck” and all about putting “butts in seats.” They did not understand or look out for her children. Further, the school had a marred reputation in Westfield. It was notorious as an early recruitment ground for neighborhood gangs. The school was not active in Westfield and—in her view—was not one of the neighborhood’s strengths. Brandy was less active in her church because it was located in another neighborhood where her extended family lived. While she participated in her choir and an occasional potluck, she did not take on the kinds of leadership roles or political activities at her church as she did at Progress.

Brandy took pride in Progress and her involvement in the after-school

program. The organization was a beacon in Westfield and had done so much for the community, efforts she contributed to. Indeed, since my initial interview with her, Brandy helped organize the after-school program's antigun violence march in Westfield, where she gave a speech on the importance of keeping children safe during the summer.

Brandy's commitment to Progress deepened through the "lifelong" friendships she developed with staff members. She explained how staff demonstrated genuine care and concern for her family after her rocky separation from her husband. They offered a listening ear during her emotional distress and found ways to provide counseling for her children. The after-school staff gave countless car rides for Brandy and her children, shared job leads, and provided groceries for her family.

Progress's profound influence on how Brandy understood herself as a mother, a community member, and a citizen was shaped by policy. As this ethnographic study has demonstrated, policies enabled organizations like Progress to develop the volunteer and leadership roles in after-school programs, roles that taught Brandy important civic skills—how to organize, lead, and communicate. Policy shaped how staff reached out to Brandy, creating conditions that cultivated her deep relationships with staff members. And policy enabled Progress to implement an after-school program through the lens of its own unique identity as a change catalyst in Westfield—an identity that opened up various opportunities for civic and political activity to Brandy. The after-school program wasn't just another government-funded social service Brandy received; it transformed her relationship with the state, boosted her capacity for and interest in political participation, and provided forms of social support to boot.

I have argued that these unintended consequences of after-school policy are aided by shifts in social policy—the shift toward social service delivery and the emergence of new public management tools in social policy governance. This book shows that these shifts in social policy can change the way targeted assistance programs influence democratic citizenship for the disadvantaged. Conventional wisdom would suggest that programs that target low-income families teach the same negative lessons about government and politics to recipients. The findings in this book reveal a rich nuanced connection between policy, implementation, program experiences, and political participation that counters these conventional assumptions. I demonstrate how policies can be designed to empower low-income citizens—transforming their relationships with the state, building their civic capacities, and drawing them into political activity.

First, these findings point to policy features that extend beyond conven-

tional distinctions between universal and targeted programs. As chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate, staff-client interactions in targeted programs are not always stigmatizing and are a function of finer-grained policy rules and tools that shape the nature and quality of citizens' relationships with bureaucrats. In the case of after-school policy, policy rules required staff members to routinely check-in with parents over long periods of time. These routine long-term interactions were not designed to determine eligibility or monitor compliance to program directives. Instead these interactions focused on the child—his or her behavior and progress in the program—and broader family needs. Policy tools in the form of market competition, performance pressures, and accountability structures also encouraged staff to treat parents well. Staff used interactions with parents to gauge their preferences and adjusted service delivery accordingly. In short, these policies prescribed long-term interactions and encouraged personalized service delivery—conditions that ended up fostering deeper supportive relationships between parents and staff members.

The conventional coarse distinctions between targeted and universal programs don't quite capture these dynamics. Further, most scholars tend to recommend shifting targeted programs to more universal structures to remedy burdensome experiences.¹ As Campbell notes,

Rather than subject prospective beneficiaries to the stigma and red tape associated with means-tested programs, universal programs treat their recipient with dignity and respect. The programs are set up to ease the way for recipients to secure the benefits they have “earned,” rather than face a demeaning process of proving eligibility.²

But as safety-net programs evolve, the distinction between targeted and universal programs prove to be insufficient for understanding program experiences or how social policy influences mass political behavior. Understanding how policy tools and rules work within targeted programs may yield deeper insights into how policy shapes democratic citizenship for the disadvantaged.

Further, this study shows that the state can do more than “treat people with dignity.” The state can cultivate deeper connections between citizens and the state by prescribing and incentivizing personalized service delivery. As it stands, bureaucrats in many targeted programs must interpret complicated and ambiguous policy rules, process client documents, and respond to policy-imposed deadlines and benchmarks with antiquated administrative systems and very little time.³ Bureaucrats face tensions between doing what policy requires of them and developing personal connections with

beneficiaries—connections that can enhance encounters with the state.⁴ Most means-tested policies do not reward this kind of behavior, but this study shows how policymakers can design targeted programs that do. With the right policy tools, targeted programs can cultivate and reward positive bureaucratic behavior toward clients and create meaningful and supportive experiences for citizens.

If the classic distinction between universal and targeted programs falls short of explaining parents' rich experiences, categorizing programs by authority structures does not explain these program experiences either. Scholars classify authority structures by the complexity of eligibility processes, whether programs share decision-making power with agencies, whether bureaucratic procedures are transparent and protect clients, or whether proper recourse is available for failed or disappointing claiming experiences.⁵ The presence of caseworkers is characterized as a key feature of paternalistic programs that diminish client autonomy in programs. Yet this study shows how power is created and shaped by the way policy structures relationships between citizens and bureaucrats. It reveals a kind of relational power that is understated and underexplored by policy feedback studies.

The relationships I describe in this book emerged primarily on parents' terms. Policy granted parents agency to decide the nature of their interactions with staff and afforded parents similar levels of discretion and freedom in their bureaucratic encounters that are enjoyed by more advantaged populations. In this sense, some ideals of new public management are realized. Parents have autonomy in how they engage the state and experience tailored responsive service delivery.⁶ This relational autonomy is an important departure from earlier research that highlights the power differential between low-income citizens and bureaucrats.⁷ What is more, if agency that is exercised in one domain begets agency in another—parent agency in programs likely shapes how they engage in civic and political life.

Not only do these relationships increase parents' power vis-a-vis the state, but they are also sources of political empowerment. Parents' relationships with staff became avenues to civic skill-building opportunities in the program and local civic and political activity. Parents were recruited for volunteer, leadership, and employment roles prescribed by policy through their relationships with staff members. And as chapter 5 demonstrates, parents learned skills that were relevant for participation through these opportunities. Here policies that do not require participatory roles miss an opportunity to enrich democratic citizenship. South End parents do not benefit from parental involvement roles despite expressing a desire to work with children as a way to get involved in their community. This study shows that when

policy incorporates beneficiaries into service delivery, programs can take on the role of churches and nonvoluntary organizations in cultivating civic skills for participation. Moreover, after-school programs also act as sites of political recruitment as staff leverage relationships with parents to recruit individuals for local forms of civic and political participation.

Because parent agency and staff discretion influence how parents become active, one might worry that only the parents who are already civic-minded will be overrepresented in parent involvement roles. However, this book shows that disparities in participation vary by program. Active parents at Jackson have more previous volunteer experience and greater interest in political participation than inactive parents, while active and inactive parents at Progress have similar levels of experience and interest. To limit disparities, policies could make involvement in service delivery mandatory for beneficiaries—but doing this would diminish parents' agency in programs. The strength of these after-school policies is that they do not control targets—parents are free to choose whether and how to take part in opportunities. Hinging services on involvement in participatory roles would transform empowering and engaging policies into paternalistic ones that prescribe model behavior, direct beneficiaries' participation, and punish those who do not participate. Instead policy should encourage bureaucratic behavior that leads to greater involvement. For instance, policies could require greater transparency about the kinds of participatory roles available to beneficiaries and diminish staff discretion in recruitment by requiring staff to invite all beneficiaries to participate. Education scholars and political scientists agree—personal invitations to participate work.⁸ While universal invitations do not eliminate beneficiaries' selection into participatory roles, they can reduce staff's influence in determining who can participate, further boosting beneficiaries' agency in shaping their own program experiences and promoting a greater range of representation of beneficiaries in program administration.

In addition, some sociologists have found that those with the least social and economic resources often rely on social service providers for social support, turning to staff members for help to avoid depleting their own poorly resourced or limited networks.⁹ Thus parents who develop close ties with staff members may lack strong supportive relationships outside of the program and by consequence lack opportunities for recruitment into political participation. Patterns of recruitment at Progress and Jackson may not remedy the gaps in participation among parents in programs, but by recruiting those who are least likely to be drawn into political activity through other social ties, these programs can narrow broader disparities in participation between the advantaged and disadvantaged.

Reevaluating New Public Management

The findings here also suggest that new public management reforms can have positive consequences for program experiences and citizenship. While not definitively concluding the benefits of new public management tools, staff and parents' experiences reveal the conditions under which new public management tools can produce positive, politically empowering experiences with the state.

As Brodtkin suggests, new public management reforms direct bureaucrats' focus. In TANF and welfare-to-work programs, workers focus on quotas and caseload reduction benchmarks and work to move clients off the rolls.¹⁰ K-12 education policy emphasizes student performance on standardized tests. As a result, administrators adjust curricula to include evidence-based practices and encourage teachers to "teach to the test."¹¹ But the means to meet performance standards are not always specified. As a result, organizations and workers engage in practices that harm clients and undermine policy goals. On market competition, very few studies show how competition between agencies for government resources and clients improves service delivery or outcomes.

Parents' experiences with the after-school programs in this book tell a more optimistic story—where the link between resources and performance, accountability, and market dynamics positively shapes staff members' behavior toward parents. In contrast to cash-assistance programs, these new public management policy tools focused staff's attention on retaining students and ensuring regular attendance. For Jackson, the pressure to boost student test scores led staff members to emphasize retention and attendance. For Progress, performance indicators for recruitment, retention, and attendance also encouraged staff to keep students enrolled and regularly attending the program. South End's director responded to competition for students by catering to parents' preferences. In short, these programs responded to these new public management tools by requiring very little from parents to keep services and delivering services with a personal touch.

These responses point to how new public management tools can improve citizen-state interactions. Scholars note how the quality of citizens' interactions with bureaucrats is crucial to achieving policy goals and improving how low-income citizens view the government.¹² To be sure, public administration scholars describe the "psychological costs"—or the "stigma of applying for or participating in a program with negative perceptions, a sense of loss of power or autonomy in interactions with the state, or the stresses of dealing with administrative processes"¹³—as deterring claims of public benefits. By

creating performance standards that encourage supportive rather than demeaning citizen-state interactions, policymakers can diminish the psychological costs.

This book also points to the need for research on how performance standards work across a range of means-tested programs. New research in other policy contexts illustrates how the right kinds of performance standards can reduce the psychological costs of claiming public benefits. Some qualitative research on WIC programs in North Carolina shows how caseload *retention* benchmarks and emphasis on outreach and customer service leads to positive relationships between program staff and clients.¹⁴ The Federal Nutrition Service (FNS) allocates block grants to WIC state agencies and determines state funding levels by “projected program enrollment”—the average number of participants served each month from the previous year.¹⁵ Agencies lose administrative funds when they do not maintain 95 percent of their caseloads.¹⁶ WIC staff members respond to these caseload retention incentives by closely monitoring participants who have missed recent appointments, calling participants to remind them of appointments, accommodating last-minute changes in participants’ availability, and taking walk-ins. Much like the after-school staff members in this book, WIC staff also work to build personal relationships with beneficiaries. Beneficiaries regarded these efforts as contributing to their positive experiences with the program and similarly viewed staff members as sources of social support.

But performance standards designed to improve “customer service” do not always produce positive results. In recent years, performance standards designed to improve customer service in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have come under scrutiny. FNS implements timeliness performance standards that require states to process SNAP applications and recertifications within a thirty-day window.¹⁷ FNS also encourages states to reduce error rates that lead to over- or underpayment of benefits. States are rewarded with bonuses if they reduce error rates and meet timeliness benchmarks and risk losing administrative funds for poor performance. In theory, these performance standards should improve “customer service,” by improving program efficiency and accuracy. However, recent reports suggest that state agencies have manipulated data to misrepresent error rates.¹⁸ Further, the pressures to process cases quickly can produce the same curt strained relationship between bureaucrats and claimants observed in TANF and other means-tested programs.¹⁹ Scholars should work to pinpoint the kinds of incentives that lead workers to treat clients well. These kinds of insights can be instructive in designing standards that narrow the gap between the disadvantaged and the state.

The Power of Place

In addition to revealing the nuanced ways these organizations implemented policy and engaged parents, this book demonstrates the power of “place” in service delivery. Scholars are only beginning to understand the connection between place, implementation, and policy feedback, showing how local political values, or ideology, informed sanctioning practices in TANF²⁰ and how police surveillance in marginalized neighborhoods deters political participation.²¹ Michener demonstrates how citizens learn lessons about the government by observing the conditions of neighborhoods where Medicaid offices are located. Run-down agencies in deteriorating communities convey the governments’ indifference and lack of care for the disadvantaged, attenuating participation.²² Finally, Soss and Weaver’s recent work develops the idea of race-class subjugated communities, describing poor black neighborhoods as marginalized through “modes of governance that stigmatize, repress, and ultimately turn government into an invasive, surveillant authority to be avoided.”²³ This study begins to build on this work by showing how organizations respond to communities in service delivery and how recipients consider community contexts when evaluating their program experiences and, in a broader sense, government.

On the implementation side, staff interviews suggested that organizations developed place-based identities—or community roles—that defined “who” the organization was and “what” the organization did. Staff at each organization held distinct views about neighborhood contexts, characterizing communities as negative influences (Jackson), having potential (Progress), and posing threats (South End). These views corresponded with how they understood each organization’s identity within these neighborhoods. Jackson’s targeted material assistance and informal counseling reflected its self-described role as a preventative stopgap against neighborhood violence. Progress’s “coordinated efforts” to improve neighborhood conditions stemmed from staff’s view of the neighborhood as having the potential for transformation. And South End’s protectionist “safe haven” identity translated into narrowly targeted services to children and families.

The findings point to broader interpretive processes beyond interactions with staff. Neighborhoods shaped how parents think and act politically. Parents interpreted their neighborhoods as “microcosms of government,” and each program’s role within these neighborhoods taught place-based lessons about politics. As chapter 5 illustrates, parents looked to their neighborhood playgrounds, schools, and blocks to assess government responsiveness, their political standing, and their own ability to bring about social change. How

these organizations influenced the communities they serve taught powerful place-based lessons about whether social change is feasible and which civic and political strategies were worthwhile.

In the case of Progress, where broader community programming was a key aspect of program design, the program modeled the ethos of “giving back” through local forms of civic and political participation. Jackson’s and South End’s limited reach confirmed and reinforced parents’ view that their neighborhoods were beyond change or improvement.

As low-income citizens increasingly rely on place-based service providers, community contexts will assume a greater role in policy feedback models as a variable that explains the service delivery and beneficiaries’ political sensibilities. As this book suggests, where agencies are located and what they do within communities can influence democratic citizenship. Even so, we have much to learn about the role of place in policy feedback. For example, how does policy implementation vary—if at all—by community context. How do agencies’ deeper politically symbolic meanings differ by community context? If the organizations in this book influence how citizens develop political efficacy beliefs in inner-city contexts, what are the social and political significance of “street-level” organizations in suburban and rural contexts, where the dimensions of poverty and help-seeking differ?²⁴

In the case of rural communities, welfare agencies and nonprofits may differ in implementation or take on a completely different social meaning. In an inner city or larger suburban context, prospective beneficiaries have the benefit of anonymity. They can seek help from several agencies and numerous bureaucrats. For instance, prospective beneficiaries in Cook County can apply for assistance at more than a dozen public welfare offices, while the citizens of Bureau County, Illinois—a rural county with less than 30,000 residents—can claim benefits at only one office. The social distance Cook county claimants experience from bureaucrats may protect them from stigma or contribute to it. Claimants may have impersonal experiences where they are “treated like a number” or may experience mistreatment altogether by bureaucrats who are overworked and burdened by large caseloads and limited resources.²⁵ In rural counties like Bureau, which have fewer social service agencies, smaller populations, and close-knit networks, caseworkers and clients likely share social connections outside of agencies. These social ties can improve program experiences²⁶ or become a source of stigma.

Indeed, rural sociologists have documented the unique social and economic characteristics of rural communities, noting rigid patterns of stratification and social exclusion faced by racial minorities and the rural poor. In these contexts, social service workers occupy an elite middle-class group of

“haves” because they have steady employment, income, and the prospect of retirement in communities that lack viable job prospects.²⁷ As a result, bureaucratic encounters can reflect a microcosm of the social and economic hierarchy of the rural communities, and citizens’ interactions with welfare offices can reflect more of a negotiation of social identities and status within community contexts than making claims on a distant amorphous welfare state. This is especially the case if bureaucrats replicate the patterns of social exclusion that characterize rural communities²⁸ in how they make sense of policy and “size up” clients to determine eligibility for benefits or agency action (e.g., sanctions, denials, requests for additional information). Thus seeking help from agencies in rural communities may hold more social significance and prove more difficult than in more densely populated communities. Research in policy feedback, policy implementation, and bureaucratic encounters have not unpacked how experiences with the state vary by community contexts. In-depth ethnographic studies of what these agencies mean for citizens in various community contexts—beyond differences in eligibility rules and benefits—can clarify the link connection between these “place-based” experiences and the kinds of lessons citizens learn about government.

Are Nonprofits Really Different from Public Bureaucracies?

At the outset of this book, I pointed to the uptick in delegated governance as a hallmark of new public management reforms. However, this study offers limited insights on how nonprofit service providers differ from public agencies. This is in part due to the broader aim of the study—to show how the features of after-school policy shape democratic citizenship for the disadvantaged. In keeping with that objective, I chose cases with varied policy and funding mechanisms that makes it difficult to parse out whether public-private distinction alone matters for service delivery.

Even with this variation, staff and parent accounts revealed that Jackson’s program—a case of direct governance—was surprisingly similar to South End’s and Progress’s after-school programs, which were run by nonprofit organizations. All three programs prioritized cooperative relationships with parents and retaining students—priorities largely defined by the policies (e.g., grants) that supported these programs. On the whole, the policies themselves rather than the private-public distinction seemed to matter more in the day-to-day life of each program. The latitude policy gives to organizations through policy rules and performance measures may explain variation I do observe across programs.

For example, Jackson's close adherence to Title I rules may reflect the tight strings attached to Title I dollars. Title I lays out clear standards for student achievement and narrow guidelines for parent involvement. Further, Title I monitors program compliance through audits and reporting requirements. Progress faced similar performance pressures. The 21st CCLC grant required the organization to report parent contact and involvement but the grant also gave Progress latitude to create its own parent roles to fulfill a broad "family engagement" guideline. As a result, Progress created a robust set of parent roles through its "parent partnership" that reflected the program's mission and identity.

Without clear guidelines and a performance-based accountability system, South End developed few parent roles. Yet the program responded to Child Care Subsidy's market accountability features and South End's director found ways to incorporate parent input into service delivery. In this sense, policy rather than the public-private distinction may have driven differences in programs. This finding confirms earlier research on measuring performance of agencies delivering welfare-to-work programs. When grants and contracts have specific performance measures that closely align with agency goals and policy objectives, programs better reflect policy intent.²⁹

A comparative case study of nonprofit and public organizations that are subject to the same policy, located in similar communities, and have similar staff would be a better test of whether the public-private distinction matters for policy feedback. With these factors in mind, future research should take on a finer-grained analysis to explore this distinction.

In some ways, the findings point to Progress's unique approach to service delivery. Accordingly, the positive effects of Progress's after-school program on parents' civic and political engagement may not be representative of other after-school programs. I'd caution against this conclusion—in part because the in-depth accounts presented in this book cannot support this claim. While Progress is distinct in serviced delivery, the public policies that incentivize inclusive participatory programs are widely implemented in after-school programs across the nation. To examine whether Progress is an outlier or closer to the norm in mobilizing parents would require a larger mixed method or quantitative study that demonstrates how other organizations respond to the rules and incentives of the 21st CCLC grant.

Further, the key point of this book is to demonstrate how components of social policy shifted in ways that can change how low-income families engage the state. Instead of experiencing uniformly alienating burdensome policies, low-income parents may encounter empowering programs that—while targeting their children—broadly enhance democratic citizenship. Parents' ex-

periences across all three programs reveal marked improvements in how low-income citizens engage the state. As demonstrated in this book, parents encounter programs that solicit their perspectives, whether formally or informally and to varying degrees. They also experienced autonomy to interact with staff on their own terms—an aspect of program experiences seldom examined in social policy research. Finally, decentralized policy implementation introduced new kinds of place-based cues about politics. Parents gleaned lessons about political standing from the conditions of their neighborhood blocks and the work of federally funded community-based organizations within their communities. These are important insights that should not be overlooked and reflect a paramount shift in our understanding of how disadvantaged citizens interact with the state.

Revisiting Old Cases through a New Lens

The study's findings also clarify why some programs such as Head Start have been politically mobilizing. In particular, this ethnography reveals some alternative mechanisms that may explain why programs like Head Start boost political efficacy and political participation for low-income citizens.³⁰ Soss finds that Head Start program participation can counter the demobilizing effects of TANF and attributes the positive effects of the program to its participatory design. Local policy councils gave parents decision-making power in programs, and parents viewed these leadership roles as the program's way of valuing their input and perspectives.³¹ The positive messages participatory roles convey to Head Start parents (interpretive effects) boosted their political efficacy.

This book enriches these insights by showing how parent involvement roles provide resources for civic and political engagement. Through parental involvement opportunities, parents learned how to organize, communicate, and lead. They also became aware of public issues and interested in solving community problems. In addition, this book shows how supportive relationships between staff and parents enhance parents' program experiences and shape access to participatory roles and forms of civic engagement. It suggests that not everyone experiences program design in the same way. In the case of Head Start and other childcare programs, benefits from participatory program design may be experienced by a select group of parents who forge personal relationships with staff members. Finally, this study draws attention to the local nature of policy implementation and policy feedback. Head Start programs are delivered through community-based nonprofits,

schools, and other local organizations. And these organizations have distinct approaches to serving communities that may convey positive place-based messages about politics that boost political efficacy and participation among program recipients.

The Contemporary Maternal State

Finally, this book also revives a discussion about the state's efforts to help parents raise the next generation of citizens. Skocpol's early work notes the rise and swift decline of the "maternalist" state—a set of short-lived policies implemented during the Progressive Era to "help women better raise their children."³² Born out of the advocacy efforts of middle-class women, the maternalist state consisted of proposed laws that reduced women's work hours and established the Children's Bureau and programs that provided preventative care for children to boost maternal and infant well-being.³³

By the time of the Great Depression, the maternalist state lost much of its political support and was eclipsed by social insurance programs and other New Deal relief efforts. But the ethos of the maternalist state was in some ways rekindled with President Johnson's War on Poverty, which targeted some federal resources to impoverished children as a way to "break the cycle of poverty." Indeed, Johnson described Head Start as a "new war front on poverty" that would "make certain that poverty's children would not be forevermore poverty's captives"; the program's targets were "five- and six-year-old children" who were "inheritors of poverty's curse and not its creators." Johnson continued, "unless we act these children will pass it on to the next generation, like a family birthmark."³⁴ To disrupt intergenerational poverty, Head Start would provide a comprehensive set of services that addressed children's needs. The program also provided counseling services to parents "to improve the home environment" and—as mentioned earlier—would include parents into program activities and program administration.³⁵

This renewed interest in policies targeting preschool-aged children with education interventions and parental supports was driven by interdisciplinary research that linked poverty to delayed child development.³⁶ This trend has continued as child development research and cost-benefit analyses have demonstrated the high return on investing in children.³⁷ This growing body of research has broadened support for childcare policies as more than a work support for low-income parents, but also a way to nurture child development. One way to ensure the positive development of children is to support their parents.³⁸

As a result, many policies that target children have increasingly incorporated parents or “families” in programming. For example, the latest reauthorization of the CCDBG adopted “family friendly” provisions such as extending eligibility periods to 12 months, lengthening the periods of eligibility during a job loss, and encouraging states to streamline eligibility processes to align with other means-tested programs.³⁹ While these provisions were designed to limit discontinuity in childcare services, which negatively affects child development, they also end up treating parents better in the process with more forgiving accommodating policies.

Later federal efforts to improve the quality of childcare further show this “family friendly” turn. The first and second iterations of President Obama’s Race to the Top initiative,⁴⁰ a comprehensive education reform, encouraged states to develop quality rating systems that “address the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development needs of all children,” from infants and toddlers to school-aged children in out-of-school time programs.⁴¹ Federal policy distinguishes family engagement as an indicator of quality and requires states to promote “program quality standards that require programs to support families’ involvement with their children’s learning and, and to strengthen partnerships with families.” At the bare minimum, staff should regularly communicate with parents to support children’s learning and development, but the most effective programs provide “opportunities for parents to participate in children’s activities, parenting education activities and activities that support social networking or connections.”⁴² Programs with the strongest family engagement strategies also connect families “with health, nutrition, mental health, and other community human resources and services that support families.”⁴³ Many states reward providers for family engagement programming. For example, in Illinois, the Child Care Subsidy program offers financial bonuses or “add-ons” for every child receiving a subsidy to providers with the highest tier of quality that prioritizes family engagement.⁴⁴

Rather than devaluing low-income parents’ child-rearing responsibilities,⁴⁵ policies are moving toward tailored service delivery and social supports to help parents raise their children. In this sense, the shifts toward more humane treatment of parents reflect a return to the maternalist state, which—as this book has demonstrated—can have positive consequences for democratic citizenship.

Family-friendly policies raise new questions to explore in policy feedback research. First, these kinds of policies point to *families* or *parenthood* as a social construction worthy of study. Schneider and Ingram argue that the targets of policies are socially constructed by public discourse, media portrayals, and policy itself.⁴⁶ These social constructions consist of a “recognition of shared

characteristics” that distinguish a target population and an “attribution of specific valence-oriented values symbols, and images to the characteristics.” Policy targets can be positively constructed as “honest” and “deserving” or negatively constructed as undeserving.⁴⁷ These constructions corresponded with how policy targets experience policy—whether they encounter burdensome programs or experience ample and easy to access benefits.⁴⁸ As it stands, social construction theory describes low-income mothers and children as having distinct social constructions in which children are positively constructed and their parents less so. As a negatively constructed group, low-income mothers should experience burdensome programs. For the most part, studies of AFDC and TANF support this claim. However, as policy increasingly treats children and parents as “families”—serving children by supporting their parents—scholars should consider how policy describes the valence and attributes of low-income families and examine the kinds of burdens or benefits parents experience when using “family friendly” policies.

Family-friendly policies also present new ways to study policy feedback. As methods and data improve, policy feedback research can conduct the kinds of life course analyses taken up by sociologists and developmental psychologists and developmental scientists. A life course approach treats individuals as members of an age cohort and attends to how chronological age marks developmental benchmarks and social roles.⁴⁹ In the same way life stages connote distinct social roles, life stages can also imply connections to distinct sets of policies.

In some ways, the feedback literature accounts for this perspective by showing how different policies foster political constituencies across age groups. Seniors are politically activated by Social Security, young men by the GI Bill, and young middle-class women by higher education policies.⁵⁰ However, citizens often experience more than one policy at a time and the kinds of policies they experience depend on their life stage. Constituencies that emerge from public policy shift over time and likely develop around a package of programs rather than a single policy alone.

For example, participants in this study talked at length about the extent to which the “state” cared for their children and measured government responsiveness by how well the government kept their children safe and ensured them childhoods that were comparable to that of more affluent children. Thus education, school breakfast and lunch programs, after-school care, and recreational services may be especially salient to how low-income parents view government. Some policy feedback studies examine these policies, showing how extensive performance and accountability systems from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) depresses participation⁵¹ and how school

closures can mobilize parents.⁵² Yet we seldom consider how these policies work together to influence democratic citizenship for parents of school-aged children.

Likewise, for low-income parents with young children, policies like WIC, maternal and child health programs, and early childhood education programs are crucial to their everyday lives. But these policies are rarely the topic of implementation research or policy feedback studies. The inner workings of these programs may work together to promote political participation or at least buffer the negative effects of other policies that deter it.⁵³ Studies should consider how a set of policies like these correspond to the life stages of citizens to shape participation.

While this book reveals how the features of after-school policies can empower low-income parents, it does not elaborate on why these family-friendly policies have amassed political support and staying power while other means-tested programs face funding cuts and have become increasingly difficult to access. One possible explanation is that childcare policies and after-school programs are relatively new policy areas. Aside from Head Start, federally funded childcare policies targeting the poor did not emerge until the mid-1990s. Further, these programs were primarily framed as a work support, designed to provide women leaving welfare with childcare as they transitioned into employment. Debates about whether childcare—especially early childcare programs—serve as a work support or a way to enrich children during critical years of development have waxed and waned. But in recent years, research has promoted early childcare programs and after-school programs as tools for child and youth development that bring about large returns. These programs are framed as investments in children rather than handouts to able-bodied adults—a framing that undoubtedly boosts political support for these programs. Future studies about the political development of childcare and youth development programs coupled with careful analyses of the current configuration of political supporters can help explain how these family-friendly policies have survived.

Students of political history might also raise questions about the relative success of after-school care given their resemblance to less successful empowerment programs implemented during the War on Poverty. How have empowering childcare and after-school programs grown, when initiatives like the Community Action Programs of the 1960s failed?

First, the political empowerment parents experience is largely a by-product of program design rather than the expressed intent of after-school policies. However, community action programs aimed to incorporate the poor into service delivery to bring about political empowerment and social

change.⁵⁴ While the participatory features of the after-school programs discussed in this study mirror their Great Society predecessors, the expressed purpose of these after-school policies is to contribute to youth development and academic achievement. Parent involvement, whether at home through learning activities or through formal leadership and volunteer roles, are described as a means of boosting student achievement rather than fostering political empowerment. Thus the empowerment parents experience in these programs reflects an unintended consequence of policy design.

In addition, after-school policies allow states and local governments control over policy administration. Established by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funded and administered community action programs. The OEO sought to circumvent state and local power structures by funding agencies that had little stake in maintaining racial inequality. As Quadagno's classic work notes, "In selecting which programs to fund, OEO staff supported those favoring civil rights objectives and denied funding to those linked with the white power structure."⁵⁵

Opposition to the empowerment emphasis of Johnson's community action programs stemmed from state and local actors who objected to federal government providing direct resources to community action agencies. Detractors of community action programs framed this federal funding as usurping local political control.⁵⁶

However, the policies that support after-school programs give states and local actors considerable say in how funding is distributed to programs and how programs are implemented on the ground. State and local governments retain administrative authority over the Child Care Subsidy, Title I, and the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant. State-level agencies manage the award competition for the 21st CCLC grant and, in the case of the Child Care Subsidy and Title I, the distribution of funds to schools and organizations.

Implications for Political Participation

Will the political skills and lessons learned from service providers lead to broader forms of participation? Will the communication and organizational skills learned from these programs lead parents to write their congressional representatives to protect after-school funding? And can we expect these skills and interests to inspire petitions and demonstrations to keep programs from shutting their doors? In recent years, protests in North Carolina,⁵⁷ New York,⁵⁸ and Baltimore⁵⁹ against proposed after-school budget cuts suggest the answer is "yes." Given the rich literature on political

participation, we can conclude that the lessons learned from participatory experiences can certainly equip parents for these tasks. And while the evidence I present cannot speak to future participation outcomes, it does suggest that parents marshal communication, organizational, and leadership skills to persuade public officials to provide clean and safe parks for their children, to pressure local council members to fix potholes on their street corners, and to convince police officers that their neighborhoods are worth protecting. Political observers might view these activities as trivial, but for the mothers and fathers described in this book, safe and clean neighborhoods are the crux of democratic citizenship and how they understand their place within the polity.

Nevertheless, this book presents evidence that service providers may offer experiences that help narrow the gap in participation between the well-resourced and the disadvantaged. This more delegated and service-based safety net can help those who have been politically silenced by policy find their voice.

Appendix A

Methods

This book sets out to develop new ways of understanding how policy shapes participation in an increasingly devolved, delegated, service-based safety net. I use after-school programs as a case because they reflect all three trends and are an important policy context for low-income families.

Because we know very little about how these programs work on the ground, I use an interpretive qualitative study to develop theory and concepts for this important growing policy context. An interpretive approach seeks to “understand what a thing is by learning what it does, how particular people use it and in particular contexts.”¹ I wanted to explore program design in these settings as parents and staff knew it using—as much as possible—their own words.²

This does not mean I approached fieldwork without policy feedback studies in mind. Using the interpretive approach, I could work on data collection and analysis with some “provisional inferences” or hunches informed by previous research, but with some few caveats.³ First, I could not “test” key policy feedback concepts (e.g., program typologies, interpretive and resource effects) with my data. As a small “n” case study with roughly 70 interviews, the data is too limited for hypotheses testing. Moreover, I could not “control” for unobservable factors that may have affected parents’ experiences with programs or their participation outcomes. But carefully controlling for variables was not the aim of this study. As an interpretive study of policy feedback in a new context, I aimed to produce insights that were grounded in what actually happens in specific settings. Interpretive research explores the tension between what is found in the field and concepts from existing research. To that end, study sites should be authentic and not “controlled” settings.⁴

For the interpretive approach, theory building happens when the re-

searcher makes sense of the tension between what is discovered in the field and findings from previous studies.⁵ Throughout this study, I looked for plausible reasons behind puzzles that emerged from my observations and interviews and found I could involve both existing theory and my empirical findings to search for these explanations.⁶

Before I describe my research design and how I collected the data, I want to clarify the kinds of “causal” claims I make throughout the book. I do not aim for causality in the quantitative positivist sense, in which I test alternative explanations to arrive at precise causal mechanisms.⁷ Instead I pursue what proponents of the interpretive approach call “constitutive” causality, whereby I try to understand how participants in a setting explain their own behaviors and events.⁸ Instead of imposing policy feedback concepts as explanations of parent and staff experiences, I prioritize study participants’ own understanding of program experiences and how they explain their own behaviors.

The Process: Why I Selected Chicago, the Neighborhoods, and Cases

Interpretive research involves theorizing about unexpected observations from the field. Research designs using this approach are flexible and tend to evolve.⁹ This was certainly the case for this project. When I started, I wanted to explore how nonprofits and public agencies differed in service delivery. I was a graduate student in Ann Arbor at the time and hoped to study organizations in Detroit, but the Great Recession brought about significant economic decline in the Detroit metropolitan area and nonprofits across the city were closing their doors. I needed to go where there was a vibrant growing nonprofit community, so I explored Chicago as an option.

Chicago was the ideal setting for this study for a number of reasons. First, nonprofits administered most services targeting families and children. Illinois contracted large nonprofits to administer child welfare services: Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Child Care Subsidy program, and most publicly funded youth programs.¹⁰ Second, different types of nonprofits (e.g., large faith-based organizations, small community-based organizations, and national networks of nonprofit service providers) administered these services. I could explore how service delivery differed across different types of organizations. Finally, many of the professional associations supporting these organizations were headquartered in Chicago and held conferences and professional development workshops in the city. I could attend these meetings to recruit organizations into the study.

I compiled a list of multiservice agencies in Chicago that were supported by government funding and reached out to the directors of these agencies. In 2010, I attended conferences and met with a half dozen executive directors to explain the study and visit their organizations. Most were enthusiastic but only one director gave me access: Anne Jenkins from Progress Development Corp said yes.

Before I ever conducted an interview or jotted a field note, I visited Anne's organization several times and attended her annual fundraising benefit. At first, I was not sure where to begin or which programs to explore. Like many nonprofits, Progress offered a number of services. The organization ran two homeless shelters, a food pantry, clothing closet, a small preschool, and an after-school program. I chose the after-school program because it was the organization's largest and most established program. It was also the program community residents widely referenced—Progress was known for what it did “for the kids.”

After-school programs were also ideal because of their prevalence across nonprofits. I could examine fairly comparable after-school programs across organizations to explore how different types of organizations (faith-based, secular, or public agencies) administer these programs. And government funds sponsored most after-school programs through Title I, the Child Care Development Block Grant, and the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant. These different grant opportunities introduced more variation to the study—I could compare program features by organization type and by funding source.

How I Accessed Organizations

I did not access all three organizations that participated in this study at once. Case selection and data collection were sequential and emergent in part because it takes time to develop trusting relationships with study participants (Feldman et al., 2004, 35–36). In addition, the interpretive approach requires adjustments in research design as new insights emerge. I learned from one case what to look for when selecting another case and the kinds of questions to ask staff and parents.

I developed relationships with Progress staff by volunteering extensively for eight months. I tutored seventh- and eighth-grade students twice a week and helped staff organize family and community events. I also spent my summer at Progress, chaperoning summer field trips, leading reading groups, and coordinating the program's summer basketball league. After several months

of volunteering, I was ready to start interviewing parents. My consistent presence over the course of the school term smoothed my transition from volunteer to researcher. I started conducting interviews at the beginning of the school term—in September 2012—but my responsibilities within the organization did not end. I started attending staff meetings and trainings. I taught the fifth- and sixth-grade class, taught music to students, and continued to coordinate the program's basketball leagues.

Throughout my time at Progress, staff stressed the importance of understanding the “Progress” way. They wanted me to accurately capture the program's aims and their commitment to families. After a while, “getting the story right” involved spending time with staff outside of program hours. Staff members invited me to their homes for dinner to share personal stories about how they ended up at Progress. They were proud of their work and eager to share their stories with a broader audience. This made our partnership relatively easy.

My time at Progress taught me what to look for in other cases. First, I got a glimpse of when, where, and how staff interacted with parents. Parents and staff conversed during parent pick-up, regular phone check-ins, parent involvement opportunities, and program events. And these interactions ranged from formal routine conversations about student behavior to more personal conversations about family life.

Knowing this focused my data strategy collection for the next setting. I refined my interview protocol to include questions about personal conversations with staff and instances when staff went above and beyond to support families. I also asked parents to share longer narratives about how they arrived at each program and how they viewed the program in relation to their families and their communities.

After spending a full school term at Progress, I was in search for another program supported by a different grant. I hoped to find an after-school program in Westfield that was funded primarily by Child Care Subsidy reimbursements. I found a program blocks from Progress, but a labor dispute at the center limited my access. I needed another program in a similar neighborhood. Through my connections with leaders in the nonprofit community, I found an after-school program on the Southside at South End Community Center.

A Note on Neighborhoods

At Progress, neighborhood contexts emerged as an important way staff and parents viewed programs. Three characteristics of neighborhoods seemed

fundamental to how staff and parents understood programs. First, the racial makeup of the neighborhood was important to parents: 90 percent of Westfield's residents are black. When asked to describe the organization, parents commented on how Progress provided opportunities for *black* children and met the needs of *black* families. Westfield's high unemployment rate and deep poverty also shaped how parents and staff described programs. Parents noted the limited job prospects in Westfield and were grateful for the opportunities Progress gave their children—experiences they could not provide given their own hardships.

Staff similarly commented on Westfield's economic decline and high unemployment, recounting stories of intergenerational poverty among families and parents' efforts to make ends meet through Westfield's informal underground economy of bartering, sharing, and favors. Finally, crime was especially salient to staff and parents. Parents expressed concerns about children's safety and complained about a lack of safe places for children to play. Staff shared stories about the growing influence of gangs in the neighborhood and losing students to gun violence.

Given the importance of neighborhood conditions, I needed to select an after-school program that was not only comparable in programming but also located in a similar neighborhood to Progress's. I chose the South End Community Center, which was funded primarily by Child Care Subsidy reimbursements, because the surrounding neighborhood—South End—shared some of Westfield's characteristics. While slightly better off than Westfield in terms of poverty and crime, the neighborhood was about the same size as Westfield and was nearly identical in race and economic opportunities. Table A.1 shows the demographic characteristics of both neighborhoods.

Both neighborhoods are predominately African American and face high poverty and unemployment rates relative to the rest of Chicago. In 2010,

Table A.1. Neighborhood Characteristics

	Westfield	South End	Chicago
Population	20,000	24,000	2,695,598
African American	90%	87%	32.9%
Per Capita Income	\$14,000	\$19,900	\$27,148
Without High School Diploma	26%	18%	20%
Unemployment Rate	17%	17%	11.1%
Below Poverty Line	40%	28%	18.7%
Homicide Rate	38	31	18.6

Source: Data retrieved from the 2010 U.S. Census.

Note: Estimates are approximate to de-identify Westfield and South End.

roughly 16 percent of Westfield and 17 percent of South End residents were unemployed relative to 11 percent of Chicagoans. Both neighborhoods experienced deep poverty; nearly 40 percent of Westfield's residents lived below the poverty line and almost 30 percent of the South End community lived in poverty.

The differences between the two communities should not be glossed over. Ten percent more of Westfield's residents live in poverty in comparison to South End and Westfield has a significantly higher homicide rate. But at the time of the study, Westfield was considered one of the most impoverished and violent communities in Chicago. Not many neighborhoods closely matched its crime and poverty rates. And while South End and Westfield are not identical, they are similar along key characteristics that seemed most salient to study participants—racial composition, unemployment, poverty, and crime.

I approached the South End Community Center in the same way I approached Progress—by volunteering. I volunteered for three months to get a sense of the program's day-to-day activities. I played with children and assisted with check-in, bus rides, homework help, and chaperoning short trips to and from bathrooms, playgrounds, and the gym. I officially gained access to South End Community Center in January 2013 and conducted interviews and observations from January through December. I focused on staff observations and parent interviews during the school term and conducted most staff interviews over the summer months.

I still needed to add breadth to the study through a public case and one funded by Title I dollars. A public after-school case could provide descriptive insight on whether two nonprofits—as cases of delegated governance—offered distinct program experiences when compared to a public setting. A Title I program could offer variation in funding sources—I could compare how Title I funds influenced program design relative to the Child Care Subsidy program or the 21st Century grant.

Two years following my initial fieldwork, I went back to Westfield to recruit Jackson Elementary School staff into the study. I chose Jackson because it used Title I funds to provide an after-school program for struggling students. I also selected Jackson because I had already developed relationships with its staff and parents through my work with Progress. Progress's basketball league hosted games in Jackson's gym; as coordinator of the league, I knew the principal well and had met many of the parents and students. Because I had already cultivated these relationships, I easily gained access to the school's after-school program.

At the time of the second round of data collection in the spring of 2015

and the spring of 2016, Jackson was relatively stable compared to other schools in Westfield and South End. Between 2013 and 2015, the city of Chicago consolidated several schools on the Southside and Westside, which led to an influx of students and teachers into remaining or “receiving” schools. The South End community was especially affected by two school closures and the remaining schools received new students and teachers. My goal was not to explore how parents were grappling with school closures—although that did emerge as an important issue for parents in interviews. I wanted to talk to parents who had stronger long-term ties to an elementary school. While Jackson has faced the risk of closure in the past, the school was not affected by Chicago Public School’s closure and consolidation plan. I could interview staff who had long-term experiences with the school and parents who had years of experience with Jackson’s teachers and programs.

How I Presented Myself

When I began interviews, parents knew me as a volunteer or staff member who looked after, taught, and tutored their children. Once I informed them that I was a graduate student interested in their program experiences, they expressed interest in the study. Here I think my identity as a young black woman was an asset. I shared the same racial and gender identity of many study participants, and I sensed respondents were willing to share detailed stories about their lives and these programs because they viewed my success as their own.¹¹ Parents were especially supportive of my pursuit of higher education. My recruitment efforts were usually met with reassuring grins and words of encouragement, such as “Oh this for school? You go girl!” and “Get that degree!”

Staff members expressed similar enthusiasm. They often asked questions about my college experience and shared their own aspirations for higher education. This helped my study immensely. Staff and parents were supportive and—more importantly—willing study participants.

Observations and Interviews

Instead of focusing on what students did in these settings, I observed what staff and parents did. I started my fieldwork by observing and documenting general activities to get a sense of the program’s pace, key transitions, and staff routines. The excerpts at the beginning of the book reflect the kinds of

observations I conducted at each program. But as analysis progressed, I narrowed the focus of observations to staff-parent interactions at parent drop-off or pick-up, program events, and parent meetings or activities. I followed Emerson's (1994) guidelines on field notes, starting first with jottings and then expanding these jottings later.

In the beginning, I had trouble balancing my time as a volunteer and my role as a researcher: supporting staff while documenting activity was daunting. To manage this, I designated days for observations and days when I would focus on my volunteer duties. I also shadowed specific staff members. While I was not given access to staff meetings at Jackson, I did take notes on most staff meetings that I attended at South End and Progress.

As my observations narrowed to parents and staff interactions, jotting notes became much easier. These interactions usually occurred at specific times—at the very beginning and end of programs and during family and community events. At all three programs, I would arrive earlier on-site to clean, summarize, and expand on jottings from the previous day.

Observations helped me decide whom to talk to and what to ask. I learned which parents had long-term relationships with staff at each program, and I could identify who was relatively new to the program. I also learned about parents' interactions—I could distinguish parents who visited the program most frequently from those who were less involved. I could also identify parents who had more casual or personal interactions with staff from those who had brief exchanges with staff as childcare professionals. Observing this behavior also helped refine my recruiting efforts—I sought out deeply invested program veterans and newer parents to capture a range of experiences.

I initially recruited parents through flyers that were sent home, but I found that personally inviting parents to participate was a more effective recruitment strategy.

At Progress, I approached parents at program dismissal and events hosted by the after-school program. At South End and Jackson, I took a similar approach. I started with a wide distribution of flyers. As I completed interviews with those who responded to the flyers, I moved toward more targeted invitations to recruit parents who had a range of experiences with the program. Table A.2 describes parent characteristics.

The parents I interviewed across these programs did not differ much in terms of age and race. All of the parents were low-income, African American parents in their early 30s. Single-parent households were common across all three groups but most prevalent among Jackson parents. Family size varied and the average age of children varied slightly across programs. On average,

Progress parents had larger families and older children when compared to South End's and Jackson's parents. Parents' education levels differed marginally between Progress and South End parents. Both groups of parents had at least a high school diploma and, in rare instances, some college experience. Jackson Elementary parents interviewed were the least educated, with an average level of education just shy of a high school diploma.

Parents across all three programs experienced poverty. With household sizes ranging from four to five, South End's and Progress's average household income neared the federal poverty line.¹² At the time of the interviews, Jackson parents experienced deep poverty. Several parents reported long stints of unemployment in the past year and noted the difficulty of finding work. Nearly all of the parents received some sort of public assistance ranging from Medicaid to public housing.¹³

What about Selection?

In some ways, parent characteristics differed significantly; marriage was more prominent among the Progress and South End parents I interviewed and Jackson's parents were the least educated and experienced the greatest economic hardship. One might be concerned that these differences influenced how parents selected these programs, which would weaken the central argument of this book. There could be something distinct about either set of parents that motivated their choice of programs, and these character-

Table A.2. Parent Characteristics

	Progress Youth Development (<i>n</i> = 15)	South End Community Center (<i>n</i> = 15)	Jackson Elementary (<i>n</i> = 17)
Mean Age	33	30	33
Race	100% African American	100% African American	100% African American
Marital Status ^a	60% Single	71% Single	100% Single
Number of Children (mean)	4	3	3
Age of Children (mean)	12	9	9
Education Level	13.8	14.5	11.3
Income	\$26,000	\$28,000	\$8,000
Public Assistance	86%	86%	80%

^a"Single" refers to both never married and divorced households.

istics might explain program experiences and participation outcomes. For example, South End parents might be especially active or civic minded and opt to enroll their children into the program because of its parental involvement opportunities, while Jackson parents prefer a program with fewer parental commitments or involvement opportunities.

Selection bias concerns—while important—take on a different meaning in an interpretive study. The objective is not to control differences but to understand how these differences matter. For example, if each group of parents differs significantly in the selection process, I can explore why one group of parents prefers one type of program more than another or identify the barriers to accessing more engaging participatory programs. These kinds of insights could have direct policy implications on program design and access. The common themes that emerge across these distinct groups of parents might suggest broader aspects of program experiences that can be applied to other similar settings. In both cases, these kinds of insights serve as the foundations for new concepts and hypotheses that can be tested in larger studies.

Even with these theory-building objectives in mind, I took some measures to address selection bias. First, I looked to the literature on how parents select childcare providers to guide parent interview questions and analysis. Studies suggest that parents select providers whom they deem trustworthy and often choose providers that are conveniently located and provide care during hours that best fit work schedules.¹⁴ I asked parents to share how and why they chose to enroll their child into these programs. Significant variation in these responses would suggest some selection bias.

But interviews suggest that parents used the same criteria to select a program. Parents chose programs by the kinds of academic support they provided students and whether programs were located near work or home. Forty-five of the 48 parents interviewed emphasized the quality of homework help and tutoring as factors they considered when selecting providers. Parents enrolled their children in these after-school programs with the expectation that these programs would improve their children's academic performance.

Parents also heavily weighed the proximity of programs from home, school, and their workplaces. Sixty percent of parents reported the program's convenient location as influencing their choice of providers. The importance of proximity emerged when I asked parents to describe other options for after-school care. Most responded that there weren't any—even if other programs were located in the neighborhood. Parents defined convenient locations as programs that were within *safe* walking distance of schools and home. They distinguished safe blocks from dangerous ones, and—unless the

program provided transportation home—parents chose programs that were within a safe walking distance.

But even if parents selected programs for the same reason, selection bias within programs might complicate the inferences I draw about program design and participation. It may be the case that those who serve on parent advisory boards or volunteer would have done so in another setting, with or without the program. Moreover, these parents would likely be civically and politically engaged without the help of these organizations. In the same way, parents who are passively tied to each organization could also have similar levels of inactivity in political realms. This study does not observe the counterfactual for either kind of parent. I do not observe what parents would do without the program. Instead I adopt the conventional perspective on political mobilization to understand how the design of these programs matters. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) describe mobilization as the “process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate . . . one of these actors has mobilized somebody when it has done something to increase the likelihood of her participation” (26).

With that in mind, the narratives presented in this project can be interpreted as evidence of how these programs targeting low-income families can influence the likelihood of parents participating in civic and political activities. In this sense, this book is a story about how the features of services and the organizations that deliver them intervene in the mobilization process. These programs may not determine parents’ predispositions to political activity, but this study shows key features of policy that organizations can build upon.

Staff Participation

I recruited staff at all three programs by sharing information about the study at staff meetings and circulating flyers. Staff members who were interested in participating contacted me directly. I conducted the interviews in a place suggested by the staff member—which sometimes included a private office on-site or a coffee shop. Table A.3 describes staff characteristics at each program.

Of the three programs, Jackson Elementary’s after-school staff was the oldest, most educated, and most experienced group. On average, staff members were in their mid-thirties and most of the staff interviewed (71.4 percent) had graduate degrees—a master’s in education or a master’s in education leadership. Staff—on average—had more than nine years of professional

experience either teaching or supporting the after-school program. At Jackson Elementary, all of the staff members interviewed worked in full-time positions for the school. Along with extensive education and professional experience, Jackson's after-school staff members were also the most diverse of the three groups along gender and racial lines.

Distinct from Jackson's veteran educators, the staff members at Progress were an eclectic group of college interns, recent college graduates, licensed teachers, and nonprofit professionals. While every staff member had earned a college degree, three earned advanced degrees, two staff members earned an advanced degree in nonprofit management, the other in education. The staff was less racially diverse than Jackson's after-school staff and had, on average, three years less experience.

The staff at South End was predominately African American and residents of the South End community. All but one were part-time employees and younger than age 25. With the exception of one part-time employee, every youth worker was once a participant in the youth program as a child and became a program employee during high school and college. All of the part-time youth workers had at least three years of program experience. Levels of

Table A.3. Staff Characteristics

	Jackson Elementary After-school Program (<i>n</i> = 7)	Progress Youth Development Corp After-school Program (<i>n</i> = 9)	South End Community Center After-school Program (<i>n</i> = 7)
Age	35	31	27
Race			
Black	3 (42.8%)	2 (22.2%)	7 (100%)
White	2 (28.6%)	6 (66.6%)	
Hispanic	1 (14.3%)	1 (11.1%)	
Asian	1 (14.3%)		
Gender			
Male	2 (28.6%)	2 (22.2%)	2 (28.6%)
Female	5 (71.4%)	7 (77.8%)	5 (71.4%)
Education			
High School			2 (28.6%)
Some College	1 (14.3%)		3 (42.8%)
Bachelor's	1 (14.3%)	6 (76.6%)	1 (14.3%)
Graduate Degree	5 (71.4%)	3 (33.3%)	1 (14.3%)
Tenure (years)	9.42	6.5	6.6
Full Time	7 (100%)	9 (100%)	1 (14.3%)
Part Time	0	0	6 (85.7%)

education varied among the South End staff; most of the part-time employees had some college experience or were currently completing degrees.

The Interviews

I asked every parent and staff member the same set of questions, but I tailored these questions for each site based on my participant observations. In the case of Jackson's after-school program, I noticed that parents sought out one particular staff member. When I interviewed this staff member, I asked her to describe how she interacted with parents, how her close relationships with parents differed from more distant connections, and how these relationships changed over time.

I took a similar approach with parent interviews. At South End, I frequently observed a group of parents who had more casual social interactions with the staff. When I interviewed these parents, I reframed general questions about staff interactions to include behavior I observed. I asked questions such as "I noticed you tend to stick around during parent pick-up to chat with this staff member. How often do you stick around to chat with staff? Who do you usually talk to? What kinds of things do you tend to talk about?" I assured parents and staff that their identities and our conversations were confidential.

Analysis

My efforts to understand the meaning of program experiences for both staff and parents involved a mix of deductive and inductive analyses. My approach was deductive because previous research on policy feedback, policy implementation, and nonprofits informed the analysis. It was inductive because it was directed by a close read of interview data that allowed for emergent concepts to inform the analytic story.¹⁵

To aid analysis, all transcripts, memos, and field notes were entered into a qualitative software package, NVIVO-11. I initially categorized respondents by the interview questions. I then created line-by-line codes for interview transcripts and field notes to identify crucial aspects of program experiences from staff and parents' perspectives. I grouped these narrow detailed codes into broader analytical categories by different levels of analysis (e.g., organization practices and policy).

I created these broader analytical categories through an "iterative com-

parison” process whereby I treated every respondent as a case and compared responses.¹⁶ For example, parents uniformly highlighted relationships with staff (whether professional or personal) as an important part of their experiences. To explore how these relationships emerged, I categorized parents who had close ties with staff and those who did not. I probed the data for differences and similarities between parents’ responses by asking questions such as “What kinds of interactions do parents with close ties to staff have compared to those who don’t? Are there differences in how frequently these parents engage staff? Do these parents look different demographically?” I also explored parents’ own explanations about how and why they interacted with staff. By comparing and contrasting parent responses, I could tease out parents’ motives and preferences for relationships with staff.

I captured interview responses in data matrices that connected staff and parent characteristics to emergent themes. These matrices helped me identify patterns in experiences across study participants (Ryan and Bernard 2000). As I collected and analyzed data, I wrote memos that described my impressions of the data and hunches about emerging theory. These memos were the basis of most of the chapters in this book.

Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Parent Interview Protocol

Usually I just start by asking you to tell me a little about yourself? How long have you lived in Chicago? What brought you to Chicago? What about your family? Do you have any children?

- 1) What brought you to (X agency)? Tell me a little about your circumstances around the time you came to (X agency)?
- 2) How did you first hear about this program?
- 3) How did you choose this agency/program?
 - a. Were there other options?
 - b. Were you more comfortable with this agency/program than others? Why?
- 4) Can you tell me about your first experience with agency X? What happened that day?
 - a. Did you have to apply at the agency for the program? Can you explain to me what that process was like for you? (probe for long waits, forms/paperwork, timeliness of agency response, types of questions asked during the application process—were they too personal/considered appropriate, were there clear explanations about the application process?)

A. Program Experiences—Self-Reflections

What were your hopes going into the program? Did you have any personal goals?

- 1) Has the program been helpful in achieving these goals? If so, how?

- 2) Thinking about your life before you started the program, how has your life changed since you started/finished the program. What has stayed the same?
- 3) How has the program most impacted your life?
- 4) In what ways have your experiences with the program changed the way you feel about yourself?
 - a. Your family?
 - b. Your neighborhood/community?

B. Program Participation

Now I want to talk about what it's like being in the program.

- 1) Tell me about the last time you were here at agency X. What happened? Just tell me from beginning to end.
 - a. Is this usually how your days go here at agency X?
 - b. If not, what was different this day?
 - i. How does your day-to-day experience with the program change over the course of the week?
 - ii. Was there ever a time when your experiences with the program were different?
 1. How was it different?
 2. How has the program changed overtime?
- 2) Are there any specific rules you have to follow or certain expectations you have to meet to stay in the program?
- 3) What happens if you break a rule?
- 4) Has there been a time when you or someone you know in the program broke a rule? Can you describe what happened?
- 5) Why do you think the program has these rules?
- 6) In your opinion, would you consider the program rules reasonable and fair? How are they fair/unfair?
 - a. What kinds of rules would seem more fair to you?
- 7) Is there a way to challenge decisions that are made by staff? How would you go about raising a complaint to a staff member?
- 8) If someone in the program were to challenge a worker's decision, how would you think it would turn out?
- 9) Was there ever a time when you or someone you knew in the program raised a complaint to the agency or had a problem with the program? Can you describe what happened?

- a) How did the staff respond?
- b) What did or did not go your/their way?

Now I'm going to ask you about the staff here at Agency X.

- 1) Do you remember your first meeting with a staff member or caseworker?
 - a. Can you tell me about the first time you met a staff member from agency X?
- 2) Do you usually contact a specific staff member when you have a concern? How often do you meet with staff? What do you typically talk about?
- 3) What about your last meeting with X, what kinds of things did you talk about?
- 4) Is the staff here usually helpful and supportive? Can you tell me about a time when the staff were really helpful/supportive to you? How about a time when they weren't as helpful?
- 5) Do you feel like your caseworker/staff members listen to you when you have a concern? What kinds of things do they do that lets you know they're listening? (Probe for an example.)
 - a. How do staff members respond to your questions or problems?
- 6) In your opinion, do the staff here have to follow strict rules or are they flexible? Do they usually work with you? Are some staff members/caseworkers more strict than others?
- 7) Overall, how would you evaluate workers at agency X?
 - a) Do you feel like you are usually treated fairly?
 - b) Do you feel like you are usually treated with respect?

With the presidential elections coming up this November, people are interested in how people feel about politics. Now I am going to ask you some questions about how you feel about the government, politics, and being politically active.

A. *Broader Politics*

- 1) When you hear the word "politics" what are the first things that come to mind?
- 2) What about the word "politicians?"
- 3) How about the word "government?"
- 4) What about the word "welfare?"

- 5) In your opinion, do you think welfare is a part of the larger system of government?

B. Political Activity

- 6) When you think about becoming involved in politics or participating in politics, what comes to mind?
- 7) In your opinion, how would a person become involved in politics? What types of activities would someone do to become involved?
- 8) Would you say that you are “politically active?”
 - a. Can you give me some examples of your political involvement?
 - i. Probe for frequency and activity over time.
 - b. Did you vote in the most recent presidential election on November 6th?
 - c. Who did you vote for?
 - i. What influenced your decision to vote for that candidate?
 - d. What about other candidates, were there other candidates in congressional offices that you voted for?
 - i. What influenced your decision to vote for these candidates?
 - e. What issues were most important to you in this most recent election?

C. Civic Engagement/Community Involvement

- 9) What about being involved in your community, what does it mean to be “active” in your community? How would a person become involved in the community?
 - a. Would you say you are active in your community?
 - b. What kinds of activities do you do in your community?

D. Internal and External Political Efficacy

- 10) When you think about the policies we get from the government, what would you say is important in determining these policies?
- 11) In general would you say that government does what the citizens want? Can you give me an example of when the government has or hasn't done what the citizens want?
- 12) In your opinion, which groups have the most influence on the government?

P: Or do people in this country have an equal amount of influence on the government?

- P: How can you tell these groups have influence?
- 13) How about yourself, how do you as an individual think you can influence the government?
- P: Do you feel like public officials care much about what people like you think? Do you feel that government officials listen to people like you?
- P: How does the government show it cares about what people like you think?
- P: How about the local government? In what ways does the city show it listens to people like you? (Additional probe about people in the community like neighbors, churches, and organizations.)
- P: How would you describe your ability to influence your neighborhood schools? Do you think your individual actions matter in influencing school policies in your community?
- 14) Tell me about what actions you think would be most effective in getting the (government, schools, the city) to listen to your concerns.
- 15) Overall, would you say that you have a pretty good understanding of how the government works? Compared to most people out there, would you say that you know a lot or only a little about politics and government?
- 16) If a group of X clients got together and formed a collective movement, do you think it could actually influence the kinds of policies we get from the government? Why?

Church-Based Nonprofit

- 1) This agency/program is affiliated with X church—do you attend any Sunday morning worship services, Bible studies, or meetings at this church?
- 2) If yes, on average how often have you attended over the past year?
- 3) Are you actively involved in any church work outside of attending services? Probe: Like ministries or groups at X church.
- 4) Describe group/ministry and your involvement:
 - a. During your involvement with church X have you done any of the following:
 - a) written a letter?
 - b) gone to a meeting where you take part in making decisions?
 - c) planned or chaired a meeting?

- d) given a presentation or speech?
- e) contacted a government official?
- 5) Would you say these activities have improved your ability to work with people on a political issue or problem?
- 6) Would you say these activities have improved your ability to participate in some of the political activities we mentioned earlier such as voting, protesting, writing letters to public officials, and things like that? In what ways?

Recruitment

- 1) Since your involvement with agency X, have you ever been encouraged by an agency worker to register to vote?
 - a) Have you ever been encouraged by an agency worker to vote?
 - b) Have you ever attended a program event where an elected official was present?
 - c) Have you ever been introduced to an elected official through your involvement with the agency?
 - d) Since you became involved with agency X, have you ever attended a political rally or demonstration hosted by the agency?
 - e) Have you ever attended a political rally or demonstration hosted by an organization affiliated with the agency?

This concludes our interview. Thank you for your participation.

Staff Interview Protocol

A. Introductory/Background Questions

- 1) What is your current position?
- 2) Could you describe your responsibilities with the agency?
- 3) Tell me a little about yourself, what brought you to agency X? How did you learn about the agency? When did you start working here?
- 4) What type of work did you do before you came to agency X?

B. Agency/Program Information

- 1) Can you tell me about this organization and its mission?
- 2) What about X program, can you tell me about its mission?
- 3) Can you describe the services offered through this program?

- 4) In what ways does the mission of the agency influence how you deliver services and assistance to the community?

C. Program Participation

- 1) How do clients usually apply for the program?
 - a. What are the administrative procedures for receiving new clients?
- 2) Once parents enroll their children into your program, what are the requirements parents must meet for their child to continue to participate in the program?
 - a. How about for the children in the program?
 - b. What happens if parents or children fail to meet these requirements?

D. Day-to-Day Operations

Now I want to understand how your program functions on a daily basis. I am going to ask you questions about daily routines, your interactions with parents and their children, and parent's responsibilities in the program.

- 1) Could you describe a typical workday for you? In detail, describe your daily routine from start to finish.
 - a. Does this change from day to day or throughout the week?
 - b. Does your routine change over the course of the year?

E. Staff-Client Relationships

Now I'm going to focus on your interactions with children and parents.

- 1) How would you describe your relationship with the children enrolled in the program?
- 2) Tell me, what's a typical day look like for a child enrolled in the program?
- 3) Tell me about how you work with these families as they move through the program? How do you engage them?
 - a. When you do interact with parents, what kinds of things do you discuss?
 - b. How would you describe your relationship with parents? Are your interactions more personal or professional?
 - c. Are parents assigned to a staff member to correspond with regularly through their participation in the program?

- d. Are parents required to meet with agency staff during their time in the program?

F. Parental Involvement

1. How are parents encouraged to get involved in the program? (Probe for specific examples.)
 - a. Are parents encouraged to volunteer?
 - b. Do parents have a say in the kinds of activities the program does with the kids?

G. Additional Services/Resources for Parents

- 1) What kinds of additional resources are available to support parents?
 - a. Are there any programs or services that specifically target parents?
 - b. Do you find that parents need more support than the program offers? How often does this usually occur? What kinds of support do they need?
- 2) Do you connect parents with other organizations that can offer assistance? Can you give me an example of how you helped connect parents to these organizations?
- 3) Have you ever assisted parents in applying for public assistance such as TANF, Food Stamps, Medicaid, WIC, Child Care Subsidy, Public Housing? How did you help this parent?

H. Political Mobilization (Reserved for Executive Directors and Administrators)

Now I am going to ask you some questions about how your organization encourages community and political involvement among parents.

- 1) Does your organization publicly advocate for particular programs on behalf of poor populations? In what ways?
- 2) Does your organization seek to educate the public about issues particularly relevant to the interests of poor populations? Can you give specific examples?

1. **Political Mobilization** (ask respondents to give examples).
 - 1) There are arguments that poverty marginalizes people economically, socially, and politically. Do you think the parents in this program have a voice in their community? (Probe why or why not.)
 - 2) Is there anything your organization does to strengthen that “voice?”
 - a. Does the organization encourage parents to contact elected officials?
 - b. Have you ever invited an elected official to speak or talk with parents?
 - c. Do you encourage parents to become actively involved in their community through volunteering or working with others to address a community problem?
 - d. Does the agency encourage parents to vote? How about participate in other political actions like signing petitions or demonstrating and protesting?
 - 3) Does the agency provide information about current issues in local, state, and national politics? Materials like this would include information about candidates or information about important laws or policies that may affect the community.

I. Leadership and Employment Opportunities

- 1) Do you offer parents employment opportunities within the agency?
 - a. By employment, I mean a paid position with the agency. (What kinds of positions have parents held in the past? What about currently?)
- 2) Are there formal or informal support groups for parents?
 - a. Are parents required to attend these groups?
- 3) How is parents’ feedback incorporated in the program?
 - a. Do you use satisfaction surveys to get feedback from clients? If so, how often?
 - b. Are there advisory boards or councils where parents are invited to participate?
 - c. What role do these boards or councils play in agency decision-making?
- 4) How has parent feedback influenced the program?
 - a. Has the council/board influenced the day-to-day operations of the program?

- 5) Are there leadership opportunities within the agency for parents? In what ways can parents assume leadership roles?
- 6) Currently, are there any parents in leadership positions now? Describe their responsibilities.
- 7) Currently, do any former parents serve on the board of directors for the agency?

J. Closing Questions

- 1) Overall, how would you describe the environment for parents receiving services?
- 2) In your opinion, what's the most unique part of this program?
 - a. This agency? What makes this program different from other programs?
- 3) I'd like to give you a chance to elaborate on anything that you said or to emphasize anything especially important. Did I miss anything?

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Throughout this book, I use pseudonyms to refer to the neighborhoods, organizations, programs, and respondents.

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9. Eric Elmer Schattschneider, *Politics, pressures and the tariff: A study of free private enterprise in pressure politics, as shown in the 1929–1930 revision of the tariff* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1935), 288.

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12. Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram, “Social construction of target populations: Implications for politics and policy,” *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 2 (1993): 334–47; Joe Soss, “Lessons of welfare: Policy design, political learning, and political action,” *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 2 (1999): 363–80.

13. Paul Pierson, “When effect becomes cause: Policy feedback and political change,” *World Politics* 45, no. 4 (1993): 595–628.

14. See Campbell, *How policies make citizens*; and Mettler, *Soldiers to citizens*.

15. Soss, *Unwanted claims*; Bruch, Ferree, and Soss, “From policy to polity.”

16. Soss, *Unwanted claims* discusses Head Start, which is often administered through nonprofit organizations but focuses on the individual-level effects of program participation.

17. See Soss, *Unwanted claims*; Bruch, Ferree, and Soss, “From policy to polity.”

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23. *Ibid.*

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2. Sarah K. Bruch, Myra Marx Ferree, and Joe Soss, “From policy to polity: Democracy, paternalism, and the incorporation of disadvantaged citizens,” *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 2 (2010): 205–26.

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18. *Ibid.*

19. See Pierson, “When cause becomes effect,” 619; see also Mettler and Soss, “The consequences of public policy for democratic citizenship.”

20. *Ibid.* Pierson, “When cause becomes effect.”

21. Schneider and Ingram, “Social construction of target populations”; Soss, *Unwanted claims*; Campbell, *How policies make citizens*.

22. Bandura discusses how modeling can strengthen efficacy beliefs by reducing task uncertainty; see Albert Bandura, “Social cognitive theory of self-regulation,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50 (1991): 248–87.

23. In chapters 2 and 3, I discuss how competition motivates South End’s program director to attract and retain students and encourage attendance. Though parents such as Sharon see very few choices for their children, from Celeste’s perspective, parent vouchers open up competition. She does not compete against formal centers (which are scarce); she does compete with family, friends, or relatives.

24. Brady, Schlozman, and Verba, “Prospecting for participants.”

25. Brady, Schlozman, and Verba, “Prospecting for participants.”

26. Seven parents said they wanted to work with children.

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29. See Hahn, *How organizations develop activists*, 98–100.
30. Brady, Schlozman, and Verba, “Prospecting for participants.”
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36. See Nicole P. Marwell, “Privatizing the welfare state: Nonprofit community-based organizations as political actors,” *American Sociological Review* 69 (2004): 265–91.

Chapter 6

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2. Campbell, *How policies make citizens*, 139.
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6. Morgan and Campbell, *The delegated welfare state*; Smith and Lipsky, *Nonprofits for hire*.
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Appendix A

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