

Picket Signs & Shovels

LESSONS ON PARENT POWER AND SYSTEMS CHANGE
FROM UMM AL-FAHM, ISRAEL

BY ALEX CORTEZ,
MANAGING PARTNER, NEW PROFIT



When I first started exploring how parents ¹ can exercise their power, particularly in education, I found it very easy to fall into the trap of assuming that their success only manifests when parents show up with picket signs and megaphones, using their voices in protest to influence the direction of those in positions of authority.

To be fair, this is a totally legitimate and sometimes necessary way for parents to employ their innate power to change systems.

However, it can also be an oversimplification. As often, parents can and will also show up with shovels to build together with those in authority towards the common good – but only if those in authority are willing to respect and recognize parents as partners who play an essential role in determining what gets built.

In the Arab-Israeli city of Umm al-Fahm, amidst the turmoil of COVID, parents used both tools. Parents first organized against their education system. But then the education leadership of the city – led by its Director of Education, Mahmoud Zohadi, and in partnership with a social change organization called [MAOZ](#) ²– reframed the system’s mindset about and relationship with parents so that the system could embrace the inherent power of parents. Parents then organized together with educators to build a stronger education system and community.

It is a story with lessons for parents and education leaders in any community – maybe even yours.

Picket Signs and Parent Power in the Time of COVID

Umm al-Fahm is a municipality of 56,000 people, nearly all of whom are Arab citizens of Israel. 60% live below the Israeli poverty line, and 57% of its residents are unemployed. It is a young

1. I am using ‘parent’ as shorthand for any family or community member taking responsibility for the education and future of a child

2. www.maoz-il.org/en/

city, with almost 42% of its citizens under 19 – so how education works or fails will shape the community's future.

Like the rest of the world, Umm al-Fahm was not prepared for COVID, including its school system. On March 14th, all schools in Israel closed. Only half of Umm al-Fahm's students had consistent access to internet or computers and were able to participate in remote learning.

Exacerbating the crisis was the negative relationship between schools and parents, even though the schools were locally led by the municipality's Arab leaders. The school system had historically dismissed parents as obstacles to learning. A principal in one of Umm al-Fahm's schools acknowledged that their pre-pandemic mindset towards parents wasn't positive: *"In many cases, we saw parents as nuisances who got in the way of our work."* Because so many parents lacked education and lived in poverty, the schools felt that they had to act as if parents essentially didn't exist – that they were non-factors in education. It was described to me as a well-intentioned effort that tried to acknowledge how difficult the home environment was for a number of students. *"We thought the best way to create social mobility and a level playing field was to treat all children like they had no parents, and just focus on what we can give them inside the school."*

As a principal described it, *"we didn't think parents were bad; just not capable and not having the time... we never thought of parents as having a say in the education process. We never thought of them as partners or assets."*

It was not malign intent – but the resulting impact was a toxic relationship between schools and parents.

Starting on May 3rd, Israel gradually reopened schools to try to salvage the remainder of the semester, which ended June 30th. In much of Israel, student attendance returned to around 80% in May.

In Umm al-Fahm, student attendance started at 40% and then quickly declined, approaching 10% by the end of the semester. Parents exercised their power and simply refused to send their children back to school. The Council of Local Guardians – their equivalent of a PTA – encouraged parents to keep their kids home as an act of protection and an assertion of agency, even as the city lacked an infrastructure for remote learning.

That summer, the school system had to pause and reflect on what to do. One Umm al-Fahm principal shared with me her experience: *“There was no denying the problem! Me – I am the principal! I am the educated one, and there I sat in an empty school and nobody was coming; but I could walk down the street and see a parent in a store instructing other parents not to send their children to school.”*

The city’s education leaders were starting to feel the pressure that parents could exert. Whereas before they dismissed parents, this time they had no choice but to change their approach. Mahmoud Zohadi, Umm al-Fahm’s Director of Education, summarized their pre-COVID mindset: *“In the past we tried to partner with parents, but it didn’t work. We didn’t feel urgency, and it felt like a headache, so why bother?”* Now parents were exercising their collective power to essentially go on strike, and because there was such a poisoned relationship, education leaders didn’t even have a very clear understanding of their needs.

But one thing was clear – schools couldn’t function without students; and students weren’t going to return if their parents didn’t want them to.

Back in America....

When I first heard the story of Umm al-Fahm second-hand, it made me wonder what it would look like for parents in America to go on strike this coming fall. Parents know and love their children, but they are so often not valued by school systems in America, dismissed in much the same way as they were in Umm al-Fahm.

Even before COVID, many of my country’s large urban education systems were struggling to educate children, and this struggle was only exacerbated by the pandemic. Starting in March 2020, as schools hurriedly closed and converted to remote instruction, parents across America started discovering what learning really looked like for their children, and for many it was a rude awakening.

Parents were seeing which schools offered rigor and which did not. Parents were seeing which schools were sustaining education continuity through remote learning, which ones were struggling but trying, and which ones were essentially abandoning their children. Parents were also discovering, through a chaotic and completely inequitably applied experiment in personalized learning, what learning styles did and did not work for each child in each subject.

Parents have been doing their best to piece together education resources this past year for their children – be it from schools who were delivering (which some have), online resources, local parent and community groups, the internet, or their friends. Some families came together to form their own pods and micro-schools, and others purchased what supplemental education they could find and afford.

To be fair, it's been a truly apocalyptic year for everyone, and in the first months of COVID, it was essential to show grace; but grace periods eventually have to end.

When schools – Inshallah ('God Willing' in Arabic) – reopen this fall, many parents in America will have spent well over a year building their understanding and agency about the education of their children. In many places – irrespective of income – parents will likely have far less loyalty or dependence on their old school systems. Of course, many millions will want to get their children back in school – and I believe they will demand a place at the table to exercise their power and agency about how learning at their schools will happen.

But for truly underperforming American school systems, why couldn't parents essentially go on strike like they did in Umm al-Fahm?

I was animated by the idea of parents leveraging the power of participation and the per pupil funding that comes with it to influence true systems change.

For the record – I still think this could and should happen. Parents exercising their power with picket signs when that is what's required.

But parents employing pressure and protest is not the full story of Umm al-Fahm, and it need not be the only part of the story of parent power and systems change elsewhere.

From Picket Signs to Shovels

In 2016 on a visit to Israel, I first came to know MAOZ, a network of leaders in the nonprofit, government and for-profit sectors from across Arab, Haredi (ultra-Orthodox), Secular Jewish, and National-Religious Jewish communities who have come together to build a more just, successful, and resilient Israel through community innovation and entrepreneurialism.

MAOZ brings a combination of training, facilitation, networks, and deep strategic advising to the communities and leaders that it serves. It helps them use data to understand the root cause of a problem, supports them to develop a theory of change inclusive of all stakeholders, and then helps them implement this change. MAOZ partners are coached to think at three levels: (1) the Personal – what are their mindsets as leaders and how they build relationships; (2) the System – how must the complex set of stakeholders align to work differently; and (3) the Process – the strategy by which change happens for people and systems. MAOZ not only develops a deep trusted relationship with its network members but helps them develop that same trust with their constituents.

One of MAOZ’s network members is Umm al-Fahm’s Mahmoud Zohadi. After the failure to get students back, MAOZ set out to work with Zohadi’s team over the summer to understand why parents had not returned their children to school. Their goal was to forge better relationships with parents, and to identify what needed to change for the fall of 2020 so that parents would send their children back. MAOZ did not start with all 14 elementary schools – in fact, a number of principals remained skeptical of the idea of reaching out to parents even with few students in school.

However, there were five principals prepared to approach things differently – they felt a sense of responsibility. Their empty schools also gave them a sense of urgency.

MAOZ started by training these principals in the skill of empathic listening and to critically reflect on their mental models about the parents of the children they served. The principals were coached on how to approach parents and ask open-ended questions. One of these enterprising principals was Muntaha Agbariye, Principal of Al Muntabi Elementary School, who shared that *“they trained me how to not be judgmental, and how to show parents that I did care and wanted to be a partner.”*

Each principal conducted 1:1 listening sessions with a diverse set of parents in their schools. They recognized that the first, essential step to transforming their relationships with parents was to acknowledge the role schools had played in creating the ‘relationship hole’ they now had to dig out of.

Muntaha Agbariye and these other principals started their engagement with parents by acknowledging their own shortcomings: *“We want to open a new chapter in our relationship. We*

should have done this sooner. One of the things that COVID did is enable us to see things that we didn't think were important before. One of those things is the relationship with parents. Up until now, we were focused on what changes we wanted you to make, and not on the changes that we the school have to make. Today, we want to hear what your experiences have been during this period of COVID, and what you're interested in seeing in the school that isn't happening now."

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– Muntaha Agbariye, Principal

Parents were not used to principals coming to them and asking for them to share their opinions and perspectives – to, in effect, give principals feedback. For the first time, parents began to feel respected, valued, and heard. It was a beginning. One parent shared, *"I participated in many school meetings in the past, before COVID. During all of these meetings, the teacher was the only one who spoke – and gave out orders and regulations. This year was different. For the first time, the school asked us to talk about our feelings and share our difficulties. The principal listened, seemed to understand, and shared her own feelings. That helped us share the burden and eased some of the stress. It really energized us."*

Hearing their story, it reminded me of a key lesson in parent organizing: building relationships isn't the cost of doing business; it IS the business.

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– Umm al-Fahm parent

Throughout the process, the principals were practicing a new level of transparency. They communicated their intent, their actions, and then their learnings through the school and municipality's websites and – crucially – through the Council of Leadership Guardians who could then share it both through word of mouth and through their social media feeds.

Doing all of this well also meant relinquishing control – and most importantly, control over what the community's agenda and priorities were for school reopening. It meant letting the community define their need and their solution.

Honoring What the Community Says it Needs, Not What You Think It Needs (i.e., Letting Go of Controlling the Agenda Isn't Easy)

I can speak from personal experience how difficult this is, especially when you have worked hard to be in a position of authority to develop solutions to problems you see in a school or community. It can truly shake you when you face the reality that you are creating harm by imposing your solutions on people.

In 2016, when I last traveled to Israel, I visited the Bedouin town of Hura in the Negev Desert. Hura's then mayor, Dr. Mohammed Al-Nabari, met with a group of Boston-based education leaders and shared an example of how easy it is for good intentions to not result in impact.

Like Umm al-Fahm, many of Hura's children qualify for the Israeli equivalent of free and reduced lunches. But the schools were finding that children were not eating the food that was prepared by outside regional contractors because it was culturally different in taste and seasoning from their community's Bedouin food prepared at home.

To solve this problem, Mayor Al-Nabari leveraged his ability to support social entrepreneurs who understood the cultural needs of this predominantly Muslim community. In Hura, a group of women started a business cooking hot meals for the schools. They sourced their ingredients locally, thereby helping the local economy. And the town's children ate the food. These entrepreneurs solved the problem of nutrition for students and created a venture named Al Sanabel that now employs dozens of women providing thousands of daily meals. This solution was a win for everyone involved, including the school system seeking to serve its students.

The community of Hura knew what it needed. It needed others to ask it for solutions, not provide them. This is one of many stories that Mayor Al-Nabari shared with us that combined empowerment, economic mobility, and developing a deeper community identity through local partnerships.

The truth of this principle that communities should own their agenda for change was further impressed upon me two days later during the group's visit to Ravtech, a computer programming start-up in Bnei Brak, a predominantly Haredi municipality near Tel Aviv. Ravtech taught Haredi men computer programming. In Haredi communities, men study and debate the Torah full-time, while women work and manage the household. Ravtech was providing an 18-month training program for men which ran part of the day while providing space for Torah study and debate

for the other part, and then provided a guaranteed two years of employment. After visiting the classrooms, a group of us had lunch with one of the organization's leaders.

We Americans were marveling at the program's ability to blend their traditions with the modern economy, and I recall mentioning how great it was that it was providing such economic mobility to this community.

The leader smiled patiently and enlightened me on how wrong and presumptuous I was. Here is a paraphrased version of their response: *"You're missing the fact that these families don't consider themselves poor. They have full and fulfilled lives. They aren't doing this for bigger TV's or your iPhone. However, they are having increasingly large families. So they are making a change and a choice in order to be able to preserve their community as it is and as they want it to be, and not to meet someone else's definition of a good life."*

And certainly not mine.

I realized, in Hura and then again at Ravtech, that every community has its own definition of its needs, priorities, and happiness... and those can't be imposed. If you want to help, you have to honor their goals and their requirements for how those goals are achieved.

Again, I know this truth is hard to hear, especially if the core of your job is coming up with well-intentioned answers to other people's questions. But maybe that means we're doing the job the wrong way. Maybe the essence of our job is to ask the questions and let the people we serve decide the answers.

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This is what the education leaders in Umm al-Fahm were also learning.

Principals Putting these Principles into Practice with Parents as Partners

The principals of Umm al-Fahm realized that they needed to set aside their own agendas so that they could truly hear what the community's needs were and how they could work together with parents to meet them. Even though they lived in the community, they had been acting and leading separate from it.

Through the interviews, parents laid out four reasons why they weren't sending their children back to school, and each would have to be addressed.

- 1. The first reason was simple uncertainty and lack of trust.** Families were receiving mixed messages and conflicting information about school reopening and safety. They didn't know who or what to trust, so they didn't trust. In response, the municipality created a "situation room" where they could centralize messaging about schools, and asked parents from the Council of Local Guardians to participate in not only crafting guidance, but then also sharing it with other parents as trusted messengers.
- 2. Second, parents were not confident that schools were following health guidelines.** Parents questioned whether schools were enforcing wearing masks, physical distancing, and continual cleaning. To solve this, the principals partnered with parents to conduct walkthroughs of the schools, verifying that the schools were in compliance – and posted videos of this online so other parents could see peer parents checking out the schools. Taking it a step further, teachers brought their children to school to show they felt invested in and were abiding by the safety measures, and also posted videos of this.
- 3. Third, parents shared the emotional stress of living through COVID and asked for help.** In response, both the municipality and schools started regular workshops for parents via Facebook Live and Zoom over the summer. Some were led by school psychologists and social workers to share coping skills, with an emphasis on preparing for school reopening in the fall. Other sessions were led by parent volunteers leading discussions to process what parents had experienced during the first wave of COVID and to brainstorm strategies for managing future waves. In addition, the school system set up a crisis hotline for parents to call for advice and emotional support. It was staffed by the municipality's educational psychologists, who were on call every day until 10 at night.
- 4. Fourth, the parents were concerned with the teachers' levels of emotional stress and what that meant for how they were able to show up and effectively teach.** Parents observed that teachers were not equipped to teach effectively even to those children they could reach

virtually. Children were under a lot of stress from COVID. When teachers tried to teach virtually like everything was normal without acknowledging and addressing the situation, it was actually exacerbating the emotional distress of students and turning them further away from engaging and learning. The schools responded to this by identifying which teachers were best at effectively reaching children remotely and responding to their emotional needs, and then had them lead peer learning workshops for other teachers.

However, the schools also realized that this was symptomatic of a broader crisis – the teachers were themselves as stressed and traumatized as their students (and the parents of their students). As someone once told me, *“whole child means whole family, and really whole community.”* To meet the social-emotional needs of students and parents, the schools would also need to meet the social-emotional needs of teachers. Hilana Agbariye, Director of the Personal Service Unit and of the Elementary Education Department at Umm al-Fahm, explained, *“We believed that if we provided support to the teachers and gave them an opportunity to work through their emotions, only then will they be strong enough to be there for the students.”* The municipality provided emotional support workshops and webinars to teachers, which are continuing to this day.

Joe Givens, a community organizer and Executive Director of the New Orleans-based Isaiah Institute, teaches that, *“organizing is weaving a tapestry of trusted relationships.”* These efforts to listen to what parents needed and respond to those needs were the beginning of this tapestry in Umm al-Fahm. But the strength of this fabric would soon be tested.

Building Bridges Over the COVID Chasm

Israel planned to open its schools on September 1st, and the parents, teachers, and education leaders of Umm al-Fahm were prepared.

However, COVID cases started creeping back up in Israel’s second surge. At 11pm on August 31st, the day before reopening, the government announced that communities spiking back into the red zone – including Umm al-Fahm – were required to remain closed.

The principals were fearful that this step back would undermine all of the progress they had made in building relationships over the summer. Meanwhile, many parents were angry. The principals immediately reached out to the parents, staffing the situation room and asking the Council of Local Guardians to communicate and coordinate.

Parents, teachers, and principals all started to huddle together to chart a collective path forward. There were meetings sometimes two or three times a day to discuss options on remote learning and how to support parents and students from a distance.

Principals, teachers, and parents launched an effort to reach every single child and connect them to either online resources or offline books and work packets. The schools set up grade-specific calls for teachers and parents, recognizing the distinct need of students at different ages. They also set up trainings for teachers on how to better partner with parents.

The teachers also started to hold group meetings with their students where they encouraged them to talk about their wellbeing. If the teacher noticed a specific student was having a hard time, they reached out to them and their parents. Hilana Agbariye shared an example of these efforts. *“There was a teacher who called a student every morning before school, and said: ‘Good morning, how are you? We’re waiting for you in class.’”*

Principals also set up regular Zoom office hours separate from the situation room, where parents from their schools could log in to ask questions, discuss their concerns, and seek support.

This new crisis, rather than ripping the community apart, brought them closer together.

In mid-October, kindergarten was allowed to reopen. First through fourth grades reopened in November. The first day that schools opened, teachers were there to celebrate the return and make both students and parents feel welcome. The Council of Local Guardians encouraged parents to send their children back to school.

In May 2020, the attendance rate had started at 40% and then dropped. For the five elementary schools who started this work over the summer, their October/November attendance rate was 95% for the grades open.

The changes in mindsets and relationships were also now spilling over into the other nine elementary schools as they began to adopt the same practices – I presume both as converts, but also potentially from competitive and peer pressure.

The schools continued to offer workshops, their hotline, consistent and clear messaging through the municipal situation room, and regular parent and teacher engagement. The teachers held monthly meetings with all the parents in their class, each time about a different subject. The principals also continued to make themselves directly available to parents.

Conclusion - A Golden Triangle, Reframing Power, and Work Without End

These elementary schools started to embrace a framework they call the “golden triangle” – composed of students, parents, and teachers. At the end of 2020, teachers asked parents to write letters to their children telling them how proud they were of the work they were doing and managing through COVID. The teachers also wrote personal notes of gratitude to parents for their partnership in supporting their children and the school. It was the first time parents had received written positive messages from teachers – some even posted them on Facebook. One parent expressed what this meant to her: *“This is the first time in my life that I received a certificate of honor. I was so happy and moved when I read the teacher’s words and showed it to all my family and friends. I was so used to doing my work at home, with my kids, and never hearing a kind word from anyone.”*

I asked the Umm al-Fahm educators what lessons they took away from this experience, and what would need to be sustained now that the COVID crisis was slowly coming to a close.

First, they pragmatically acknowledged that parents are there to stay in the power structure of the school system. Muntaha Agbariye shared that, *“it’s our duty to be in a relationship with parents and maintain a partnership – education cannot happen without parents.”*

Second, sustaining this change will be an ongoing commitment and practice. Mahmoud Zohadi shared that they were now moving on to the next stage of work to continue to transform mindsets and action. *“This is no longer about managing the stress of COVID, but about now managing the success of students – which means continuing to change our mindsets and eliminate our biases,”* he said.

Zohadi has guided the education system to conduct regular interviews with parents on top of the other new avenues of ongoing partnership so that they can understand the needs of the constituents they serve and continue to deepen those relationships.

Umm al-Fahm is also not just creating impact locally. In partnership with MAOZ, they are codifying the lessons from Umm al-Fahm to be replicated in other communities across Israel. A

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– Mahmoud Zohadi, Director of Education

leader at MAOZ shared that they are also working with Umm al-Fahm to extend the concept of the “golden triangle” as a frame for strengthening relationships beyond the school to throughout the municipality. A MAOZ team member who works with the Umm al-Fahm educators said: *“This is work that had to begin. But in order to succeed, this work must never end.”*

Reflecting on Umm al-Fahm’s journey, I wondered what the educators I interviewed felt about power, and specifically their power now that parents had exercised a significant amount of it. Muntaha Agbariye, Al Muntabi's Principal, smiled when I asked this question, and through our translator shared the following response: *“I actually feel like I now have more power, because I have these partners – parents – who can exercise power to help my school succeed. And now other parents and educators see how good the school is doing, so more people want to come to our school to attend and to learn.”*



To read more, please see [Systems Change and Parent Power](#) ³

I WELCOME YOUR THOUGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES.

PLEASE REACH OUT TO ME
AT ALEX_CORTEZ@NEWPROFIT.ORG

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NEWPROFIT

225 Franklin Street, Suite 350
Boston, MA 02110

info@newprofit.org
www.newprofit.org