COLEMAN ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Advocating to Institutionalize Children's Rights

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The case study of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth (Coleman) presented here is part of a larger research project conducted by The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University. The project studies the efforts of exemplary advocacy organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area that have successfully initiated change in policies that affect young people. This research is motivated by the lack of comprehensive information about such organizations despite their central importance in urban communities. Most existing material highlights "best practices" without more contextualized and detailed analysis of how such organizations may improve conditions for marginalized children and youth.

This case study considers how Coleman relates to its local government and other community groups; how it mobilizes citizens to become advocates for their own rights; and how Coleman both shapes and is shaped by the local context in which it works. Data for this study consist of interviews with Coleman staff, board members, and involved citizens, as well as observations of numerous public events, rallies and internal meetings collected over a two-year period.

Although our focus here is on a single, highly effective organization, we believe that the advocacy strategies, tools, and challenges highlighted in this case study have relevance beyond Bay Area communities. We hope that our analysis will be useful to other advocacy groups, as well as to policymakers, funders, government officials, and activists seeking to increase support for children and youth amid tough competition from the priorities of more established and powerful community interests.

We would like to thank staff and board members of Coleman Advocates for sharing their time and institutional memories with us and for keeping us informed about their many campaigns and events to better the lives of children and youth in the Bay Area.

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Introduction

To commemorate San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom's first one hundred days in office in April 2004, one thousand supporters gathered to acknowledge his accomplishments on behalf of the city's children and youth, and to appeal for continued support. Staff members from many of the city's child advocacy and youth-serving non-profits were present at Civic Center, but these adult advocates were peripheral—figuratively and literally—to the gathering's focal point: several hundred preschoolers seated in rows centered in front of the stage, holding signs with slogans including "My parents need to work. Child care now!" and "Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding?" The Mayor and other public officials stood before these precocious and strategically placed activists, trying to convince surrounding adults that the children at the center of the gathering were central to their thinking as well.[1]

Tammy Radmer

This 2004 Rally for Kids, organized by Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, was the result of a long term effort—which began months before the election had been decided—to get the Mayor-elect to prioritize children's issues. Following the election, Coleman sent Newsom an open letter from an ad hoc committee of children's organizations, setting forth immediate priorities to keep San Francisco a child and family-friendly city. The requests for Newsom to address were clear: preserve children's services despite the city budget crisis; appoint a new head of the Department of Children, Youth, and their Families (DCYF) and a new Chief of Probation who are community-minded; and expand health coverage to young adults ages 18 to 24.[2] The letter closed with one additional request: that the Mayor report back to the community on his progress toward realizing these goals after his first one hundred days in office. The letter also suggested April 15 as a potential date for this public report. Newsom not only complied with that exact date by appearing at the "2004 Rally for Kids," but his remarks to the community that day indicated that he had already begun work on many of Coleman's priorities.

This rally typifies Coleman's child advocacy work in San Francisco. Coleman secures support for child-friendly policies and programs by exerting pressure on public officials to be accountable to *all* of their constituents—particularly low-income children and families often neglected in interest group politics. Through its vigilant monitoring of public officials, the political education of elected officials, and its willingness to be strategically confrontational with local government, Coleman generates political pressure in San Francisco to keep children's needs at the top of the public agenda. Coleman is particularly attentive to the development of the city budget as a political process and carefully follows the allocation of public resources, a strategy that distinguishes it from other child advocacy organizations.

Coleman is a diverse, staff-run advocacy organization with seven professional staff members, and it convenes service providers and community activists across sectors to mobilize a broad-based group of citizens to support its issue campaigns. Coleman's targeting of public officials and institutions reflects the organization's guiding belief that the welfare of children is a responsibility of the entire polity—not just families: "All children deserve to have their basic needs met, and it is the role of government to ensure that this happens."[3] Coleman's most successful advocacy campaigns, therefore, culminate in the institutionalization of its efforts by government through the creation of new city offices, committees, or laws. These moments, at which Coleman hands off its campaigns to public institutions, mark the organization's ability to translate its advocacy work into public policy that achieves system-changing reforms for children in San Francisco.

Child advocacy in context

Child advocacy organizations like Coleman function as critical intermediaries between families and the state, the traditional guardians of children's welfare. Since the beginning of the children's rights movement in the 1960s, policy makers largely have discarded the notion that children are merely the property of their parents until reaching legal adulthood. Communities have collectively assumed greater responsibility for securing the basic rights of children, including healthcare, food, shelter, and education. The position of child advocacy organizations in civil society allows them to mediate between struggling families and the welfare state in retreat—a niche that is of growing importance in urban communities where children are a relatively powerless constituency.

This case study of Coleman Advocates explores the strategies and tactics that Coleman employs to mobilize citizens and city officials to dedicate more public resources to children and youth. Coleman's successes may be particularly instructive given the context in which it operates: San Francisco has the lowest percentage of children of any major metropolitan area in the US. In 2000, children between the ages of 5 and 19 were just 12.4% of San Francisco's total population, compared to 20.3% in Oakland, 21.1% in New York City, 21.5% in Chicago, and 21.8% in Los Angeles.[4] San Francisco's child population has been declining for the last decade as housing prices soar and families leave the city; in the last ten years, the total number of children in the city has dropped by 11%.[5]

Today, Coleman's agenda has expanded to include childcare; youth development; public education; affordable housing; parks and recreation; and health care, in addition to its founding commitment to juvenile justice reform. This range of issues brings a racially and ethnically diverse group of adults and youth to Coleman.

One might argue that attending to the needs of children in such a climate might be an easier task from a quantitative perspective: there are simply fewer children to worry about in San Francisco. But these numbers, in reality, can strongly work against child advocates. The low percentage of children in San Francisco can mask children's needs, and voters—the majority of whom have no children—are likely to support other causes. As Margaret Brodkin, Executive Director of Coleman noted of San Francisco, "you have liberal politics but you don't have many kids so…it's a different kind of dynamic, like 'why should we care?'"[6] How, then, in spite of the challenges of its local landscape, does Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth strategically navigate through its political context and mobilize local government to win more resources and better public policies for children?[7]

Brief History of Coleman Advocates

Coleman's founding

In the mid 1960s, Jean Jacobs founded Citizens for Juvenile Justice in San Francisco, an unincorporated group of citizens that was Coleman's predecessor. After seeing a three-year old child in an isolation cell at the San Francisco Youth Guidance Center, Ms. Jacobs was determined to improve conditions for children in the juvenile justice system. Jacobs and her husband persuaded Gertrude Coleman to leave a bequest to the San Francisco Foundation to benefit the city's children; the foundation decided to use the bequest to fund a nonprofit organization that would advocate for children. In 1975, members of Citizens for Juvenile Justice incorporated Coleman Advocates to be the recipient of this bequest. Coleman is thus rooted in juvenile justice reform, which was a pressing social issue at the time of its founding and had experienced progress in the federal courts—particularly in the Supreme Court's decision in the *In Re Gault* case in 1967, which established children's rights to due process. During this period, the Children's Defense Fund was also founded, again giving national attention to the children's rights movement.

A broadened agenda & strategies

Coleman began advocating for the rights of children in the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Yet Coleman gradually decided that it needed to focus on a broader agenda for children to address the enduring problems of urban poverty that children face, which heightened during the political shift to the right and drug epidemic of the 1980s. Margaret Brodkin was hired in 1978 to expand Coleman's mission, a growth process which she reflected upon for the organization's 15th anniversary in 1989: "We learned that reform of the juvenile court and juvenile probation system could only occur in conjunction with changes in police practices and policies, the availability of prevention and drug rehabilitation programs, and community attitudes about youth and violence."[8] Coleman expanded its efforts to its more general mission: "Making San Francisco a better place for children." Today, Coleman's agenda has expanded to include childcare; youth development; public education; affordable housing; parks and recreation; and health care, in addition to its founding commitment to juvenile justice reform. This range of issues brings a racially and ethnically diverse group of adults and youth to Coleman, giving the organization, as one staff member put it, a "frenetic energy" that can be felt by virtue of the constant activity in Coleman's building.[9]

As Coleman's portfolio of concerns evolved, so too did its advocacy strategies. Coleman initially concentrated its efforts on city departments that were service providers, such as juvenile probation, and then shifted its focus to City Hall and to the political process.[10] Coleman was led to this shift by several factors: budget cuts across systems that required action by the Mayor as the city's top administrator; impasses with agency staff that could only be resolved by higher elected officials; and the need for budget advocacy to protect children's services from further cuts.[11] As Coleman became increasingly involved in the political process in San Francisco to advocate for children, it learned to use the media to get public officials' attention instead of meeting with officials directly. A longtime Coleman Board Member noted this shift in strategy: "We were at a point of diminishing returns of sitting down and being really nice with people in city government."[12]

A former director of the Mayor's Office of Children, Youth, and Families, which was funded as a result of the passage of the Children's Fund, said of Coleman's efforts: "it was the first real, major movement…on a citywide and county basis, to elevate children, youth, and family issues." And as Brodkin noted, with this increased visibility came new responsibilities for Coleman: the Children's Amendment "made us a political force and we realized we had an awesome responsibility…to the electorate, seeing that the momentum keeps going."

The Children's Amendment

Coleman's success at passing the Children's Amendment in 1991 (Proposition J), one of its greatest advocacy triumphs, exemplifies this political strategy. Since the then-Mayor Art Agnos refused to continue discussions with Coleman regarding the allocation of public funds, Coleman circumvented this roadblock by collecting 68,000 signatures for a ballot measure to establish the Children's Fund, which dedicates 2.5% of the assessed value of local property taxes to children's services. The passage of this amendment—the first of its kind for any urban area—significantly increased Coleman's visibility and credibility in San Francisco. A former director of the Mayor's Office of Children, Youth, and Families, which was funded as a result of the passage of the Children's Fund, said of Coleman's efforts: "It was the first real, major movement…on a citywide and county basis, to elevate children, youth, and family issues."[13] And as Brodkin noted, with this increased visibility came new responsibilities for Coleman: the Children's Amendment "made us a political force and we realized we had an awesome responsibility…to the electorate, seeing that the momentum keeps going."[14]

Organizational Structure of Coleman

Hearing "real issues from real people"

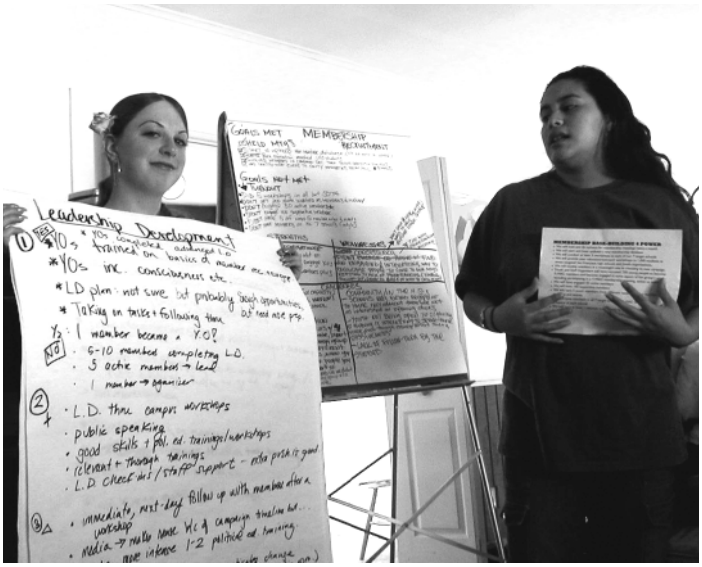
As Coleman's strategies have evolved over the years alongside the expansion of its agenda, so too has the organization grown with respect to the programs it runs and the staff it employs. Coleman presently has seven paid staff members and 23 Board members representing a variety of professions and interests, including medicine, law, parks and recreation, education, and community organizing. Coleman also has a relatively new National Advisory Board, chaired by Peter Edelman of Georgetown University Law Center. Coleman's annual budget is approximately $700,000.

YMAC: Youth organizing

Although Coleman affiliates attribute much of the organization's success to the strength of its Board and staff, staff members believe it is the involvement of parents and youth that gives Coleman much of its legitimacy in neighborhoods across San Francisco. In 1991, Coleman started its youth empowerment group, Youth Making a Change (YMAC), which sets its own agenda but coordinates its efforts with Coleman's overall agenda. YMAC restructured this past year to operate as a membership-based organization, within which youth members select and pursue their own issue campaigns. Issues include the conditions of bathrooms in the city's public schools; the creation of school-based health centers; a "Safe Schools" policy to regulate police on school campuses; and juvenile justice reform to reduce the juvenile hall population in San Francisco. The Director of Youth Policy and Development at Coleman describes YMAC and its relation to Coleman: "We definitely think of ourselves as a youth organizing group that evolved from a more traditional youth advocacy model."[15] According to a former Coleman staff member and non-profit executive director, YMAC reflects Coleman's belief that citizens—particularly young people—can and should become advocates for themselves.[16]

PAY: Parent empowerment

Building upon its commitment to empower citizens to become advocates in their own right, Coleman started a parent organizing group, Parent Advocates for Youth (PAY) in 1994. Like YMAC, PAY operates as an autonomous program while its work still serves Coleman's mission. Issues that PAY has taken on include improving city recreation programs, public parks, programs for children with special needs, school facilities, food, school governance, affordable childcare, and juvenile justice reform. PAY has ten members at a time who receive a stipend for their weekly time commitment, and who come from diverse backgrounds and communities in San Francisco. The director of PAY emphasizes that the group is more diverse than typical parent groups such as the PTA,



which gives it more legitimacy.[17] Concern about the quality of public schools is the common bond among these diverse parents, and the issue that best engages parents across racial, ethnic, and class divides. According to the PAY Director, "As a group, we realize that education is not only the one common bond between all of us, but that it is the one thing that can level the playing field later on."[18] A Coleman Board member and former PAY Director also highlighted how, starting in 1998, Coleman's increased involvement in education issues mobilized a cross-section of the public, including youth and adults: "To Coleman's credit, they facilitated the meetings and helped get all these people together to say our schools are important, parents do have a voice, kids should have a voice, and we want all of our neighborhoods represented."[19]

The addition of YMAC and PAY makes Coleman more than a group of professional advocates working on behalf of families and children—these groups empower Coleman's constituents to become advocates in their own right. And as a former Associate Director of Coleman notes, this inclusion of parents and youth within the structure also accords Coleman greater legitimacy in the city: "The issues are real issues coming from real people."[20] Some of the key strategies Coleman uses to push these real issues forward will now be highlighted to underscore the potential of child advocacy organizations to mobilize local governments to improve conditions for children and youth.

Coleman as a "Watchdog"

Defining rights within communities, and realizing them with public resources

Although Coleman's issue campaigns may not explicitly reflect a commitment to a particular conception of children's rights, Coleman's ethos as a child advocacy organization is deeply rooted in a philosophic belief about the role of the polity in providing for children's welfare. Coleman is unequivocal about its belief that it is the duty of government to provide for children by ensuring their basic needs. Yet Coleman also asserts that children's rights and needs should be determined by the communities in which they live: "Policies and programs for children, youth and their families should be determined by the community, particularly those directly impacted by those policies and programs."[21] Coleman's work is thus two-fold, and implicates both the private and public sectors: basic rights and needs should be defined locally, but resources to realize these rights and needs should be ensured by public institutions. Coleman's work first involves helping citizens prioritize their needs—a process that occurs most directly through YMAC and PAY. Coleman's issue priorities, according to a former Associate Director, are drawn "from a base of real people. It isn't just the staff sitting in a room somewhere coming up with 'great ideas.'"[22] Coleman can then proceed to construct a campaign around these dominant issues to marshal support from elected officials for reforms.

Since government has a duty to meet children's basic needs, Coleman positions itself as a "watchdog" to ensure that government institutions fulfill their responsibilities to children.

Coleman's work is deeply grounded in the prevailing view that children, as rights-bearers, are a responsibility of the polity writ large, and a population to which elected officials should be more accountable. A slogan that Coleman has used in its campaigns to advocate for family-friendly policies in San Francisco exemplifies this view of children as critical public resources and a shared responsibility: "San Francisco is better with children." Although these points likely seem commonplace and perhaps hackneyed today, the practical implications of this philosophy on Coleman's work are significant in that it provides Coleman with a target at which to aim its advocacy efforts: since government has a duty to meet children's basic needs, Coleman positions itself as a "watchdog" to ensure that government institutions fulfill their responsibilities to children. The ways in which Coleman acts as a vigilant watchdog of local government in San Francisco on behalf of children are varied. Several that are most illustrative of this stance are described.

Budget advocacy

One central way in which Coleman acts as a watchdog of local government for children is with respect to its stance on public funds. Coleman recognizes that the budget process is a uniquely open and potentially democratic process, and uses public hearings to advocate for children and youth. Coleman views city resources as collective entitlements that should be distributed to children as a priority. It challenges departments that receive more funds than Coleman deems necessary and sees these departments as directly undercutting children's services. Through the creation of the Children's Fund, Coleman's budget advocacy added funds to children's services in San Francisco. In addition, by exhibiting a high level of skill in its budget advocacy efforts, Coleman augmented its visibility in the wider community since the budget process impacts all public sectors: "The budget process is the highest profile local policy-making endeavor; it receives the most press attention, and has the most staff resources attached to it. Simply by using the budget process as our podium, we automatically increased the public attention our issues received."[23] Through its Children's Fund campaign, Coleman learned how to impact the allocation of local funds and create new sources of revenue—a skill particularly important, noted Brodkin, during periods of fiscal retrenchment.[24]

Coleman recognizes that the budget process is a uniquely open and potentially democratic process, and uses public hearings to advocate for children and youth.

Coleman continues to be at the forefront of budget advocacy in San Francisco, and convenes service providers and other non-profit organizations to discuss how the allocation of public funds impacts children and youth. At meetings during the summer of 2004, the San Francisco Child Advocacy Network (SFCAN), a Coleman led coalition, reviewed newly elected Mayor Newsom's proposed city budget to identify cuts it perceived to be detrimental to children's services, and to develop a plan for action before the budget was approved. At one meeting, Brodkin noted Coleman's unique position with respect to budget advocacy: particular organizations and programs whose budgets have been cut cannot impartially represent a general children's platform, whereas Coleman's financial independence from local government gives it the credibility to be the general voice.[25] Coleman thus became a "clearinghouse" for other programs and non-profits impacted by budget cuts, offering to solicit their concerns, investigate the details of potential cuts, and then proceed with a campaign. To do this work, in-depth knowledge of the local political systems and officials is critical—as well as a willingness to be confrontational.

To this end, Coleman has recently targeted the San Francisco Fire Department because it believes that it receives funds that exceed what is necessary for its operations. Just days after the Fire Department placed door hangers on homes in San Francisco neighborhoods to earn support for increased funding, Coleman distributed its own door hangers—designed to mimic the Fire Department's—that detailed what it believed to be the Department's excesses. The hangers also included a slogan that Coleman now uses for a variety of its campaigns: "Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding?" Coleman's campaigns, however, are not waged with slogans alone: Coleman also released to concerned citizens (via its website) and government officials a detailed financial analysis of the Fire Department's budget with its recommendations for cost-cutting reforms.[26] And all of these campaigns are carefully pitched to get the attention of elected officials: "When we are framing our issues, we think in terms of what a politician would like to be able to tell his constituency about what he has accomplished."[27]

Using and shaping political rhetoric

Coleman's watchdog orientation with respect to elected officials is also evident in its understanding and use of politicians' rhetoric. Although Coleman does not naively believe that politicians will follow through on all of their campaign promises, it does not entirely dismiss such promises as empty. Rather, Coleman carefully tracks and remembers politicians' public statements as matters for which they can be held accountable. For example, in advance of their Mayoral Forum at which candidates would respond to pre-selected questions regarding children's policy, Coleman had distributed a questionnaire to solicit and document candidates' stance on issues of concern. Coleman then mailed candidates' responses to all likely voters in San Francisco—a strategy that created a public record of candidates' policy commitments. This strategy conveys a critical, though perhaps tacit, pre-condition for Coleman's relationships with politicians. Coleman appears to have a contractual understanding of political rhetoric: if candidates make promises to promote a particular policy, Coleman interprets such promises as commitments to which they will be held accountable. Politicians' statements regarding children's policy are bones for the watchdog: such statements provide Coleman with leverage to target elected officials should they falter on realizing promised reforms.

The "localness" of Coleman's advocacy makes this sort of watchdog role possible. Coleman can communicate directly with both voters and elected officials. It is this sort of communication, notes a former Coleman staff member, that allows Coleman to gain access to key power-brokers: "Coleman very intentionally communicates in an ongoing

way with voters, and…engages in the electoral process, and those are the things that create the access [it has to local government]."[28] And it is this strategic watchdog monitoring, which Coleman publicizes, that keeps politicians accountable. To this end, Coleman issues "report cards" for elected officials, grading them on their kid-and-family-friendliness.

A weekly "Advocate Alert," which arrives by email or fax Monday mornings to subscribers, is another public forum in which Coleman communicates politicians' promises to hold them accountable. A former Coleman staff member highlighted the content and efficacy of these alerts: "Even if no one reads the fax alert, the fact that the politician knows that information is in the hands of thousands of people matters."[29]

Coleman as a Political Educator & Agenda Setter

Policy and leadership as locally "grown"

Although Coleman most noticeably positions itself as a watchdog as described above, it is not merely reactive to public officials' actions: it also proactively attempts to focus the public agenda on children's issues by "grooming" public officials to be advocates for children. Coleman's activity on this front is necessarily less visible than its typical campaigns: building relationships is a personal and more private form of advocacy, as compared to public forums and rallies that depend on public attention. But providing receptive public officials with such mentorship can equally lead to system-changing reform, and is perhaps a more direct way in which Coleman may institutionalize its efforts. By tutoring officials, Coleman may influence public policy at its source—by changing the decision premises of leaders—in contrast to watchdog advocacy that is external and reactive to the decision-making process.

Since its beginning, Coleman has intentionally focused its advocacy efforts on local rather than state-wide issues because of the higher impact it may have in the local arena. As Brodkin states: "One of the things that's kept us innovative and kept me interested all these years is the localness of it, so that it is very easy…to have both contact with the people that you're trying to see things changed for, as well as the systems that you're trying to change."[30] Coleman does not have much presence at the state level, a limit which Brodkin recognizes: "We've done hardly any work in Sacramento."[31] But in Brodkin's view, although Coleman's work is local in scope, its effects are broader: "The way we can help in Sacramento is by being an engine of creativity and ideas…so that our legislators can carry forward ideas."[32]

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Brodkin described one particularly successful student of Coleman's political education: Mark Leno, a California State Assembly Member, who was previously a San Francisco politician for whom children's issues were not initially paramount. According to Brodkin, after Coleman's persistent work with Leno at the local level, Leno started a committee in Sacramento on the issue of childhood obesity after he became a state legislator.[33] This notion of Coleman's work traveling from its local origins to the state and even national levels via aspiring public officials reflects Brodkin's view of political leadership: just as Coleman attempts to grow good children's policy at the local level, so too does Brodkin believe that political leaders should be cultivated locally before moving higher up the system.[34] It is this cultivation of local politicians—with the view that they may move beyond and act as carriers of Coleman's message—that motivates Coleman's work as a local political educator. And the political education that Coleman offers to local officials is not just for those politicians who move up the system to posts beyond San Francisco—it is equally important for those who stay in San Francisco to shore up local, continuing support for children and youth.

"Just being there"…and being there and being there

The political education that Coleman delivers to public officials occurs both formally and informally, publicly and privately. Through public communications with elected officials (i.e. candidate questionnaires, and public forums during elections), Coleman prompts politicians to learn about and take positions on children's issues, as its Mayoral Forum illustrated. Aspects of Coleman's education of Mayor Gavin Newsom, on the other hand, illustrate the more informal and private ways in which this education toward understanding children's needs is conducted. One of Brodkin's interactions with Gavin Newsom exemplifies the "behind-the-scenes" education Coleman may offer to elected officials. Brodkin went to Newsom's office when he was on the Board of Supervisors and drove him to many of the parks in San Francisco to show Newsom the condition of a critical resource for children and youth, a field trip that led to Newsom's sustained interest in improving the city's parks.

Tammy Radner

This sort of persistence is critical to Coleman's success, as Brodkin acknowledges, "First of all, it was just being there."[35] This tenacity underscores her awareness that conducting such a political education is a long process, relative to Coleman's other more rapid-fire advocacy strategies. It takes, in Brodkin's words, "a long time to build the capital."[36] Coleman's strategic education of Newsom, therefore, began long before he took office: Coleman's pre-election activities attempted to focus all candidates' attention on children, and to effectively turn the race into one about children. As noted, Coleman distributed a questionnaire to candidates soliciting their positions on children and family policy; it then mailed their responses to all likely voters in San Francisco. The financial resources that Coleman dedicated to this activity underscore the importance it attaches to having political leaders who prioritize children: Brodkin indicated at a staff meeting that half of Coleman's annual printing budget would be spent on this mailing (about 100,000 were circulated).[37]

According to Brodkin's assessment, their efforts were successful. She told a group at a planning meeting for the Mayoral Forum that the candidates were fighting over who would be the first to have a press conference regarding children's policy, which was, in Brodkin's memory, the first time that such issues had been taken so seriously by politicians in the city.[38] And with respect to Newsom in particular, Brodkin describes the education he received from Coleman as largely successful: "We ended up with the most educated mayor on children's issues that I think the City's ever had."[39] Newsom has declared his first year in office "The Year of the Child," a slogan that is a tribute to Coleman's efforts—but also potential ammunition for Coleman should Newsom retreat from his intention to prioritize children and family policy.

Long-term outlook

There is a notable drawback to this heavy investment of time, energy, and sometimes funds, to the political education of public officials given their high turnover rate. As one staff member described at a Coleman meeting, she would have to "start over" with a new city official since a key contact in a city department had left.[40] Yet turnover also presents Coleman with the opportunity to engage in electoral politics again, with the hope of focusing the public's attention on children's issues. Elections present Coleman with a critically important opportunity to shape public discourse, and to secure support for its issues from hopeful office-holders, as Coleman's Mayoral Forum exemplifies.

A politician trained by Coleman is no guarantee of consistent future support; many interests affect decision-making and sometimes yield decisions counter to Coleman's position. Newsom's response to Coleman's lengthy campaign to trim the Fire Department's budget is a case in point of how differences persist between "teacher" and "student," and how disappointing this can be to advocates when a policy decision runs counter to their educational efforts to get officials to prioritize children. According to Brodkin, despite Coleman's campaign to promote cost-cutting reforms of the Fire Department, in just several minutes at a City Hall meeting, Newsom quickly promised not to trim the Fire Department's budget.[41] Clearly, competing political pressures can and do still exert influence and cause the Mayor to side against Coleman. But these occasional disagreements do not, in Coleman's view, render its efforts futile or signal the undoing of its education. According to Brodkin, their education sticks and will move forward with the careers of politicians: "As Gavin goes up, he will take with him the education."[42]

"If you look at Coleman, what you see in its wake is a trail of institutions that have been created because it goes through a process of issue identification, building community, building consensus around an issue, and then saying, 'Well, what institutionally, structurally could we build to address this problem over the long term?'"

Indicators of Success: "A Trail of Institutions" in Coleman's Wake

What is perhaps most impressive about Coleman's advocacy efforts—both with respect to its activities as a watchdog, and its work as a political educator—is how many of its campaigns culminate in the creation of new advisory committees to public officials, new policies, and new laws to support children and youth. The list of accomplishments to this end is long, including: passage of the Children's Fund (Proposition J); creation of the San Francisco Youth Commission; the creation of the Juvenile Probation Commission; and creation of the Mayor's Department of Children, Youth and Families. These successes mark the moments at which Coleman hands off its campaigns to local government entities, entrusting them to carry forward policies supportive of children and youth. These hand offs signify the transition of advocacy efforts from external groups to efforts inside local government. They signal a shift from dependence on the social mobilization of everyday citizens—a process requiring much time and continuing effort—to the harnessing of the interests and energy of full-time officials who are authorized to make decisions and to take actions on the public's behalf.

This shift speaks to the core of Coleman's guiding belief that the government is ultimately responsible for the welfare of children. It is therefore fitting that Coleman's greatest triumphs are institutionalized in public laws and agencies. A former Coleman staff member emphasized Coleman's unique ability to embed its reforms in governmental structures: "If you look at Coleman, what you see in its wake is a trail of institutions that have been created because it goes through a process of issue identification, building community, building consensus around an issue, and then saying, 'Well, what institutionally, structurally could we build to address this problem over the long term?' "[43]

Yet there is also a downside to this outcome of advocacy: once Coleman hands off its efforts to government entities, it to some extent loses control of the implementation process. Coleman's assessment of efficacy is often limited to whether a measure passed, whether more funds were secured, or a new program started—assessments that are more sensitive to resource distribution than to implementation efficacy. But according to Brodkin, this limitation is perhaps what naturally separates advocates from direct-service providers and evaluators: advocates can secure resources, but others have to make effective use of them. This division has characterized Coleman's limited involvement with the Children's Fund since its passage. Yet Coleman stands by its belief that more resources for children and youth are better than less—even if it cannot oversee the implementation of the resources it helps to secure. Coleman has also had significant influence on non-government organizations, including other area non-profits and direct-service providers. By providing support to these groups (and in some cases, helping to create new organizations), Coleman can have more impact on the implementation of some programs and policies. Examples here include Coleman's support of Beacon Wellness Centers, Larkin Street Youth Services, and Huckleberry Youth Programs.

The Importance of Confrontation: Being *Persona Non Grata*

Coleman has strategically adopted two roles—that of a watch dog and political educator—to impact local policy for children in San Francisco, and these roles underscore the tension implicit in principled advocacy. Although the above description of Coleman's activities with respect to these roles does highlight some of Coleman's successes in San Francisco, it must be noted that these roles are not without costs. As Brodkin herself cautioned: "Don't get a rose colored picture of the kind of role that Coleman has played."[44] Being a watchdog of local government, in particular, is not a position that ingratiates Coleman to some public officials: controversy rather than partnership characterizes many, though not all, of Coleman's relations with office-holders. But it is Coleman's response to this controversy that is truly central to its efficacy: Coleman is keenly aware of the fact that it is often *persona non grata*, but it carries on nonetheless with a thick skin.

Advocates, by definition, are likely to be pushing against somebody or something that stands as an obstacle to the realization of their goals. Controversy, therefore, is endemic to the arena, as Brodkin highlights: "Controversy is something that should not be avoided—it is essential…this field is all about making lemonade out of lemons."[45] What distinguishes Coleman, by Brodkin's analysis, is not its involvement in such controversy, but its willingness and ability to proceed through strife. Brodkin speaks of the enemies she has made in the last twenty five years as almost a badge of advocacy success: "I have outlived twenty people who hate my guts, who wouldn't speak to me."[46] Coleman is willing to engage in more confrontational advocacy to adhere to its beliefs about society's responsibilities to young people. The conflict Coleman creates with public officials and agencies is thus principled action to strategically advance its vision of children's entitlements.

But controversy is not just an obstacle to endure: advocates also have to act if they are to continue to promote their cause. Brodkin traces one of Coleman's biggest successes—the passage of the Children's Fund—to immovable politicians. In this case, Coleman could not get commitments from local officials to support the policies it wanted for children. It had "antagonized," in Brodkin's words, public officials so much that

Brodkin was shut out from further discussion. So Coleman circumvented politicians and went straight to voters:

> The Children's Fund would not exist if Coleman had not pushed (and therefore antagonized) literally everyone in public life, been forced out in the cold, and had to come up with a different strategy. We didn't have much clout—and developed it by building a constituency and circumventing the traditional power brokers.[47]

This contestation gave birth to one of Coleman's greatest triumphs in San Francisco.

In addition to deciding how to respond to existing obstacles, Coleman also tries to be strategic about when and how to initiate conflict with allies when agendas differ. Brodkin speaks about this critical decision—how to respond, and with what force, to views counter to one's principles—in a personally reflective way. As a self-described "rough around the edges" sort of person, she does have skin tough enough to withstand controversy, but she is keenly aware of the importance of carefully considering when to begin a battle. As she said regarding when to take a stand against a local politician, "We're already tormenting over the question, when do we start fighting with the guy?…Are we going to go after him for that? Are we going to say, 'that's really horrible?' "[48]

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Brodkin is clearly aware of the high stakes here. But too much moderation, she asserts, would be counterproductive. Underlining this point, she used a poignant metaphor in describing credibility as the advocacy world's currency: "You have to spend your credibility in order to get something done, you know? What do you get it for if you're not going to spend it on something?"[49] Coleman has gained legitimacy in San Francisco with local officials because of its almost thirty-year history of advocacy efforts, marked by high profile campaigns such as the successful passage of the landmark Children's Fund. These "credibility-earning" triumphs thus become Coleman's bank account—but only of use if it results in future spending when Coleman feels the need and impulse to be controversial and even antagonize elected officials. This, perhaps, is the key to Coleman's efficacy: it earns its credibility, and then is willing to spend it.

Organizational Constraints

The case of Coleman exemplifies how a child advocacy organization may mobilize citizens and public officials to support systemic changes that improve conditions for children and youth in urban areas. Yet Coleman's position in San Francisco is not without constraints. Coleman's almost singular focus on securing funds for children often detaches it from the implementation process. Coleman can add funds to children's services, but it does not always have the capacity to monitor and improve the delivery of those services. For example, since the passage of the Children's Fund, Coleman has largely trusted the procedure by which funds from the amendment are distributed to service providers and non-profits. Coleman does not usually question decisions made by government administrators of the funds. Yet recent cuts in the city budget to organizations and services that Coleman deems critical have caused Coleman to rethink its relative silence on funding decisions made by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, which administers the Children's Fund. Becoming more deeply involved in the implementation of the Children's Fund may be a new role for Coleman.

Coleman's position as a child-specific rather than general advocacy organization also poses some constraints for the organization. Unlike general advocacy organizations that may work on a variety of community issues of concern to involved citizens, Coleman—if it is to maintain its strong reputation as a child-advocacy organization—must choose issue campaigns of close proximity to children. On some level, children's issues are so widespread that this criterion is not too limiting: as Brodkin noted, "There is no issue you couldn't say was a kids' issue."[50] Yet even given the fact that children's needs pervade all social welfare issues, Coleman is not necessarily well situated to advocate in all sectors. For example, as Brodkin noted, affordable housing is certainly an issue that implicates children, but there is a network of housing activists in San Francisco who are better equipped to take on this issue than Coleman. In addition to considering institutional expertise when deciding what issues to take on, Coleman also has to consider who will speak on behalf of children if it does not. Affordable housing, notes Brodkin, has many advocates; juvenile justice reform and after-school programs do not.

Coleman's long-standing success in San Francisco, to some extent, is also a present-day challenge for the organization. Coleman's solid niche as *the* child advocacy organization in San Francisco does make it more difficult for the organization to secure funding. Local foundations and donors may assume that Coleman—given its thirty year history—will continue to thrive, and thus choose to support newer organizations that

are less established. Coleman's historical success and longevity may also make it difficult for the organization to maintain its public visibility via the media, given the ongoing rise and decline of newer organizations that may capture attention.

Coleman's Distinctive Position in San Francisco

Coleman is undeniably an unparalleled San Francisco institution that advocates for children and youth. Coleman's strategies and tactics distinguish it from other advocacy organizations in the Bay Area and have made it a powerful voice for children over its thirty year history. Coleman's unique emphasis on political processes—particularly elections and the city budget—is evidence of how advocacy groups can exert external pressure on government systems to meet the needs of children and youth, and use local power structures to advance their cause. Coleman's most important function, therefore, is to hold local government accountable to children in San Francisco by mobilizing citizens and coordinating other organizations and service providers. Coleman then institutionalizes its efforts by harnessing them to government agencies that act on behalf of the public—and that do so with a more child-friendly focus as a result of Coleman's work.

Just six months after Coleman's open letter to Mayor-elect Newsom, almost all of Coleman's requests to the Mayor upon his election have been addressed. In June 2004, Coleman analyzed the Mayor's budget proposal, commending him for expanding health coverage to young adults, creating new youth employment programs, and preserving most children's services in spite of the budget crisis. As a result of Coleman's efforts in San Francisco, the city has more stable funding for children's services, comprehensive policies and investments in childcare, a more rehabilitative juvenile justice system, expanded opportunities for youth development including after school programs and job opportunities, and a more democratic city budget process that allows child advocates' voices to be heard. Yet perhaps one of the biggest triumphs for Coleman—and by extension, the city of San Francisco—was the appointment in the fall of 2004 of Margaret Brodkin to head the city's Department of Children, Youth, and their Families (DCYF). Coleman's letter to the Mayor-elect had requested a DCYF Director "with expert knowledge of children's policies and services, and a high level of skill in working with the community."[51] Brodkin's appointment is a testament to the fact that Coleman has become a powerful champion for children and youth that San Francisco cannot ignore. Child advocacy organizations like Coleman that act as persistent intermediaries between families and the state offer citizens a unique venue for voicing their concerns and compel the state to listen, which, as Coleman illustrates, results in a more inclusive and child-focused policy environment, and a city that takes better care of its young people and their families.

Endnotes

[1] Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth "2004 Rally for Kids," April 15, 2004.

[2] "Open Letter to Mayor-Elect Newsom," by Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, December 23, 2003.

[3] Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth; "Principles We Support," http://www.colemanadvocates.org/AAMission.htm.

[4] Census 2000.

[5] San Francisco Department of Human Services, May 2003 Family and Children's Services Quarterly Report.

[6] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, May 6, 2004.

[7] Coleman is examined as part of a "population" of community organizations performing similar advocacy functions as well as those organizations they attempt to influence. To understand how these organizations function, our study considers their organizational structure, how they define and frame campaign issues, what strategies they use to execute their campaigns, and how they assess the efficacy of their work. For this case, we have conducted 10 interviews with Coleman staff and Board Members, and observed 8 meetings and 5 public events sponsored by Coleman.

[8] Margaret Brodkin. "Making Children a Priority of Our Local Communities: 15 Years of Advocacy in San Francisco." (San Francisco: Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, 1989). p.6.

[9] Discussion with N'Tanya Lee, December 16, 2004.

[10] Margaret Brodkin. "Making Children a Priority of Our Local Communities: 15 Years of Advocacy in San Francisco." (San Francisco: Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, 1989). p.8

[11] Ibid.

[12] Interview with Peter Bull, May 21, 2003.

[13] Interview with Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez, January 6, 2004.

[14] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, January 31, 2003.

[15] Interview with N'Tanya Lee, November 21, 2003.

[16] Interview with Taj James, February 20, 2004.

[17] Interview with Sandra Fewer, April 2, 2004.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Interview with Marybeth Wallace, April 1, 2004.

[20] Interview with Joe Wilson, December 3, 2003.

[21] From Coleman Advocates list of "Principles We Support," http://www.colemandadvocates.org.

[22] Interview with Joe Wilson, December 3, 2003.

[23] Margaret Brodkin. "Making Children a Priority of Our Local Communities: 15 Years of Advocacy in San Francisco." (San Francisco: Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, 1989). p.13.

[24] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, January 31, 2003.

[25] San Francisco Child Advocacy Network Budget Strategy Meeting, June 8, 2004.

[26] "Save Lives and Save Money - Clean Up the Fire Department Now," released by Coleman in May 2004; available at http://www.colemanadvocates.org.

[27] Margaret Brodkin. "Making Children a Priority of Our Local Communities: 15 Years of Advocacy in San Francisco." (San Francisco: Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, 1989). p.11.

[28] Interview with Taj James, March 7, 2003.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, January 31, 2003.

[31] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, March 7, 2003.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, May 6, 2004.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Coleman Staff Meeting, May 9, 2003.

[38] Coleman Planning Meeting for Mayoral Candidate Forum, August 5, 2003.

[39] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, May 6, 2004.

[40] Coleman Staff Meeting, May 9, 2003.

[41] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, May 6, 2004.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Interview with Taj James, February 20, 2004.

[44] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, May 6, 2004.

[45] Email exchange with Margaret Brodkin, May 7, 2004.

[46] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, May 6, 2004.

[47] Email exchange with Margaret Brodkin, May 7, 2004.

[48] Interview with Margaret Brodkin, May 6, 2004.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] "Open Letter to Mayor-Elect Newsom," by Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, December 23, 2003.

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