

EXCERPT: THE STEALTH TAKEOVER OF NYC'S SCHOOL BOARDS (in the works for ProPublica)

On a rainy Tuesday in May 2023, a handful of parents gathered in the fluorescent-lit cafeteria of PS 321 in Park Slope to vote in an election almost no one knew was happening. The ballots were counted by 8 p.m., and by a margin of just 12 votes, a slate of candidates backed by PLACE NYC, a parent group claiming to champion “academic rigor,” took control of Brooklyn’s District 15 Community Education Council (CEC).

Only 7% of parents turned out to vote. The elections and outcome went wholly unnoticed by local media. But its repercussions were swift. And immediate.

Within weeks, the new council blocked a proposal to expand a diversity initiative that had sent more Black and Latino students to top middle schools. Instead, they voted to reinstate a controversial “screened admissions” policy, one that relied on grades and test scores, metrics critics say favor affluent, white families. “It was a coup,” whispered one longtime CEC member, who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation. “They showed up with a plan, and they executed it.”

This wasn’t just a local skirmish. PLACE NYC and its allies have perfected a playbook for hijacking hyper-local school councils across the country, from San Francisco to Chicago. Their strategy: Target low-turnout elections where a few dozen votes can swing control, then push policies that resegregate schools under the banner of “merit.”

“They’re not just parents who care about gifted programs,” said Halley Potter, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation who studies school segregation. “They’re foot soldiers in a broader movement to dismantle public education as we know it.”

At stake is the future of New York City’s schools, and whether the nation’s largest school system will cement itself as one of its most unequal.