

# WE MADE A PROMISE



School-Community  
Collaboration,  
Leadership, and  
Transformation  
at Promesa Boyle Heights

## Executive Summary



Annenberg  
Institute for  
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABOUT TIME FOR EQUITY

Over the past four years, AISR has partnered with the Ford Foundation on the Time for Equity project. Time for Equity builds the capacity of schools, districts, communities, and partner organizations to improve educational opportunities in the nation's most underserved school systems through expanded and reimaged learning time. Our work so far has included the development of twenty-four indicators that school communities can use as "yardsticks" to measure and refine their efforts to create expanded and improved learning opportunities for young people; a scan of the Los Angeles Education Ecosystem that preceded this report; and a forthcoming study on teacher knowledge, ownership, and leadership in Los Angeles. These resources can be found at <http://timeforequity.org/> and <http://annenberginstitute.org/what-we-do/projects/time-equity>.

For the full report (and references), see <http://annenberginstitute.org/publications/we-made-promise>.

## ABOUT THE ANNEBERG INSTITUTE

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) is a national policy research and reform support organization that collaborates with school districts and communities to improve the conditions and outcomes of education in America. Through three program circles of work – District & Systems Transformation, Community Organizing & Engagement, and Research & Policy – AISR helps these stakeholders join forces and establish sustainable systems that ensure excellence, equity, and social justice for all students, especially in urban, high-poverty communities. This work is grounded in the vision of a "smart education system," that is, a high-functioning school district that collaborates with cross-sector community partners to provide a comprehensive web of opportunities and supports for students, inside and outside of school.

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Front cover: Parent volunteers provide snacks for students at Mendez High School's career day, March 2016.

## Purpose of the Study

Promesa Boyle Heights is a neighborhood-level ecosystem that works to deliberately develop relationships, coordination, and alignment across multiple partners to benefit young people and families, an approach that has seen positive, measurable outcomes as a result. At the core of Promesa's mission is the substantive engagement of parents, youth, and residents as key stakeholders, decision-makers, and owners of the work. This level of community ownership is too often missing in collaborative education efforts, but it lays crucial groundwork for ongoing support, sustainability, and success. This study was conducted with the hope that an exploration of the processes, structures, and belief systems of Promesa Boyle Heights, as well as the lessons learned by the collaborative, would be of value to those working to foster meaningful collaboration across the educational ecosystem.

## Guiding Frameworks and Methods

Our research was informed by two key frameworks. *Collective impact* is “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem,” which involves a centralized infrastructure, dedicated staff, and a structured process (Kania & Kramer 2011, p. 36). *Smart education systems*, a framework developed by AISR, include multiple and substantial cross-sector partnerships between district, community, and the public and private sectors that work to achieve educational equity for all students.<sup>1</sup>

To learn more about the perceptions of stakeholders involved with Promesa Boyle Heights, we facilitated a series of interviews driven by the following research questions:<sup>2</sup>

- What are the conditions, practices, and strategies that foster sustainable collaboration among schools, school systems, partner organizations, and communities to improve equitable opportunities and outcomes for students?
- How do these conditions, practices, and strategies overlap with the collective impact and smart education system frameworks?
- How can parents, students, and residents be effectively engaged as key stakeholders and leaders in a collaborative education reform effort to achieve equity for all students?

## Background and History

### Boyle Heights

Boyle Heights, located on the eastern edge of Los Angeles, is one of the city's oldest and most densely populated communities. Demographically, Boyle Heights has seen significant changes over the years; by 2000, 94 percent of the neighborhood was Latino,<sup>3</sup> but recently gentrification has become a notable concern (Aron 2016). Residents of Boyle Heights face numerous educational and economic challenges, placing the area in the top 10 percent of Los Angeles County's 272 communities with high educational and income risk factors. Despite the challenges faced by residents, Boyle Heights has a long, rich history of activism and collaboration, a distinct sense of community culture and pride, and a record of success in fighting for community and school improvements.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://annenberginstitute.org/who-we-are/smart-education-systems>.

<sup>2</sup> More information about the methods used in this study can be found in the full report.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/boyle-heights/>.

## Promesa Boyle Heights

Promesa Boyle Heights is a collective of residents, youth, schools, and community organizations united in lifting community voices and working together to transform conditions and improve opportunities for students and families. The governance structure is built around community leadership and collaboration.<sup>4</sup> Proyecto Pastoral, a local community-based organization, serves as Promesa’s anchor organization. Promesa works in three neighborhood schools: Mendez High School, Roosevelt High School, and Hollenbeck Middle School.

## Findings

### Core Values and Goals

In interviews with Promesa stakeholders, we heard a shared vision for thriving students, schools, and community: holding high expectations for students’ long-term academic success; ensuring that youth have the necessary social, emotional, psychological, health, and economic supports for that success; and supporting community well-being as a whole, including education, safety, employment, and health. Underlying this shared vision are several interrelated core goals and values:

- Building power, capacity, and confidence among parents, youth, and Boyle Heights residents;
- Community members articulating and advocating for their needs;
- Bottom-up, community-driven, and inclusive structures and practices; and
- Collaboration with a range of partners.

## Partner Collaboration

We asked interviewees about the characteristics and practices that have enabled the partnerships facilitated through Promesa Boyle Heights to be successful, and to have an impact on Boyle Heights schools and community despite limited resources. Several of these are linked to the core values discussed above, particularly the development of a shared vision and efforts to create a collaborative environment that is open, transparent, and inclusive. Four additional, foundational elements of partner collaboration emerged strongly in the data:

- A focus on building and sustaining relationships;
- Supportive and engaged school leaders who “blur the lines” between community and school and cultivate a culture of collaboration;
- Skilled backbone staff, some of whom are embedded in schools and the majority of whom are representative of the Boyle Heights community, working to align and coordinate partners and to maintain the collaborative’s momentum; and
- Using school, student, and community data to determine and act on priorities and to provide the information needed to help partners better meet the needs of schools and students.

## Parent and Resident Voice and Leadership

Promesa’s approach to engaging parents, youth, and other residents comes out of a strong community organizing framework, which acknowledges that those most affected by an issue must have a central role in addressing it – work is done “with” communities, not “on behalf of” them (Renée & McAlister 2011). Community members are seen as assets, and the many kinds of knowledge within the community, including those rooted in lived experiences, are respected and valued. Work thus moves from community “involvement” or “engagement” to shifting long-standing power relationships and building collective power to achieve meaningful, equity-focused changes in policy and practice (Warren & Mapp 2011). Through this approach, Promesa emphasizes:

<sup>4</sup> For more on Promesa’s history and governance structure, see the full report.

- Outreach and recruitment to build and sustain a meaningfully engaged group of community members;
- A strong community role in governance, with a consensus-based General Assembly at the core of decision making; and
- Leadership development for parents and residents, including both skill development and political or issue-based education, that helps them to more fully engage at decision-making tables.

## Impacts

### Individual Impact

Mendez High School emerged as a strong partner in Promesa’s initial efforts, and since 2011 Promesa’s impact at Mendez has been reflected in increased graduation rates, college readiness and college-going, attendance, and state test scores.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, Mendez became the most improved high school in California (Romo 2015), and in September 2015 the partnership was named one of the Bright Spots in Hispanic Education by the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics.<sup>6</sup>

### Individual, Community, School, and District Impacts

*Individuals*, particularly parents and community-based organization staff, spoke of expanding and growing both personally and professionally through participation in Promesa. Seeing how organizations come together with “good intentions” to build community capacity for the good of the community has built more trust and hopefulness, both in individual relationships and in the collaborative process. Participants also noted the impact of developing their individual capacity to do systems-change work through the collective impact frame.

*Organizations* are strengthening their capacity to partner through Promesa’s work. Notably, participants stated that Promesa is modeling a shift in

collaboration, where organizations come together for the work, not for money, with less positioning between individual organizations. A related effect is an expansion of the range of organizations that have come to the table in a positive way; for example, members of the police department now participate in Promesa’s Steering Committee. Participation in the collaborative has brought “new resources and better-used resources” to partners, including increased staff skills and capacities, more meaningful relationships, and in some cases, direct funding.

*Community members* – specifically parents, youth, and other residents – have experienced greater leadership, agency, and investment through the process of setting an ambitious goal with a clear vision, and the resulting community-led planning, decision-making, and stewardship of resources toward achieving that goal has led to a recognition of the community’s power. Through Promesa’s work, community members are able to leverage the attention and resources of critical stakeholders, such as elected officials, community-based organizations, and funders, to help meet the needs of the entire Boyle Heights community. Parents and youth see that as advocates, allies, and leaders, “their voice really matters.” And through this deeper engagement, capacity building, and support, parents in turn feel better able to support the community’s students to reach their goals.

*Schools* are shifting their culture, systems, and structures as a result of Promesa’s work, so that school staff and partners focus on working with the highest-need students not as an add-on, but as part of their core mission and as proof of the efficacy of this particular collaborative approach. A key element is listening to the voices of students themselves and understanding their needs and barriers to success. Schools are seeding good practices and

<sup>5</sup> For more details on project outcomes, see the full report.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/list/hispanic-initiative/bright-spots.html>.

bringing them to other places – either within a specific school, other schools in Boyle Heights, or other schools across the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Promesa’s work is also “pushing the fact that the schools belong to the community,” breaking down silos and perceived walls around schools in Boyle Heights and helping hold schools accountable to the community.

The *district* is impacted as Promesa has worked to align LAUSD’s priorities with those of Boyle Heights community members, schools, and other partners. According to system leaders, Promesa’s advocacy has helped student, family, and community wellness (applied broadly to academic, financial, and mental health) become a greater priority for the district. Within these broad priorities, the collaborative has pushed for action on specific policies and strategies and has increased the understanding and expansion of the community school model as a cohesive framework for incorporating these priorities.

## Conclusion and Lessons for the Field

The elements that contribute to the success of Promesa Boyle Heights can’t simply be transferred to other communities with different histories, social factors, and individuals, but our findings indicate that key design principles are replicable and can serve as models for similar initiatives and for the field working to transform education through collective impact and smart education systems frameworks. These include:

- Building on deep, trusting relationships that exist between key community and school partners and prioritizing relationship-building as a foundation for the work;
- Investing ample staff time and energy in schools where leadership supports collaborative work and understands the value of partner organizations and family engagement;
- Including community organizing groups as core partners in the work, and investing the necessary resources and capacity to facilitate meaningful and authentic grassroots community leadership and ownership;
- Valuing the assets, capacities, and knowledge that students, parents, and community residents bring to the table, and developing structures to ensure that that they not only construct the vision for change, but have a role in enacting that vision;
- Ensuring that core values drive fund development, not the other way around;
- Using data strategically to advance the collaborative’s vision and align the work of its partners, and focusing capacity strategically on areas of greatest need and potential impact, particularly when resources or capacity are limited; and
- Cultivating a highly skilled backbone organization with staff who move the work forward while maintaining strong adherence to the collaborative’s vision and values, and who are representative of – or have significant points of connection with – the community.

Finally, Promesa’s key partners emphasized to us that the importance of determination, persistence, and belief cannot be understated:

Just because one person [in a leadership position] says [no], we’re not going to be satisfied with that. Because we have all been told things aren’t possible. Higher graduation rates aren’t possible. College access. Ending violence is not possible. So we’ve all seen things be possible.

Promesa’s story shows what is possible. By sharing it, we hope that more people working to catalyze systems change in education will invest energy, time, careful thought, and funding in collaborating equitably with their communities.





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