Putting Families at the Center: The Role of Parent Advocacy Groups during COVID-19

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As school systems nationwide struggle to deliver learning in a pandemic, parent advocacy groups are stepping up to help Black and Hispanic families who have often been left out of previous education policymaking discussions. They are designing solutions that better meet the needs of these families and demonstrating how communities can leverage this moment to demand more equitable and sustainable solutions that go beyond the status quo.

Hundreds of grassroots parent advocacy groups exist across the country. This piece focuses on four of them—The Oakland REACH in Oakland, California; Parents Amplifying Voices in Education, or PAVE, in Washington D.C.; Kids First Chicago; and Parent Revolution in Los Angeles—that have been particularly effective in devising bold solutions during the current crisis.

Their work has important implications for how organizations can support parents often marginalized in traditional systems to lead the development of solutions for their communities. These include building deep relationships with families before a crisis hits, equipping families with the skills to speak out, creating feedback loops through parent surveys and focus groups to keep conversations focused on families' concerns, and going beyond tinkering to address fundamental weaknesses in public education that stand in the way of long-term change. Lakisha Young, the founder and CEO of The Oakland REACH, explained:

> COVID has forced us to abandon our safety nets. . . . It's taken away everybody's normal, which gives us an opportunity to create a whole new normal. And we need to.

Listening to Families and Responding to their Needs

Parent advocacy groups were uniquely positioned to reach out when schools shuttered their doors last March. Many have spent years developing trusting relationships with Black and Hispanic families whose children have been inadequately served by public schools. The Oakland REACH got on the phone with its base of 300 families as soon as schools closed in March to find out how the crisis was affecting them. In Washington, D.C., staff members at PAVE called all of the families in its network during the weekend after schools closed and again the following week. Maya Martin Cadogan, the founder and CEO of PAVE, said:

> The only way we were going to figure out what they needed was for them to feel vulnerable with us.

Similarly, Kids First Chicago and Parent Revolution in Los Angeles quickly connected with the parents in their networks to understand their biggest challenges, which included housing, food insecurity, and the need for digital resources.

The organizations quickly raised money to set up relief funds to address families' most urgent concerns, from rental assistance to money for bills. They formed coalitions with other organizations citywide to raise funds and used relationships with families to identify those most in need of assistance. Kids First Chicago quickly initiated a COVID Relief Fund and sent no-strings-attached cash gifts to 150 families. The Oakland REACH raised more than $350,000 in the spring to provide some 1,000 families with cash assistance. PAVE created the Fund for DC Families and raised about $106,000 from individuals and foundations to cover everything from food and rental assistance to Chromebooks and school supply kits. Parent Revolution started the One Family LA Project with Great Public Schools Now, which generated support from 30 education organizations and raised more than $2 million in direct grants to help 4,000 families pay for such basics as food, housing, and electricity.

Once it became clear that school buildings would be closed for the remainder of the school year, the organizations deepened their use of parent surveys and focus groups in the late spring and early summer to identify the biggest educational challenges facing families and worked with them to co-design solutions.

The Oakland REACH: Showing Families What a High-Quality Education Looks Like

The Oakland REACH is a parent-run, parent-led group committed to empowering families from the most underserved communities to demand high-quality schools. More than 70 percent of Oakland public school students are Black or Hispanic, and 92 percent of families in The Oakland REACH network qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. As Young says:

> With fewer than 30 percent of Black and Latino students in Oakland schools reading at grade level, the learning our children have been receiving cannot continue. . . . Parents are demanding effective learning that breaks with a long history of miseducation.

After the district closed its schools last spring, the nonprofit used the summer to give families a concrete experience of what high-quality remote learning looks like so they would know what's possible. To support students whose learning was disrupted in the spring, The Oakland REACH created a Citywide Virtual Family Hub with the goal of integrating both the academic learning needs and aspirations of their families along with the socio-economic needs.

This vision birthed a five-week summer program for more than 200 students, five days a week. The Citywide Virtual Family Hub used the Google Classroom platform and included a Literacy Liberation Center for students in grades K–2 and a partnership with the National Summer School Initiative (now Cadence Learning) for students in grades 3–8. The organization raised funding and distributed 200 laptops and 60 hotspots to ensure every participating student had their own device and access to the internet. According to Young, student attendance at the Hub during the summer averaged 83 percent, and 9 in 10 parents said the Hub was having a positive impact on their lives and on their children's education.

This fall, the Hub has continued as an afterschool program that provides synchronous academic and social enrichment experiences to families outside of school hours. The Hub currently serves 400 families across Oakland. A Family Sustainability Center that started in the summer has also continued. Through the Center, families have access to social resources and can attend leadership development workshops.

One of The Oakland REACH's most important innovations was to transition its 10 community organizers into Family Liaisons who provide daily support for the families in the Hub. Liaisons help families navigate remote learning and successfully participate in the Hub. Family Liaisons are fellow parents who have received leadership training and often received services through the Hub themselves. As a result, said Young:

> There's automatically a relationship and connection around shared experiences. That's a huge, important starting point.

Going into the fall, 99 percent of Hub parents said they wanted a Family Liaison, so The Oakland REACH has hired additional parents to handle that demand.

After participating in the Hub last summer and experiencing a mediocre start to school this year, parent Ericka Njemanze sent a letter to her principal saying, "I am not interested in a repeat of my children's horrible academic 2nd grade school year." She asked that parents receive the 3rd grade standards and the specifics of upcoming lessons so they could help their children. As a result of her letter, the principal asked Ericka to lead the PTA and guide the school around parent voice and leadership. Ericka also applied for and was selected to be a Family Liaison this fall.

This school year, The Oakland REACH has built weekly surveys into its Hub model to capture information about their children's schooling experiences across almost 80 district and charter schools. "As far as we know, we're the only organization in Oakland building the infrastructure to collect real-time data from Black and Brown families about the realities of distance learning today," said Young. The organization will share those results with the district and use them to inform its own advocacy agenda.

PAVE: Cementing Families' Priorities in the District Budget

Maya Martin Cadogan founded PAVE in 2016 with an all-parent governing board so that families could create the vision for education in D.C.—not have it created for them. Since 2016 PAVE has held leadership training and workshops for parents, along with additional executive coaching to some 20 parent leaders. Said Cadogan:

> I'm trying to think about how parents take on the roles of the people they're oftentimes advocating toward.

After schools closed last spring, PAVE conducted a survey, in both English and Spanish, of 472 D.C. families to gather data on what they were experiencing. PAVE also hosted a series of one-on-one conversations and virtual meetings with its parent leaders. "What we were hearing from families—[DC Public Schools] did not go virtual when they started—they were giving these work packets that parents had to come pick up that were printed." PAVE's findings resulted in a 29-page statement of beliefs about a family-centered response to Coronavirus in D.C. Between March and July, some 200 parents met virtually 60 times to workshop the document. They then met with policymakers, elected officials, and candidates running for office to press for their recommendations.

Prior to the pandemic, Cadogan also had taken the lead in bringing together a group of education leaders of color, including the deputy mayor and the schools chancellor, to talk about what they wanted to see for their children. She explained:

> It became even more relevant during the pandemic, making sure that Black and Brown leader voices are centered. They were super helpful in the advocacy work our parents wound up doing; many of those organizations and leaders said we'll join in the campaign.

The parents' efforts resulted in a 3 percent budget increase per pupil in the city's 2020 budget—nearly $20 million in extra funding for mental health services and social-emotional learning in schools, and $9 million in funds to support workers excluded from unemployment insurance. "It would be a great budget year in a normal year," said Cadogan, "but in a pandemic year, people asked, 'How did D.C. do that?' A lot of it had to do with parents. They showed up and they showed up and they pushed hard and they went for it. They didn't take no for an answer."

Surprisingly, digital organizing has made PAVE's work even more equitable. Prior to COVID, PAVE regularly tried to remove barriers to attending its in-person meetings by providing childcare and food and hosting meetings in different city neighborhoods. But they usually attracted about 25 people. "Our online candidate forums—the smallest one had 55 parents and they went up to 100 because now you can join from home on your computer," said Cadogan. "When the elected officials showed up on Zoom, we'd have 78 parents. We did gallery view because I wanted them to see all these Black and Brown faces who are coming together. And that made all the elected officials very attuned to what parents were asking for and the asks were clear."

Kids First Chicago: Connecting Families to the Internet

Kids First Chicago helps families identify, navigate, and advocate for high-quality public education. To date, it has recruited and trained 900 parent advocates and champions. Daniel Anello, the CEO, said:

> Parents are the ones who ultimately should be providing input into what the design of systems are. . . . The mistake we often make is we're paternalistic about how we design things.

In hundreds of conversations this spring, the organization heard that families were worried about accessing devices and the internet from their home. So, Kids First began looking at the data citywide and talking with internet service providers to explore potential solutions. That led to an April report, Digital Equity in Education, which showed that one in five children under age 18 in Chicago (roughly 110,000 children), primarily Black or Hispanic students, lacked access to broadband. As Claiborne Wade, a Chicago Public Schools father of four said, "The need for internet access has been going on for a while now, but remote learning is making it more evident."

A day after the report was published, city leaders responded to Kids First and asked the team to devise an operational plan and budget to help bridge Chicago's troubling internet connectivity gaps. As parents continued to raise their voices, Kids First worked with public and private partners to launch Chicago Connected, a four-year, $50 million program to connect some 60,000 households and 100,000 Chicago children with no-cost, barrier-free internet services. Kids First is now coordinating with 35 organizations across the city through the initiative. Anello said:

> It would have been very easy for the bureaucracy to say, 'You're right. This is a big issue, but we don't know how to address it.' We wrote the operational plan because we wanted there to be absolutely no excuse for getting the work done. By doing that sweat-equity work, it meant they had something to respond to. But the most powerful part of this initiative was being able to see Kids First Chicago parent leaders standing side-by-side with the district CEO and Chicago's mayor at the city's press announcement for it in late June.

This past summer, Kids First's Parent Advisory Board of 21 parents from the South and West sides of Chicago hosted 16 focus groups to hear directly from 163 student caregivers about

how the pandemic was impacting their children's education. That resulted in an initial report in a planned multiyear series on parent-led solutions to education recovery.

In addition to surveys, Kids First is hosting a Living Room Series this fall that brings parents together virtually to share their recent school experiences and informally socialize. These informal engagements will help set the stage for a deeper exploration about what public education could look like in a post-COVID world. Anello explained:

> If we are really listening to the mood of the city and the country right now, we will use this moment as an opportunity to reimagine how we do school. It has always been true, but, right now, everyone involved in schooling acknowledges that we cannot deliver education without the partnership of parents and caregivers. We just need to listen harder to what families need and design schooling to better match those needs.

Parent Revolution: Los Angeles Families Sue the District for a Better Education

In Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) signed a remote learning agreement with its local teachers union, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), last spring that was "incredibly harmful to children," said Seth Litt, the CEO of Parent Revolution. "They made any video instruction optional. They required a four-hour work day from teachers inclusive of instruction, planning, and outreach to families and left it totally at teachers' discretion. They prohibited any type of assessments other than teacher-created assessments, which would be up to the discretion of the teacher if they wanted to do that or not. They didn't really take attendance in any consistent way." Not surprisingly, Litt added:

> The most disadvantaged students in Los Angeles Unified got virtually nothing. Plenty of families in our network had no contact with their school for three months.

Families worried about whether the district had a better plan for the fall. Leaders from Parent Revolution and Innovate Public Schools, another parent organizing group, came together to share families' experiences with remote learning and discuss what their children needed when schools reopened. Families found common experiences across schools and neighborhoods, which they traced back to the agreement between LAUSD and UTLA. They created a campaign with a list of demands and sent it to the superintendent and school board in July. When system leaders failed to respond, the parents held socially distanced car rallies outside district headquarters demanding that the district hold public hearings on its plan for the fall so that decisions would be made with community input. More than 30 community-based organizations sent similar letters to the school board and superintendent asking for a public conversation. Instead, the board recessed for the summer with its next public meeting scheduled just 10 days before the start of the school year. With the normal avenues for parent advocacy blocked, Parent Revolution and Innovate Public Schools presented parent leaders with the idea of taking legal action. With so much at stake for their children, parent leaders agreed. The law firm Kirkland & Ellis took on the case pro bono.

When UTLA and LAUSD reached a new agreement in August, it still provided students with much shorter school days and much less live learning time than comparable California districts. Parents also were concerned about the limited support for teachers, lack of protections for students with disabilities and English language learners, lack of clarity about how to support students who had fallen behind in the spring, and limited parent engagement. Nine plaintiffs, all parents of LAUSD students, filed a class action suit against LAUSD in Los Angeles Superior Court on September 24. The suit asserts that the district's spring and fall remote learning plans violate the California Constitution and state regulations for remote learning and discriminate on the basis of wealth and race. The suit seeks remedies to improve remote learning and to address the significant learning loss and disconnection from school that students are experiencing.

Parent Revolution hopes that the class action lawsuit will have an immediate impact on remote learning and educational recovery from the pandemic, while elevating awareness of long-standing inequities in the system. Litt explained:

> This is about a system that's perfectly designed to get the results it does for kids, which are discriminatory and oppressive. And if we care about our communities, we have to change that system because it will continue otherwise.

Learning Pods: Providing Education Equity for All Families

Parent advocacy groups are empowering families to reimagine public schools. But sometimes parents are simply opting out as the ultimate form of empowerment. Chemay Morales-James was working as an equity coach providing consulting services to public school districts when she decided to homeschool her own children. A former teacher and mother of two from Watertown, Connecticut, she said, "I just started realizing that the education system was producing exactly what it was designed to do—to separate the haves from the have-nots."

In 2016 she started My Reflection Matters, a consulting service to help parents and educators find classroom materials and tools that are culturally responsive and teach children the true history of who they are. That has developed into an in-person co-op for parents in her community, who meet one day a week from 9:00am to 2:30pm, and an online membership co-op, My Reflection Matters Village, for families from across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. "What's been beautiful is by having this virtual space with families, we've been able to co-create customized virtual learning for our families," she said.

Now, parents' experiences with remote learning under COVID-19 are causing more of them to follow Morales-James' lead and homeschool their children or form learning pods with other parents to share learning oversight or the cost of hiring tutors. Equity-focused pods are springing up around the country to extend such options beyond affluent families. In August the National Parents Union offered mini-grants of up to $25,000 to make such alternative arrangements accessible to students who are traditionally underserved by district-run schools. Applicants had to show the plans were parent-driven and supported low-income families, communities of color, or under resourced families. (My Reflection Matters Village is not a grantee.)

The national network of parents and education advocates is using $700,000 from the VELA Education Fund, which is supported by the Walton Family Foundation and the Charles Koch Institute. These grants can be used by individuals and organizations to fund micro-schools, homeschool co-ops, and other "out-of-system" models. To date, 37 projects have been funded. Keri Rodrigues, the founding President of National Parents Union, hopes to raise about $2 million to fund 110 applications in total.

The grants range from Righteous Voice Mentoring, a homeschool pod started by a single parent of two in Madison, Wisconsin, to support and empower Black girls in grades 4 through 8; to a group of parents in the Greenbrier neighborhood of Charlottesville, Virginia, who want to offer scholarships for refugee families to participate in the kinds of

small, in-person elementary school "pods" that are available to more affluent families; to a micro-pod for homeschooled middle and high school foster children in Roseburg, Oregon.

A nationally representative survey that NPU released in October found that 14 percent of parents said their children are participating in pods, and 89 percent said pods were "very/somewhat helpful" in terms of their children's education. That figure rose to 96 percent for parents who identified as their children's primary schoolwork helper.

"That's pretty powerful to me," said Rodrigues. "What it says to me . . . is that the toothpaste is out of the tube." She and her husband decided to homeschool their own five boys this past summer, when their school district failed to provide clarity about what education would look like this fall.

"Parents are pissed," said Rodrigues. "They are furious. They're well aware of the fact that they have no power in these conversations, and they're not happy about it." Polls NPU has conducted since last summer consistently show that a majority of parents—especially Black and Brown parents—do not want to return their children to schooling as usual. "They want innovation," she said.

Morales-James agrees that's what draws families to her virtual co-op. "Families are coming here because they're seeking support for themselves to shift away from schoolish ideas, beliefs, and practices into more self-directed learning," she said. "Learning should be a joyful and natural experience. It shouldn't feel coerced. It shouldn't feel like something you just go through. I didn't want that for my kids."

Her virtual village now has more than 200 members. "The story from Black, indigenous, people of color is almost always the same," she said. "[Parents say] 'I'm tired of the system not teaching the truth about this country. I'm tired of having to constantly explain things to the teacher or the school district. I'm tired of the microaggressions. So, we just decided to pull them out or not be there.' There overall seems to be this sense of emotional exhaustion."

While Morales-James describes her equity consulting as harm reduction work, the goal of My Reflection Matters Village is "liberation education," or designing a completely new system, she said, "because the roots of the old tree are just rotten."

Helping families make the most of the existing system and redesign are not contradictory. "I think those two things can happen simultaneously," she added. "I think they have to happen simultaneously."

Implications for Family-Led Policy Making

The work of parent advocacy groups, such as those described here, offer critical lessons for supporting families to lead change during the pandemic and beyond. While these lessons are important for other community-based organizations, districts can also learn from how these organizations have listened to, empowered, and engaged families in new ways.

All of these organizations drew upon these similar strengths in their work with families:

Don't wait for a crisis to develop relationships with families. Building trust takes time and effort. The Oakland REACH, PAVE, Kids First Chicago, and Parent Revolution had strong, prior relationships with families that they could draw upon in this moment. "We were around four

years before this happened," said Young. "We didn't rise from the ashes in some kind of miracle. This is hard work."

Help families navigate a complex system. The Oakland REACH found that families benefit from 1:1 support through online learning to make sense of new school policies, teacher demands, and learning environments. Their experience is consistent with the efficacy of a navigator model to help families through other educational experiences, like school choice.

Create feedback loops with families. All four organizations created ways to collect ongoing feedback from families to stay abreast of their most pressing concerns, the use of which deepened during the pandemic. These ranged from frequent contact through phone calls and community meetings to the use of focus groups, parent surveys, and virtual meetings to workshop documents. But the organizations did not stop with gathering information. Organizations used their networks to share family concerns with system leaders, whose responses were shared back to families.

Equip families with the skills and power to elevate their concerns and craft solutions. All four organizations intentionally build parents' confidence and skills to advocate on behalf of their children through training and fellowships. These activities predated COVID and have continued as a way to build family capacity as leaders. "I think the biggest role for us is the capacity that we've built with parent leaders over a number of years," said Litt, the CEO of Parent Revolution. "The lawsuit is very much in line with our core work, which is about making sure parents have power and can use it. . . . Anytime we take an action in any campaign, families come out with new capacity, new skills, new power that they put to work in their individual lives, that they put to work in collective action."

Push the system while offering solutions. Parent advocacy organizations play a complicated role within urban districts as potential collaborators, critical friends, and adversaries when families' needs are being ignored. These organizations must balance being close enough to the system that families' voices are heard while not being so close that they compromise their independence to push back. "What's interesting about PAVE is we play an inside-outside game," said Cadogan. "Our parents are not inside the system. They don't get paid by it, and they are really speaking the truth. But they're also inside the system, in that all our city agencies request our parents to join panels and insight groups and focus groups."

Conclusion

Families have key information that system leaders need in order to understand what is working, what isn't, and what the potential solutions could be. But the question for system leaders is: At a time when they are depending on parents to partner in their children's education like never before, are they willing to give parents a real voice at the table?

"I don't think people talk enough about really putting the resources—financial, people, capacity—in the hands of the communities that are impacted to make the changes in those communities," said Young of The Oakland REACH. "The orientation to leadership for parents is still grasstops—it's still other folks saying, 'How do we hear from parents? How do we get parent voice?' But what if the parents led you and told you what to do?"

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