Mobilizing the Eastside of Los Angeles for Educational Justice

Henry M. Perez and Perla Madera

A ten-year effort led by youth, community organizers, and a range of partners resulted in two new, successful high schools and showed the power of grassroots mobilization for social justice.

I've seen students that started off at Torres High School, before we had all these partners, and some were struggling. Some were getting into trouble doing things that they shouldn't have been doing. But when you connect these same students with the right program it makes a big difference. They become more focused. Extended learning time is helping us keep our students in school. We are offering them more than just math and science and the whole practice of drill and kill. We are offering them art, music, and mentorship.

— Alex Fuentes, principal, Torres High School Engineering and Technology Academy

For decades, the Eastside of Los Angeles[1] has seen mainly low-performing schools with huge push-out rates, low graduation rates, and low percentages of students prepared to attend a four-year university. Eastside schools have been, and to an extent continue to be, some of the most overcrowded and underresourced schools, not only in the Los Angeles Unified School District, but in the entire nation.

1 The region East of downtown Los Angeles that includes unincorporated East Los Angeles, Boyle Heights, El Sereno, and Lincoln Heights is popularly referred to as "the Eastside."

Henry M. Perez is associate director of InnerCity Struggle in Los Angeles. Perla Madera is a youth organizer for InnerCity Struggle.

But there are two schools in this neighborhood that have reversed these trends. Since opening in 2009 and 2010 respectively, Felicitas and Gonzalo Mendez High School for College and Career Preparation and Esteban E. Torres High School have developed to be two of the more successful high schools in the Eastside. Located only five miles away from each other, they are the first two schools that have been built in the East Los Angeles region in more than eighty years. Just last year, Mendez High School was recognized for recording a more than fifty-point gain on its Academic Performing Index (API) score, one of the largest gains in the state of California (Watanabe 2013). In a September *Los Angeles Magazine* article ranking the top seventy-five high schools in Los Angeles County, Torres Renaissance Academy and Torres Engineering and Technology Academy, two of the five autonomous pilot schools on the Esteban E. Torres High School campus, were listed #32 and #60, respectively (Mathews 2014).

The progress and current standing of Mendez and Torres High Schools is something that has not been seen in East Los Angeles in a very long time. In this article, the authors draw on our own experience at InnerCity Struggle and interviews with a number of other stakeholders to detail how InnerCity Struggle partnered with students, parents, educators, community members, and nonprofits to implement a "community schools" vision at these two schools. The framework for the community schools vision consists of implementing strategies such as: 1) the establishment of school-based supports like wellness centers or health clinics; 2) the use of restorative justice as an alternative to punitive discipline policies like suspensions and expulsions; 3) the integration of Linked Learning[2] in the instructional curriculum; and 4) maximizing the use of after school hours through the implementation of more and better learning time to assist in meeting the academic and social needs of the students and their families.[3]

This collaborative effort to create two new community schools shined a bright light on the crisis of public education in East Los Angeles. It also flipped the narrative of the education crisis in Los Angeles from one of scapegoating students and parents to one of recognizing systemic inequities faced by a mainly low-income, immigrant Latino community, which prevent them from accessing the education they deserve and limit their life opportunities.

HOW TWO COMMUNITY SCHOOLS WERE BORN

The community schools approach differs from some other school design models in that there is no one blueprint for a community school. In some places, community schools are initiated and planned top-down from the school district. But in East Los Angeles, Community Schools strategies have developed from a grassroots, bottom-up approach through more than ten years of organizing campaigns – led by youth, parents, organizers from InnerCity Struggle, and key education partners – that have served as building blocks toward creating a successful and sustainable community schools infrastructure at Mendez and Torres high schools.

2 For more on Linked Learning, see linkedlearning.org and the article by Janet Lopez and Peter Rivera in this issue of *VUE*.

3 For more on community schools, see the articles by Natasha Capers and Shital Shah and by Janet Lopez and Peter Rivera in this issue of *VUE*, and linkedlearning.org.

The Evolution of InnerCity Struggle

InnerCity Struggle began organizing youth and families in the East Los Angeles community of Boyle Heights in 1994. It started as an organization dedicated to reducing the violence in the community as well as supporting the victims and survivors of that violence, mainly mothers and youth, through gang intervention and support programs. In the early 2000s, with a new staff taking the helm of the organization, InnerCity Struggle shifted its focus from gang intervention to school-based youth organizing for education reform. The InnerCity Struggle staff created an educational justice vision based on improving graduation and college-going rates and creating a safe and healthy learning environment with holistic support programs for the youth and families of the Eastside. The staff developed a strategic plan to implement their vision and began organizing campaigns aimed at reaching that vision. InnerCity Struggle began working at two of the four high schools and soon was working at all four Eastside high schools.

In 2002, a group of youth from Garfield High School in East Los Angeles came together to discuss how they could improve the crisis-like conditions at their school. At that time, less than 50 percent of Garfield's students were graduating, and only about 16 percent were graduating eligible to attend a four-year university. The students from Garfield High School came together under the name United Students and were organized by youth organizers from InnerCity Struggle.

Trying to get a grasp on the key barriers that were hindering Garfield High School students from receiving a quality education, the students launched a survey gathering effort among their peers. The surveys asked students to identify the most pressing issues impacting their quality of education. Repeatedly, students identified overcrowding as their number one concern. In 2002, Garfield High School had approximately 4,700 students on a year-round school calendar with three tracks that alternated being in and out of session. This overcrowding and year-round calendar disrupted students' learning process and opportunities (one track would be in session two months and out of session the next two months year round) and led to a loss of seventeen days of instruction per year for students, as well as numerous other negative outcomes.

With the results of their survey complete, InnerCity Struggle youth felt like they had a strong mandate from the students at Garfield High School to fight for a new school and made the decision to launch the "new schools campaign" to win the construction of a new high school for their community. After months of organizing meetings with students and parents, collecting thousands of signatures on petitions in support of a new high school, conducting several delegations with decision-makers from the Los Angeles Unified School District, and conducting marches and rallies, the youth and families of InnerCity Struggle won their campaign for a new East Los Angeles high school in 2004. In the end, they not only won one new high school, but they won two new high schools, a new elementary school, and an adult school for the community.

Additionally, the "new schools campaign" gave InnerCity Struggle great momentum and support for continuing their educational justice vision for Eastside schools. InnerCity Struggle would then leverage this momentum and support to strategically push forward a community-led vision and effort for community schools at Mendez High School and Torres High School.

Turning New Schools Into Community Schools

Although approved in 2004, the two new schools were not scheduled to open until 2009 and 2010. Looking forward, InnerCity Struggle recognized that it had a tremendous opportunity to organize the community toward influencing how the schools would operate once they opened. Students and parents of InnerCity Struggle pressed forward stating that these new schools, that the community fought so hard to win, could not operate "business as usual" or in the "status quo" of what the community was used to. These schools needed to be drastically different. They needed to have a more personalized environment for students and parents, they needed to have high expectations and a college-going culture for students, and they needed to be community schools that would be open, accessible, and welcoming to the community and serve as a hub of enrichment and support programs and services for the community.

InnerCity Struggle understood that in order to achieve this vision, it needed a broad base of support from community and education stakeholders in East Los Angeles. In 2007, InnerCity Struggle launched the East Los Angeles Education Collaborative (ELAEC). This collaborative was made up of students, parents, representatives from community-based organizations, teachers, principals, and elected representatives. As the convener, InnerCity Struggle facilitated the collaborative in developing a "Community Vision for Public Education in the Eastside." It included the same elements that students and parents had pushed for but also included the desire for schools to have greater autonomy and flexibility over curriculum, budgets, governance, hiring, and schedules.

In 2009, the Los Angeles Unified School District launched an initiative known as Public School Choice. Although many in the education world expressed concerns over an initiative that would allow external operators to bid for any new and low-performing school in the district, InnerCity Struggle and the ELAEC saw this as an opportunity to carry out their community schools vision at one of the new high schools that was opening in East Los Angeles. With the support of the Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP), a nonprofit organization with expertise in providing teacher support, instructional development, and operating community schools, the East Los Angeles Education Partnership launched a pilot schools campaign for the Esteban E. Torres high school campus.

LAEP worked with five teams of teachers who developed five distinct proposals to operate five autonomous pilot schools at the soon-to-be-opened Torres High School. InnerCity Struggle worked with the teams to ensure that the proposals reflected a commitment to a community schools vision. InnerCity Struggle youth and parents also led a campaign to inform and engage the East Los Angeles community to support a student, parent, and community vote for the pilot school proposals. After months of organizing, the LAUSD School Board selected the community's pilot school proposals over the competing charter school proposals.

SUSTAINING THE VISION

The pilot school campaign victory won by InnerCity Struggle, LAEP, and the ELAEC sustained the energy and momentum for creating a new direction for public education in East Los Angeles. In the larger scheme of things, InnerCity Struggle understood that if the community was successful in

building an alternative school model at Torres High School, it would create the pressure and conditions for other schools in the community to improve as well.

Torres High School

As the new Esteban E. Torres High School was set to open in the fall of 2010, students and parents wanted to ensure that the commitment to a community schools vision was honored. Two top priorities for the community were the creation of a community schools coordinator position and the establishment of a wellness center on campus. The community saw a community school coordinator position as essential to facilitating the process of identifying school-based needs and finding partners that could assist the school in meeting those needs.

Additionally, InnerCity Struggle and the ELAEC learned from students that mental health services were a high priority. Many students shared their struggles with high stress and anxiety, as well as depression and suicidal tendencies. Immediately, InnerCity Struggle and LAEP created a school-based health task force charged with the responsibility of establishing a wellness center on campus. The health task force included community-based organizations, teachers, principals, school-based nurses and psychologists, students, and parents. This partnership enabled the school to quickly identify three community-based health providers that were willing to provide primary care and mental health care services at no cost to the school.

Even though the school had identified partners ready to provide free health care services to students of Torres High School, there still existed a challenge: the local Los Angeles Unified School District representatives wouldn't allow the health care providers to come onto the campus until the district approved them. After months of no approval, InnerCity Struggle used organizing strategies to pressure the district to approve the providers and the space for a wellness center. InnerCity Struggle youth launched a petition demanding that the district provide the space for a wellness center. InnerCity Struggle organized delegations between the superintendent and students, parents, teachers, and principals to express the urgency of providing students with mental health services and the expectation for the district to follow through on its commitment. After an almost two-year campaign, the Esteban Torres Wellness Center was inaugurated in April 2012.

Extended Learning Time at Torres

Another important part of the community's vision for Torres was the implementation of an extended learning time initiative through LAEP. Today at Torres, more than twenty external partners are providing enrichment and support programs for the roughly 2,000 students attending the five pilot schools on campus. According to recent data compiled by LAEP, the twenty partners are serving approximately 761 students from all five pilot schools. The programs offered at Torres High School through the extended learning time initiative serve as a way to augment the existing curriculum of the five pilot schools.

As Cristina Patricio, community schools coordinator at Torres, states,

> Extended learning time provides the students at Torres the opportunities to explore courses and programs that LAUSD does not offer them.

For example, the Torres Engineering and Technology Academy, because of its career focus, is unable to prioritize music classes for its students. However, through extended learning time, they are able to offer their students music

classes provided by a local team of musicians.

Torres High School is currently in the process of offering a murals program through a local nonprofit called Self-Help Graphics & Art. This course will offer students the opportunity to gain an arts experience that currently lacks significant investment in districts throughout the country. At the same time, students will learn about the rich history of murals in their own community and become much more grounded in the history of their community.

Extended learning time is also providing Torres High School students with the opportunity to focus on health and wellness. The nonprofit group People's Yoga offers yoga classes to students at the school; another outside partner offers Zumba classes.

In addition to enrichment programs, Patricio shares that extended learning time gives many students the opportunity to develop their leadership skills. Torres High School has a mentorship program offered by LAEP where upperclassmen take on the role of mentoring underclassmen. This opportunity has helped students like Santiago, who Patricio describes as a young man who dealt with serious anger issues:[4]

> In his first three years at Torres, no one knew what to do with him. They struggled working with him because of his anger issues. The mentorship program was a space that really worked for Santiago. He felt engaged by the school, and he was able to place all of his energy into something positive.

Alex Fuentes, principal of the Torres High School Engineering and Technology Academy, agrees that students are benefiting from extended learning time programs. He tells the story of Javier:

> He was a troubled kid but is really talented at playing the drums. He was able to join one of our after-school music programs and that really grounded him here at Torres High School.

> "Today at Torres, more than twenty external partners are providing enrichment and support programs for the roughly 2,000 students attending the five pilot schools on campus."

From Fuentes' perspective, extended learning time is critical to giving low-income students an opportunity to compete with students from more affluent families. He says,

> If you are from a middle class neighborhood you can afford for your kids to be involved in extra-curricular programs, such as piano classes. In East Los Angeles, parents want these opportunities but usually cannot afford to pay for them. For parents to receive it for free at Torres High School, and know that their kids will be safe, is an extraordinary benefit.

Torres stays open until six p.m. in order to offer students the array of expanded learning time programs. Students are even offered a meal for participating in the afterschool programs. Fuentes appreciates the fact that ELT is helping students do something positive in the afterschool hours rather than potentially getting into trouble out in the streets.

4 Students' names are pseudonyms.

Fuentes sees ELT as part of the overall community schools vision that began with the organizing campaign of InnerCity Struggle and LAEP to win the pilot schools at Torres High School. He states,

> All of this support is helping us build a culture here at Torres High School. Where in the past, parents would try to send their kids to other schools outside of East Los Angeles, we now have a culture where parents want their kids to attend Torres High School because they see what we are providing the students here.

> "The biggest impact for me is seeing that people care and that they are here to help us; lots of schools don't offer that."
>
> *– Victor Lopez, Mendez High School Student and InnerCity Struggle youth leader*

And these programs are supporting the schools at Torres High School to make tremendous academic gains. The graduation rate at the Engineering and Technology Academy rose 17 percent from the previous year and is now at 77 percent for a four-year cohort. In addition, 75 percent of the academy's current senior class is eligible for a four-year university with a G.P.A of 2.5 or greater.

Mendez High School

Mendez High School developed its direction toward a community school vision through the process of applying to the federal Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods initiative. In an effort to win the highly competitive federal grant, three organizations – InnerCity Struggle, Proyecto Pastoral, and the East Los Angeles Community Corporation (ELACC) – came together to submit a collaborative proposal under the name of Promesa Boyle Heights. In 2010, Promesa Boyle Heights was awarded a Promise Neighborhoods planning grant.[5]

With the planning grant, Promesa Boyle Heights was able to facilitate a community-led process to establish a collective impact, community schools vision for families of Mendez High School in which a continuum of services and programs would support students in the Mendez High School area from cradle to college. Dozens of organizations came together and committed to supporting this community vision by offering their services in specific areas of the plan.

Even though Promesa Boyle Heights was not awarded an implementation grant for the Promise Neighborhoods initiative, going through the process of the planning grant and developing a collective impact plan fully engaged the community. Many of the organizations that were a part of the planning process reaffirmed their commitment to the implementation of the community schools collective impact vision regardless of not receiving the Promise Neighborhoods implementation grant. Many organizations were willing to provide in-kind services to move forward specific pieces of the plan.

Since then, Proyecto Pastoral, a community organization located in Boyle Heights, has served as the anchor organization for the Promesa Boyle Heights initiative and has taken the lead in moving the community schools collective impact vision forward. Deycy

5 For more on Promise Neighborhoods, see the article by Michael McAfee and Mauricio Torre in this issue of *VUE*.

Hernandez, director of Promesa Boyle Heights, describes the initiative:

> Promesa Boyle Heights is a collaborative of organizations within the [Boyle Heights] community that developed a shared vision for where we want the community to be in the next ten years. It is a vision to ensure that students are able to succeed from the time that they are born to the time that they graduate from college.

The essence of a community schools vision is the partnerships and collaboration of individuals inside and outside of a school. Having a school open itself up to outside partners that are there to scrutinize and identify what are issues to resolve inside of the school is not always easy for school officials. Patty Kitaoka, an academic case manager placed inside of Mendez High School by Proyecto Pastoral, said,

> The first year that we were [at Mendez High School], we got the sense that the school did not want partnerships, and we were really trying to figure out how the partnerships fit and how they would be best utilized.

It didn't take very long for the leadership of Mendez High School to realize the benefits of these partnerships and the success that would come with working toward a community schools collective impact vision. Alejandro Macias is an assistant principal at Mendez High School. He has been present at the school since it opened in 2009, prior to the Promesa Boyle Heights initiative and at a time when the school was struggling to meet its potential. He said:

> 2011 to 2012 was the year Mendez was recognized by the LAUSD Board of Education for having the second highest percentage of students with perfect attendance. It was a big deal; we were actually the first Eastside school to get that recognition.

Macias recognizes that the staff of Mendez High School could not have accomplished that great achievement without the implementation of a collaborative community effort guided by a community schools collective impact initiative.

> To be able to accomplish what we have accomplished, it's not one person, it's not one teacher, it's not one student. It's really a team effort and a collaboration of parents, students, the partners, teachers, and administration. It really requires everyone to work together because it is a tough, tough job.

It is obvious that the most impacted by the efforts of the Promesa Boyle Heights initiative are the students. Victor Lopez is a current student at Mendez High School. He is also a youth leader with InnerCity Struggle and very engaged in the community assemblies to discuss the progress of the Promesa Boyle Heights initiative. He says,

> The biggest impact for me is seeing that people care and that they are here to help us; lots of schools don't offer that.

To Victor, it is very evident that there is a community schools effort being developed at Mendez High School. He sees the wealth of partnerships that his school now has and feels very appreciative for it.

> I personally take in a lot of love with having lots of partners within the campus. There are much more opportunities for myself and my classmates. We are really lucky and grateful for all the partnerships.

REVERSING SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES AND THE NARRATIVE OF FAILURE

More than ten years ago, students at Garfield High School decided to do something about their overcrowded, underresourced, low-performing school. They did not accept that these conditions were inevitable in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and large numbers of students of color. They believed that they and their families and their community deserved better.

The path leading to the two new, successful high schools described in this article was not easy. It required over a decade of hard work, grassroots organizing, and partnership building. But the vision of sustainable community schools that provide the learning opportunities and services that students need to succeed, and that act as hubs for community services and enrichment programs, proved to be powerful, gaining the support of an increasing number of partners.

The result is a model of bottom-up community mobilization for social justice that rejects blaming students and families for low-performing schools; rather, it addresses systemic inequities that deny low-income students of color their right to an excellent education. The authors hope that the story of Mendez and Torres high schools will inspire other communities to look at their own schools and know that the path to equal opportunity is difficult, but possible. This path requires that youth, families, and community members be at the center of planning and decision making. It requires a community-wide, long-term commitment to collaboration and support. The results – engaged students, surrounded by caring adults, prepared to succeed in college and life – are priceless.

REFERENCES

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