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Beyond Bake Sales

By Thomas Toch, Gregg Toppo, and Jo Napolitano

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Lakisha Young, a former KIPP employee, launched The Oakland REACH to help underserved San Francisco Bay Area families advocate for their children.

The challenges of urban education weren't new to Lakisha Young. She'd grown up in San Francisco housing projects, joined the Teach for America corps in impoverished Compton, California, and spent more than a decade trying to attract talented teachers to high-needs schools, first for The New Teacher Project, then for the KIPP charter school network.

But when Young's own daughter won one of 11 coveted seats in a charter school lottery in Oakland—out of more than 90 students who applied—she vowed to do more for the Black and Latino students and families the school district had been failing for generations.

So, late in 2016, Young left KIPP to launch The Oakland REACH, a network of Bay Area parents who fought and won a battle to give Oakland students affected by school closures and consolidations priority admission to other campuses. The fledgling organization has trained hundreds of parents historically shut out of school decisions to advocate for their children's needs just as many affluent white families do routinely.

When Covid struck and schools closed, The Oakland REACH went further, launching an online Hub to provide underserved families with high-quality instruction and enrichment activities, technology training, and family liaisons to keep them informed about their children's learning, among other projects. The Hub's success drew plaudits from Oakland officials. But just as important, says Young, building the Hub forged a sense of agency among low-income parents and parents of color who often have been excluded from their children's educational lives. She says it helped create “a sense that we don't have to settle for inequitable learning.”

The pandemic has given rise to new, conservative parent organizations making headlines for turning traditionally sedate school board meetings into community punch-ups as they battle over mask mandates, vaccines, and how race, gender, and sexuality are discussed in schools. The potency of the conservative backlash by organizations like Moms for Liberty, founded in 2021 by three past and present local Florida school board members with ties to the state's Republican party, and Parents Defending Education, a national organization launched the same year by Nicole Neily, a former manager of external relations at the libertarian Cato Institute, helped Republican Glenn Youngkin win last fall's Virginia gubernatorial race on a “parents' rights” platform and spurred

Republican lawmakers in more than two dozen states to introduce legislation giving parents a greater say in local school curricula.

But while conservatives' battles against Covid mandates and diversity efforts in schools have put them in the news, a different network of activist parent organizations in the mold of The Oakland REACH has been evolving largely under the media radar for nearly a decade, organizations with names like Atlanta Thrive, PAVE (for Parents Amplifying Voices in Education), The Memphis Lift, and the National Parents Union that represent a new voice in the fight to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for low-income students.

Propelled by the internet, the rise of video conferencing, social media, and millions of dollars in backing from foundations seeking to bring the voices of underrepresented families and communities into the work of school improvement, the organizations are pushing policymakers for stronger schools, resource equity and transparency, teacher quality and diversity, and more school options, among other reforms.

Many of the organizations have created non-profit governance structures. The groups may represent a more permanent change in the education landscape than single-cause or ad hoc parent advocates of the past—and a significant new force to contend with for superintendents, school board members, city council leaders, and state legislators.

A Shrinking PTA

For decades, parents worked with public schools largely through parent-teacher associations and parent-teacher organizations, predominantly white, suburban groups known mostly for fundraising campaigns and community events such as book fairs and family nights. With some notable exceptions, including the role of Black families in the struggle for school desegregation, parents of color and parents living in poverty have largely lacked organizations to amplify their voices in education—voices historically marginalized by public school officials.

Founded in 1897 as the National Congress of Mothers by Alice McLellan Birney and Phoebe Apperson Hearst, the mother of publisher William Randolph Hearst, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, as the National PTA was long known, remains the largest child advocacy organization in the nation, with a long history of promoting issues ranging from child labor laws and juvenile-justice reforms to increased federal funding for education.

But membership in the National PTA and its state and local affiliates has shrunk by 75 percent, from a high of 12 million in 1966 to 3 million in 20,000 local chapters today—a decline driven, in part, by perceptions among parents and activists like Young in Oakland that it is too white in the face of a diversifying student population, too affluent, too cautious, too connected to the education establishment (particularly teacher unions) and diverts too much money away from local affiliates to the national organization. “The PTA does not take on the hard fights. They don’t say the hard things,” says Keri Rodrigues, the co-founder and president of the National Parents Union, which formed, in part, as a counterweight to teacher unions and other established voices in public education. Parents want something more than just “transactional relationships” with schools, she says.

Personal Journeys

Many of the new parent organizations that are pursuing educational quality and equity have been founded by women of color whose personal experiences have motivated them to push for greater parental voice in education. They include Maya Cadogan, a former charter school administrator who launched PAVE in 2016 to elevate the voices of public-school parents of color in Washington, D.C., The Oakland REACH's Lakisha Young, The Atlanta Thrive's co-founder Kimberley Dukes, and Sarah Carpenter, executive director of The Memphis Lift.

Rodrigues, a Somerville, Massachusetts, mother of five, struggled with public schools herself as a student (she didn't finish high school and later earned a GED), only to find herself battling educators on behalf of her son Matthew, who has ADHD and is on the autism spectrum. After Matthew was frequently suspended as a kindergartner, Rodrigues concluded, "I have no power—I have no voice. I can't even be heard as an equal stakeholder at this table for my own damn kid." In November 2016, the longtime Democratic Party official and former labor organizer for the Service Employees International Union formed the Massachusetts Parents Union, which would eventually expand into the National Parents Union, now boasting some 500 affiliates in 50 states and Puerto Rico.

Khulia Pringle, a former educator like both Cadogan and Young, became a full-time parent advocate in 2017, after her daughter started acting out in high school, latched onto the wrong crowd, and began skipping classes. School officials transferred the teen from one campus to the next. "I just couldn't do anything about it," says Pringle, who today is the Midwest regional organizer for the National Parents Union.

Tougher Tactics

The organizations have taken a much more aggressive stance toward their work than local PTAs of the past. They're more interested in ballot boxes, legislative agendas, and school district policies than bake sales, not hesitating to organize rallies, draft bill language, or, when allowed, lobby elected officials directly.

Speak UP United Parents, which formed in 2016 in response to what members called systemic failures in the Los Angeles Unified School District, organized as both a federal 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) non-profit, making it easier to engage in political activities. With a \$1 million budget, the group proved powerful in the 2017 LAUSD school board elections, helping unseat the board president and secure votes for former LAUSD teacher Nick Melvoin. The organization recruited influential community members, canvassed the neighborhood on Melvoin's behalf, and operated a phone bank to turn out the vote. Melvoin is now the board's vice president and part of a recent pro-charter majority. He's also spoken out against the L.A. teacher union.

"Because we've got five years behind us," Katie Braude, Speak UP's founder and CEO, told us, "when Howard Blume of the *Los Angeles Times* wants to print parents' perspective on things, he comes to us. And the fact that we are so vilified by the union, in my mind, is a marker of success. It means they care what we say." (Speak UP hasn't won every battle. It sent out more than a million text messages and placed more than 30,000 calls in support of a 2020 ballot initiative, Proposition 15, that would have allowed increased taxes on commercial properties, raising more money for public schools, including those in LAUSD. But the initiative failed.)

In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Parents Union pushed to rewrite a \$2.2 billion education funding package that it disliked because the legislation left key spending decisions up to districts without enough parental input. “We’re not just PowerPoints and T-shirts,” says Rodrigues.

Like Speak UP, National Parents Union is not afraid to take on teacher unions, traditional allies of the National PTA. A draft concept paper about the organization, sent to other groups for feedback, presented the National Parents Union as a “countervailing force” to the unions. Rodrigues says families of color can’t expect solutions on issues like social justice and closing the achievement gap to emerge from “policymakers who are majority white.” “Unless we’re actually hearing from the people closest to the pain,” she argues, “we are not going to be able to come up with viable solutions.”

Village of Wisdom, a Durham, N.C.-based parent empowerment organization founded in late 2014, has sought to do that by working with Black families to create a tool it calls Black Genius Planning, which helps teachers document Black students’ academic, social, and cultural strengths, as well as a school climate survey to assess whether schools are providing supportive learning environments for Black students. Parents introduce the materials to their children’s schools. Educator William Jackson, who founded the group, says, “When we started, nobody was saying ‘culturally affirming learning’ in the state. Now basically everybody talks about culturally affirming learning.”

National PTA President Anna King of Oklahoma acknowledges the criticism leveled at her organization. “Sometimes people don’t feel we are taking a firm enough stand” on issues, she said. It’s difficult for a membership organization representing parents with a wide range of perspectives and priorities to get consensus on many topics, she told us. To stay faithful to its motto, “every child. One voice,” the organization has focused on stances such as expanding kindergarten, improving school food, increasing arts education, and adding more school funding. It has endorsed charter schools, though, and recently published a position statement in support of “classrooms that celebrate diverse histories and cultures.” “Students should have an honest and fair understanding of how our nation’s history has unfolded,” King says. First Lady Jill Biden spoke to the group’s 125th anniversary convention in June 2022.

Powerful Catalysts

The twin forces of technology and Covid have proven to be powerful catalysts for the new parental organizing. Online learning during the pandemic turned kitchen tables into classrooms, giving parents unprecedented access to their children’s education, both what they learn and how they learn it. The same technology that brought teachers into students’ homes connected parents with each other, locally and nationally.

Speak UP, which started with just 12 people on the affluent West Side of Los Angeles, has since grown to nearly 5,000 members from across the city using Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to recruit. “We spent a lot of time training our parents in how to use Zoom,” CEO Braude says. “Suddenly, our online meetings drew hundreds of parents instead of 20 or 30 because people didn’t have to deal with traffic.” Speak UP now has subgroups for parents of Latino and Black students and has hired an outside company specializing in surveys and polling, which conducted a study examining the impact of racial bias on students of color.

National Parents Union has conducted online national Town Hall meetings for parents and online national parent polls throughout the pandemic, keeping pace with their members' most pressing concerns. In January, the group sent an open letter to U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona asking the department to hold hearings to provide transparency and a plan for oversight for the more than \$200 billion in federal resources allocated to America's schools for Covid-19 mitigation strategies. The letter urged Cardona to take immediate steps to recommend that districts and schools, among other things, secure Covid-testing supplies for the February and April breaks, make summer instructional plans available to families no later than March 31, and create partnerships to provide safe drop-off spaces for students who would otherwise be unsupervised because their parents must work.

Philanthropy's Role

National foundations have funded many of the new parent organizations working to improve educational opportunities for traditionally underserved students, often out of an interest in building out the demand side of school reform or in amplifying the voices of those closest to historically underserved Black and Latino students and students living in poverty. For several decades, many foundations worked in tandem with Republican and Democratic administrations in Washington and with state leaders to increase the supply of effective public schools, both by improving traditional school systems and by supporting the expansion of charter schools.

But by the time Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015—legislation that greatly diminished the accountability pressure on schools to improve initiated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002—there was a growing sense among reformers, including many in the philanthropic community, that it was necessary to increase the demand for more effective schools among public education's consumers, particularly parents.

Many foundations also sought to give parents of color a larger voice in a key sector of American life, a commitment that intensified in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. In recent years, these foundations have spent millions of dollars to support new parent organizations.

In 2019, the Parent and Community Learning and Action Network, a partnership of five philanthropies spearheaded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, published a Funders' Playbook: Tools for Thinking About Family and Community Engagement. Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Heising-Simons Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation joined Carnegie in the initiative. "Educational inequities are maintained and exacerbated when certain families have the resources and know-how to navigate, support, supplement, and shape their children's educational experiences while other families do not," the report stated. It cited a large body of research on the benefits of family and community engagement in education, including improved student learning outcomes. "In communities where parents are connected to each other and deeply engaged, public schools tend to be more effective," Carnegie wrote in making a grant to the National Parents Union.

A 2016 survey of 74 foundations, commissioned by Carnegie, found that 60 percent said they made grants in family and community engagement, with a combined total investment estimated at \$230 million. Of those that reported investing in this area, 45 percent said they had been doing so for less than five years. The largest share of that funding—42 percent—was spent on organizing and advocacy, or on developing family members as leaders who can advocate for issues of school-

system improvement and reform. Forty-one percent was spent on grants to educate families on how to promote their own child's learning and development.

New Profit, a Boston-based "venture philanthropy" that invests foundation, corporate, and individual funds in organizations that "advance equity and opportunity" in education and other sectors, has invested more than \$10 million in parent organizations since 2014, including PAVE, says Shruti Sehra, the managing partner of the organization's education portfolio. New Profit provides its grantees with organization-building support. It has brought representatives of parent organizations together to collaborate. And it has enlisted Black and Latino parents from PAVE and, more recently, RISE Colorado, to help vet potential education grantees.

New Profit has decided to double down on promoting voice for historically underrepresented parents as a key feature of the post-pandemic education landscape. It plans to launch a national multi-media campaign in support of a greater parental role in local education policymaking, Sehra says. "Parents are closer than ever before to what is happening to their children's education," she says, "and it's wise to harness that expertise borne of proximity in service of students, not political advantage."

Since 2015, the New Venture Fund in Washington, D.C., another organization that invests millions of dollars from scores of philanthropic donors (including, in recent years, more than half of the nation's 50 largest foundations), has supported The Memphis Lift, Atlanta Thrive, Nashville PROPEL, and MindshiftED in San Antonio through an initiative called Organizer Zero, which provides training and technical support to community activists. During the 2020 presidential campaign, Organizer Zero, headed by former Houston Independent School District board member Natasha Kamrani, helped parent groups press for education reform as part of a Powerful Parent Movement.

MacKenzie Scott has made donations to Organizer Zero, The Oakland REACH, and The Memphis Lift in the past year as part of a multi-billion-dollar philanthropic effort to support "underrepresented people." The Walton Family Foundation has been among the major individual foundation donors to the new generation of parent organizations. Since 2016, its grants to the organizations have included \$1.1 million to The Memphis Lift, \$800,000 to The Oakland REACH, \$1.9 million to PAVE, and \$1.8 million to the Massachusetts Parents Union, the predecessor of the National Parents Union.

The foundations supporting the new parent organizations don't fit neatly into any ideological categories. The organizations themselves also aren't easily politically pigeonholed; they frequently focus on racial justice and on strengthening traditional public-school systems.

In 2014, Bruce Reed, then president of the Broad Foundation and now deputy chief of staff to President Joe Biden, urged Peter Cunningham, a spokesman for U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan during the Obama Administration, to start an organization to recruit and train local activists and parents of color to "inform, inspire and organize their communities around education issues and hold decision-makers accountable for providing the learning opportunities children need to thrive."

Cunningham launched the initiative, including a publishing platform for a blogging network of hundreds of parents, teachers, and other local activists in support of school reform, with \$12 million in funding pledges from Broad, Walton, Bloomberg, and the Emerson Collective, the

philanthropic enterprise of Laurene Powell Jobs. Since then, the nonprofit Education Post (now rebranded Brightbeam) has attracted additional funding from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, The City Fund, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Cunningham, who relinquished the organization's leadership in 2018, says handing the megaphone to parents was intentional. "A think tank guy is one thing," he told us. "A parent with a stake in the game is another." The result has been much more cacophonous than he and his colleagues anticipated, he says, with Education Post contributors expressing widely varying opinions on issues ranging from charter schools to school discipline. "We're not just trying to build a movement of likeminded people," says Cunningham, now a member of the organization's board. "We're trying to see what parents want."

PAVE identifies families' priorities through annual "parent policy summits." In 2017, they prioritized more after-school and summer-learning opportunities, along with more information on school performance and more funding for the city's neediest schools. This year, with students struggling to rebound from the pandemic, mental health and additional learning opportunities were at the top of the PAVE parent list. The organization advocated for more social workers, psychologists, and behavioral support staff in Washington's traditional and charter public schools, as well as for programs to reconnect students to their schools.

PAVE, which has a core of about 350 activists, many of them low-income parents of color, and has engaged as many as 5,000 D.C. parents, has shifted its focus from the school level to citywide policy, pressing its agenda with city council members, the mayor's office, state education authorities, and leaders from the District of Columbia Public Schools and the charter sector. Working at the city level has been more efficient than trying to work in every school, Maya Cadogan says, and it has produced some significant victories, results beyond the reach of traditional PTAs.

PAVE parents selected "budget transparency" as a priority in 2018, for example, and drafted a series of strategies to make it easier to determine whether resources were flowing to the city's neediest students. The following year, the city council changed financial reporting requirements in D.C.'s education budgets, using the PAVE principles as the bill's foundation.

A New Normal

Disenchanted by their schools' performance during the pandemic and forced to shoulder more of the burden of their children's learning, many parents are unlikely to go back to a hands-off attitude toward public school. Nor do educators expect it. A 2021 national survey of parents, teachers, and principals by the nonprofit group Learning Heroes, which helps parents become effective education advocates for their children, found that 93 percent of parents said they would be just as or more involved in their child's education this school year than last school year, when students were primarily learning at home.

More than half (53 percent) of principals and nearly half (48 percent) of teachers similarly said they expected to spend more time and effort on family engagement this school year than last. The problem, says Bibb Hubbard, Learning Heroes' president, is that most states, districts, and schools don't provide the expectations, structures, and supports necessary to make meaningful family engagement a reality.

The key to forging a stronger working relationship with parents on policy questions is winning their trust, says New Profit, the venture philanthropy, in “Systems Change and Parent Power,” a 2020 publication. Trust flows from treating parents, especially those from traditionally marginalized communities, as valuable assets, from listening to their priorities and making it easy for them to contribute, writes author Alex Cortez. That includes everything from having events in places and at times that are convenient for parents to providing free parking and childcare and hiring translators.

In addition to grounding family engagement in trusting relationships focused on student learning, Learning Heroes points to the importance of having senior school district leaders dedicated to working with families, to help ensure that systems are in place to prioritize family engagement.

In a new report, the organization holds up Baltimore City Public Schools as an example. The district’s recently revised family and community engagement policy, overseen by a cabinet-level administrator, requires that educators use a plan co-developed with parent leaders from across the city to improve family engagement practices in the city’s 162 schools. Among other things, teachers are expected to work with students and their families to fashion learning plans for each of the district’s nearly 80,000 students, including sharing data with families and seeking their reflections on what their children need post-pandemic.

In another instance, District of Columbia Public Schools has an Office of Family and Public Engagement that has worked in partnership with PAVE, including enlisting the parent organization’s support in disseminating information about a new system for rating public schools in the city. While external parent advocacy organizations will continue to put pressure on districts when they think it is necessary, smart district leaders are actively reaching out to families to engage their views as they develop district policies and practices, a strategy that can help forge stronger parental backing for district policies at the front end, while ensuring policies are more responsive to students and their parents.

“In my experience, the strongest district leaders invite a broad cross section of families into a process of cocreation that results in better district policies, reduces resistance, and supports sustainability over time,” says a partner at the Center for Innovation in Education, Doannie Tran, who focuses on family and community empowerment as a lever for systems change.

In the Burlington School District in Vermont, for example, incoming Superintendent Tom Flanagan launched a “radically inclusive” strategic planning process in August 2021, with support from Tran’s center. A coalition of some 40 students, families, community members, teachers, and administrators participated in the months-long planning process, which included conducting “empathy interviews” with some 75 members of the community about their experiences with the Burlington School District to help identify the district’s strengths and weaknesses.

The coalition and district leaders established five priorities, including “students, families, and staff will experience a sense of belonging and students and staff will feel their well-being is supported in our district.” And they selected performance metrics to report to the community annually.

For the belonging priority, as an example, the goals include 90 percent of students and staff reporting a sense of belonging in schools and a belief that schools are supporting their well-being. The coalition wants to close the well-being gap between students receiving special-education services and other students, increase the percentage of families who feel that they belong in the

district, and reduce chronic absenteeism among students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. The Burlington school board approved the plan unanimously early in 2022 and is assembling a group of community members to review project plans regularly, provide feedback to district leadership, and communicate progress to the larger community.

In the same spirit, the Waltham Public Schools in Massachusetts included parents and community members in a Reopening Advisory Council it established to plan the restarting of the district's schools last year. The task force convened weekly, established subcommittees, surveyed families multiple times, and regularly communicated with parents in writing and virtually.

The surge of parent activism is likely to persist. Social media has expanded communications dramatically and changed power dynamics, and parents have new, pandemic-sharpened expectations for their children's learning. As Young of The Oakland REACH puts it: "We're not interested in 'going back to normal.' We're not interested in any 'continuity of learning' because the continuity of learning and 'normal' left our kids not being able to read."

Given the emerging parent power in public education, school districts would seemingly be wise to embrace such convictions. Prioritizing more meaningful parental engagement stands to increase parents' trust, reduce rancor, and provide local education leaders with valuable new insight into student needs, especially from low-income parents and parents of color who have long been relegated to public education's periphery.