BUILDING A SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT OF FAMILIES

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PARENTS LEAD THE WAY

This is the story of Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network, or PLAN, which began as a one-woman start-up in a home office and has developed into a nationally recognized source of expertise and innovation in family engagement in education. PLAN touches the lives of thousands of low-income and immigrant families and creates systemic change in schools, districts and state education policy.

In October 2003, 175 parents, parent organizers, school leaders, and family service providers gathered in Oakland for the first-ever Bay Area parent leadership conference. Supported by the Zellerbach Family Foundation and organized by Melia Franklin, then outreach manager for Action Alliance for Children, a statewide children’s advocacy organization, the conference sought to galvanize a movement to support parents as leaders in their children’s lives.

Partners in the project, including staff from Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, Parent Voices, Parent Services Project, and Partnership for Immigrant Leadership and Action (PILA – formerly NCCP), had been meeting monthly for a year to plan the.

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event, named Parents Leading the Way Toward Stronger Communities for Children. What emerged was more than a conference — it was a rallying cry for a movement. As one participant expressed: “We need more preparation for parents to acquire skills and tools necessary to make positive change, not only in each school, but also in the community and the lives of our children.”

In January 2014, these same partners gathered in the home of Melia Franklin, who had served as facilitator for the planning process and project lead for the conference, to explore this question: “What will our schools and communities look like when we are successful in building strong parent leadership?” Together, we sifted through conference results and notes from dozens of post-conference interviews, envisioning a network that would build the capacity of Bay Area parent leaders to engage effectively with schools, policy bodies, and institutions that affect children and families. From this gathering, and seed funding from Zellerbach, Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network (PLAN) was born.

As budget cuts threatened the quality of education and the survival of other programs vital to the well-being of Bay Area families, effective parental engagement in the educational and civic institutions that affect the lives of their children was more vital than ever. However, as participants at the Parents Leading the Way conference articulated, opportunities were limited for parent leaders and organizations to connect, build skills, co-create successful strategies, and collaborate with each other to strengthen the ability of parents to take action on behalf children and families.

Over the next two years, PLAN grew from a one-woman home office with an advisory board and network of volunteers. Through a series of regional forums, PLAN expanded opportunities for parent leaders and grassroots organization staff to share and develop strategies for effective action, build skills, and connect parent leaders and organizers to a network of peer support. Evidenced by the more than 400 participants who turned out in the first year alone, PLAN built a core constituency of staff and parent leaders who, as the success of the conference demonstrated, were hungry for the opportunity to connect with each other around their common goal of increasing parents’ capacity to be a force for positive change for Bay Area families.
WHY PARENT LEADERSHIP?

Decades of studies show that when families meaningfully engage in their children’s education, students excel and schools improve. While this association has been documented for decades, it was not yet a high priority in the early 2000s. A synthesis of the research showed a positive relationship between family engagement and improved academic achievement among students of all ages, across socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and educational background. In fact, researchers conclude that the most accurate predictor of a student’s achievement in school is not income or social status, but rather the extent to which the student’s family is able to become involved with the child’s education on multiple levels.

One challenge in this work is that “family engagement” means different things to different people. To some, it is limited to helping with homework, field trips, and fundraising. To others it means coming to meetings and trainings when asked, essentially being a vessel for information. For PLAN, family engagement means something different still.

PLAN believes that schools in Oakland reflect the conditions of the communities around them, [many of] which experience high rates of poverty, crime, environmental toxins and other stressors — conditions compounded by a lack of community or parental involvement. We also believe that those who are most affected by an issue should be at the forefront of the solutions.

Families work hard to enable their children to be successful learners — an opportunity that many didn’t have themselves. While hearing that the reason for school problems is that “those parents just don’t care” is common, most parents experience barriers, both real and perceived, to participation in their children’s schools. For these families, success goes beyond just rising test scores and includes feeling heard, respected, and empowered to bring about changes they know are best for their children and their community.
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In short, PLAN advocates for and helps develop and sustain transformative family engagement that is a shared responsibility; that requires schools and agencies to commit to engaging families in meaningful, respectful, and culturally appropriate ways; that invites and equips families to actively support their children’s learning and development. Within a racial justice framework, the responsibility weighs more heavily on institutions that have historically marginalized families of color. These institutions must develop an in-depth knowledge and practice of respectful communication, and of in-depth inquiry to elicit deeper understanding of what families need and want. Empowering families — developing their skills, knowledge, and confidence to advocate for and participate in their children’s education — is one part of the equation.

For true family empowerment to occur, however, schools must develop a welcoming, responsive environment in which families are viewed as partners in, rather than obstacles to, their children’s education. Family engagement efforts must identify and seek to overcome the barriers to engagement, rooted in institutionalized oppression, that families experience in their daily lives.

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For a small, nimble organization such as PLAN, each year offers the opportunity to test and evaluate new strategies to achieve our mission. Early in 2004, we adopted a core curriculum, PLAN to LEAD Parent Leadership and Engagement Curriculum, also supported by Zellerbach Foundation, and refined it into a primer for parent leadership for educational equity in public schools. By training trainers in 6-10 organizations and schools over a year-long period, PLAN sought to build the capacity of the field to replicate best practices throughout the Bay Area.

By the end of 2007, community-based organizations, school districts, and parents from diverse cultures increasingly recognized PLAN as a key resource for supporting parent leadership and advocacy in education. PLAN’s theory of change assumed that participating in PLAN to LEAD transformed individual parents, who then went on to transform their schools and communities and ultimately create systemic change. Participating organizations, such as Chinese for Affirmative Action and Parents for Public Schools, were integrating key practices drawn from the PLAN to LEAD curriculum and building training and leadership development into their work plans and organizational focus. For example, Chinese for Affirmative Action used PLAN to LEAD to develop a leadership team and a campaign for parental language access in San Francisco. In year one, they sent staff through the program to train parent leaders; in year two, those parent leaders went through the training of trainers and conducted the next phase of peer-led leadership development.

As the program evolved, it became clear that we also had to build the capacity of school personnel. One school, Oakland International High School, leveraged PLAN’s program to build a comprehensive parent engagement program.

“PLAN to LEAD helped our organization immensely. As a new school, there is no way we would have been able to organize parent meetings and begin to ask our parents to participate in their children’s education without the support and training from PLAN. PLAN forced us to get organized and follow through on building a parent base.”
The program was unique in that it followed up group trainings with customized coaching and technical assistance at schools sites, such as Think College Now in Oakland.

“PLAN has provided our school with the tools and knowledge to empower our parents to be social agents and advocates of change. The coaching and training PLAN has provided has given us valuable insights as to how to best nourish the leadership of our parents.”

As individual parents and school district staff gained leadership skills and experience, their participation in school reform efforts increased. Parents transformed their schools by taking on leadership roles. Parents trained through PLAN also had statewide impact through sharing their experience with policy leaders to win institutional reform. For example, in 2007, PLAN leaders testified before the state legislature on the importance of receiving information about the course requirements high school students need to qualify for admission to California’s state universities. The result was a new law, AB 428, requiring high schools to provide easy-to-understand annual notice of college preparatory course requirements to parents and students.

In 2008, with support from First 5 Alameda County, PLAN launched a new program, Parents Ready for School, to support parents of young children in navigating the school system to advocate for their children’s success. Word was spreading that PLAN’s work was benefiting families and school staff, and even changing policy. By the end of 2009, PLAN had training contracts and parent leaders in several Bay Area school districts.
In 2010, PLAN shifted its focus from regional to the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) for several reasons. First, a regional focus limited the depth of PLAN’s impact; we lacked sufficient staff to cover such a large area effectively. Second, Oakland was emerging from an almost nine-year state takeover with a bold agenda: to become a full-service community school district. In PLAN’s view, community schools held a greater promise for addressing the needs of the whole child and the whole family, with a focus on equity.

Moreover, community schools, by design, had to be driven by community input, presenting an opportunity to advance a family engagement agenda. In short, we believed that we could have a greater impact, and deploy our limited resources more effectively, by aligning our training programs more closely with our parent engagement and leadership development work in a single district, in essence opting for depth over breadth. In addition, a full-service community school strategy positioned PLAN as a central partner to fulfill the district’s vision.

On February 20, 2010, PLAN co-organized a community engagement dialogue with representatives of education organizing groups, OUSD’s Family and Community Office Engagement Unit, and then-new Superintendent Tony Smith. The purpose of the meeting was to develop strategic, coordinated, and sustainable partnerships among community organizing groups focused on education and OUSD, in order to realize authentic community engagement in Oakland public schools.
OUSD’s strategic planning process, which kicked off in fall 2010, gave PLAN an opportunity and framework through which to advance a parent-led platform to strengthen opportunities for parent voices to be heard in schools and in the district. PLAN leaders spoke at several board meetings early in the fall about the fact that the strategic planning process was inaccessible to parents. This outcry prompted a major expansion of the district’s Community Engagement Strategy.

PLAN leaders then developed a parent engagement survey administered to more than 500 OUSD parents to gather input on the district’s strategic plan. This process allowed PLAN to develop relationships with parents at multiple school sites and relay evidence to OUSD staff and officials of the need for reform. **Parents used the survey results to develop the following recommendations for OUSD’s strategic plan:**
PARENT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt and adhere to engagement standards developed by parents in all OUSD public meetings;

2. Hold monthly meetings in each of the three OUSD schools between parents/community and OUSD staff and officials;

3. Establish a Family Engagement Advisory Council of grassroots groups and parent leaders to advise and guide OUSD family engagement efforts;

4. Ensure fully functioning School Site Councils at every school and enhance training for parents to assume leadership roles.

All of PLAN’s recommendations became part of OUSD’s strategic plan, and PLAN was recognized for being a “critical friend” in the process, which contributed greatly to the district’s prioritization of and vision for family engagement over the next five years.

To implement PLAN recommendations, OUSD formed a Family Engagement Advisory Committee comprised of organizations that work with parents and youth in Oakland and have expertise in the practices and principles of family engagement. The committee’s first charge was to fulfill a key strategic priority highlighted by PLAN’s campaign: create family engagement standards that will establish concrete expectations for family engagement in the district. Members of the Advisory Committee, including PLAN staff and leaders, presented the standards to the Board of Education on May 23, 2012, and the Board unanimously approved the standards some three weeks later, on June 13.
While adoption of Family Engagement Standards signified a resounding victory, implementation of the standards has been an ongoing process. In the fall of 2012 PLAN families decided to begin by building relationships with teachers and planned a district-wide event to bring parents and teachers together to build positive relationships. PLAN parent leaders formed a planning committee, which also included teachers and community members. The result was Oakland’s first-ever Parent-Teacher Summit, held on April 26, 2013: more than 100 parents, teachers, students and community members attended from over a dozen schools in Oakland’s low-income communities of color.

Speaking three different languages, participants gathered in a café-style setting at International Community School in Oakland’s Fruitvale neighborhood to discuss how to motivate parents to be more involved, how to support teachers to engage with family members, and how to foster collaboration to boost student achievement.

By the end of the evening, the group had turned from dialogue to concrete action steps, including:

- **Giving teachers more time and training to work with families, individually and in groups.** For example, some Oakland schools have teachers who have some of their work hours allocated to communicate with parents.

- **Expanding translation services at school sites to minimize language barriers that keep many immigrant families from communicating with teachers and getting involved in their children’s schools.**

Organizing to change the culture at school sites from the dominant view of parents needing “help” to seeing parents as valued partners and contributors to the classroom and school community as a whole.

Shifting school culture to embrace parents as true partners in their children’s education emerged as an area of focus for our organization and OUSD. PLAN began to work with school staff and families to increase parent participation in school governance bodies by supporting OUSD as it trained and supported principals, parents, staff, and teachers to create Community School Strategic Site Plans. In the spring of 2013, PLAN staff helped plan and facilitate trainings for school site teams working on their site plans and supported a principal professional development day.

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In his State of the State Address in January of 2013, Governor Brown called for legislators to redistribute money to high-need children, because, he said, “Equal treatment for children in unequal situations is not justice.” PLAN had been an early and vocal proponent of the idea of “weighted funding” according to student need, and Brown’s pronouncement kicked into gear a major coalition effort to educate families and legislators about the potential impact of this reform. In June 2013, the landmark Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) became law and dramatically changed the landscape for both family engagement and community school development. LCFF was the biggest overhaul of the school funding system in over 40 years. Through a three-year education and spending plan called the LCAP (Local Control Accountability Plan), LCFF requires unprecedented engagement of parents in setting funding priorities of California school districts and generates additional resources for programs to support students who are low-income, learning English, or in foster care.

Once again, PLAN’s partnership with the district proved critical, as Oakland was one of the few districts which insisted that school site planning and priorities feed directly into the LCAP process. In the fall of 2013, PLAN expanded the parent voice in OUSD by engaging over 200 families in parent meetings, workshops, trainings, and civic engagement to participate in school site planning, LCAP input sessions, and OUSD board meetings. Four PLAN leaders were elected to the first districtwide LCAP Advisory Committee, and eight PLAN parents sat on their School Site Councils to influence school decision-making. In the third year of LCAP development, PLAN and its leaders remain influential partners in increasing community access, transparency and accountability over district spending for student success.
A Model of Innovation

In January 2014, PLAN was selected from among 1100 applicants to receive a three-year grant of $500,000 from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s national initiative on family engagement in early childhood. With this support, PLAN is working to transform the popular mythology that “parents just don’t care” about their children’s education by expanding capacity-building and leadership support to parents and staff at four East Oakland elementary schools. Our new program, LEAP (Leaders for Engaged and Active Parents), provides additional training and support to core parent leaders at a school site to build sustainable, culturally responsive structures and practices to ensure that families are valued, heard, and meaningfully engaged to boost outcomes for our most vulnerable students.

PLAN initially launched the LEAP program at three OUSD schools, with tangible results. At REACH Academy, PLAN parent leaders planned and organized Volunteer Wednesdays in collaboration with the principal, teachers, and OUSD staff. This pilot program involved more than 35 families; previously only one or two parents volunteered due to a general impression on parents’ part that the school did not appreciate their efforts. Families designed the pilot to address specific needs, such as bullying on the playground, an unfriendly atmosphere in the front office, and low academic achievement. Participating families, equipped with training and job descriptions, worked in classrooms, the front office, and play areas. At Esperanza Elementary School and Korematsu Discovery Academy, 15 PLAN leaders launched a campaign to address long-standing traffic and other safety concerns. Parents won support for a Safety Patrol program, to be run by a Parent Coordinator and 5th grade students with assistance from the Alameda County Department of Public Health and the Oakland Police Department.

In each of these examples, we began by building relationships with families, teachers, staff, and principals. We asked families what needs they saw and worked with them to use surveys to document the need for change. Finally, we leveraged partnerships with the school district and community organizations. We worked side by side with OUSD’s Volunteer Liaison to create the pilot at REACH, and we brought in Safe Routes to School, the Oakland Police Department, and others to help with the traffic campaign at Esperanza and Korematsu.

In summary, this innovative model supports parents and schools as they collaborate to create tangible improvements in the experiences of families and students. We believe these achievements are building a foundation for further development of an infrastructure that will support authentic family-school partnerships in community schools.

Our Voices Have the Power to Make a Difference.
PLAN’s diverse strategies are building parents’ power to change systems and change schools. On June 24, 2014, the OUSD board unanimously voted to adopt a proposal developed by low-income students and parents to send $4 million in additional state funds directly to Oakland schools. With allies from Oakland Community Organizations, Californians for Justice, EBAYC, Black Organizing Project, Public Counsel, and Public Advocates, we organized to bring parents and students to meet with members of the school board to make clear that what schools needed was more funding to help students and families at the school site, not more funding for central administration.

The proposal that was adopted leverages funds from the Local Control Funding Formula to aid students who are low-income, learning English, or in foster care. The School Board’s decision, which includes significant new investments to address these students’ needs, is evidence of the power of our voices.

Continuing to press for more robust family engagement, last spring PLAN leaders asked Oakland families what it would take for them to be 100% engaged in their children’s schools. The findings highlighted in The State of Family Engagement in OUSD show that the overwhelming majority of families want to be in the classroom and at the school helping to improve learning conditions and support children. But half the families surveyed said the biggest barrier was not being involved as decision-makers.

According to families, most of the barriers to their engagement – lack of translation, information, and ongoing opportunities to develop their knowledge and leadership – could be addressed if they were setting the priorities as decision-makers.

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The report also highlighted what families feel is an important prerequisite: a place of their own.

Just three weeks into the 2015-16 school year, parents at REACH Academy cut the ribbon on a new Parent Center, a space where they can socialize, organize, and grow with new opportunities, such as a computer lab.

The previous Parent Room was shared with the afterschool program and was cluttered with playground equipment and old supplies.

PLAN leader and School Site Council Vice-President Ché Phinnesse worked with other leaders to advocate for funds to support the school’s use of best practices, such as hiring bilingual community assistants and allocating space for parents. “At the Parent Center, we can brainstorm new ideas and programs so we can bring new resources to our school,” she said.

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The Road Ahead

PLAN leaders, staff and board are poised to continue the legacy that began at the kitchen table. We believe that small ideas can become big, that small groups of people can become large movements for change. As our 100% Engaged for Student Success Campaign makes strides forward to direct more resources into schools to partner with families, we know that many years of work remain to achieve a high-quality education system that serves all families.

We intend to use our expertise here in the Bay Area and around the nation to spearhead the systemic change needed to bring to millions of low-income and immigrant families the leadership skills, equitable impacts, advocacy supports, and democratic processes that change the way schools, districts, and states create and implement policies.

One day we will celebrate our 20th Anniversary. On that occasion we aim to show that family engagement is no longer an optional aspect of an excellent education for all students; it is an inherent requirement, an integral component of education. As Mary McLeod Bethune, our elder mother of the education movement, once said, “The progress of the world will call for the best that all of us have to give.”

PLAN will continue to give our best for a world in which all children receive an excellent education.