

LEANING IN

THE NEW POWER OF PARENTS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

BY GREG TOPPO, JO NAPOLITANO, AND THOMAS TOCH

APRIL 2022

FutureEd
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

About the Authors

Greg Toppo is a writer and author of *The Game Believes In You: How Digital Play Can Make Our Kids Smarter*. Jo Napolitano is a writer at The 74 and author of *The School I Deserve: Six Young Refugees and Their Fight for Equality in America*. Thomas Toch is director of FutureEd.

About FutureEd

FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, committed to bringing fresh energy to the causes of excellence, equity, and efficiency in K-12 and higher education. Follow us on Twitter at @FutureEdGU

Usage

The non-commercial use, reproduction, and distribution of this report is permitted.

© 2021 FutureEd

LEANING IN

THE NEW POWER OF PARENTS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

BY GREG TOPPO, JO NAPOLITANO, AND THOMAS TOCH

APRIL 2022

FOREWORD

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

That landscape is shifting rapidly. PTAs and PTOs are in decline, and a new generation of far more activist parent organizations are springing up across the country, 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. More interested in school district budgets and ballot boxes than bake sales, they're pushing policymakers and local education leaders for better schools, greater transparency, resource equity, teacher diversity, more school options, and other remedies.

The pandemic has intensified this new parent activism by turning kitchen tables into classrooms, stoking parents' frustrations with school closings and online learning. And it has spawned new conservative parent organizations opposed to mask mandates, vaccines, and district attempts to confront issues of race, gender and sexuality in schools—agendas that at times put them in direct opposition to parents pursuing educational equity, and agendas that have turned more than a few school board meetings into civic punch-ups. This report examines the rise of the new generation of parent organizations in public education, the people behind the movement, and its consequences for education policy and policymakers.

The project has been a team effort, involving writers Greg Toppo and Jo Napolitano, FutureEd Senior Fellow Lynn Olson, and myself. Senior Fellow Greg Richmond was involved in the project's early planning. Doannie Tran, a partner at the Center for Innovation in Education, and Kenya Bradshaw, chief program officer at Reconstruction US, generously read a draft of the report. Policy Analyst Bella DiMarco compiled the state bill tracker on parent-rights legislation. Research Associate Nathan Kriha provided research support. And Molly Breen and Jackie Arthur provided editorial support.

FutureEd takes its editorial independence very seriously. We are a foundation-funded organization. We identify work that we believe is important and then pursue philanthropic support for that work. We name the sources of our support on our website. It's also the case that national foundations have supported many of the new parent organizations in public education. We believe that the emergence of a new parental activism in education is an important trend warranting our analysis. But that has resulted in us writing about organizations that have received funding from foundations that also fund FutureEd, including the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Walton Family Foundation, and The City Fund. One of the foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, funded this project. We are grateful for the foundations' support and for their commitment to FutureEd's editorial autonomy.

Thomas Toch

Director, FutureEd

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 her 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 whom 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 traditionally excluded from their children's educational lives—"a sense that we don't have to settle for inequitable learning."

For decades, parents worked with public schools largely through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and Parent-Teacher Organizations (PTOs), 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.

Now that landscape is shifting rapidly. PTAs and PTOs are in decline and a new generation of far more activist parent organizations in the mold of The Oakland REACH are springing up across the country—organizations with names like Atlanta Thrive, PAVE (for Parents Amplifying Voices in Education), The Memphis Lift, and the National Parents Union, organizations more interested in ballot boxes, legislative agendas and school district policy priorities than bake sales.

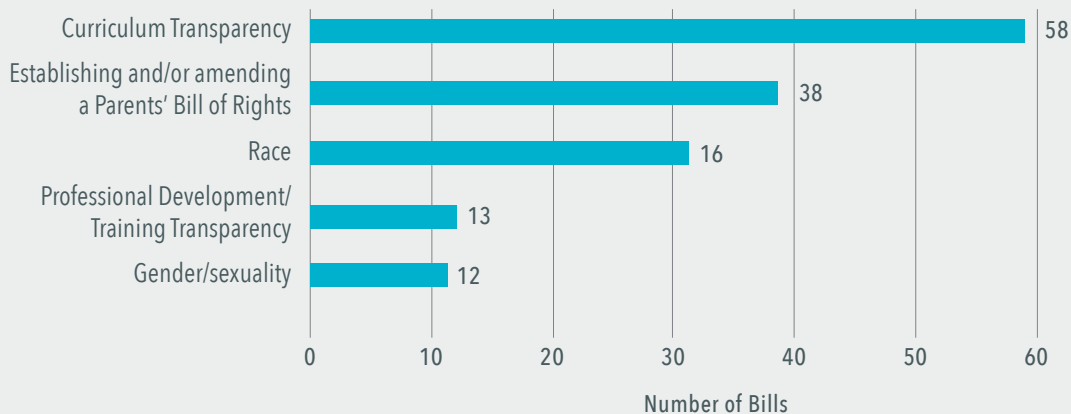
Propelled by the internet, the rise of video conferencing, social media, and millions of dollars in backing from foundations seeking to bring the voices of underrepresented families and communities into the work of school improvement, activist parent organizations have emerged in a growing number of cities and states, pushing policymakers and local education leaders for better schools, greater transparency, resource equity, teacher diversity, more school options, and other remedies. In some instances, they've gained a federal tax status that allows them to lobby officials directly.

The pandemic supercharged the new parental activism, turning kitchen tables into classrooms and leaving parents frustrated with school closings and the quality of online learning. And the Covid crisis added a conservative strand to the parent movement, spawning groups like Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Education opposed to mask mandates, vaccines, and district attempts to confront issues of race, gender and sexuality in schools—agendas that frequently have put them in direct opposition to parents pursuing educational equity and turned more than a few usually sedate school board meetings into community punch-ups.

The potency of the conservative parental backlash helped Republican Glenn Youngkin win the recent 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.¹ And it brought the National School Boards Association, a pillar of the public education establishment for some 82 years, to the brink of dissolution after the organization wrote a letter to President Biden last fall characterizing the actions of some conservative parents against local education officials as “a form of domestic terrorism and hate crimes.”²

Whether pursuing educational equity or freedom from government mandates, some of these local parent groups are fast expanding into national organizations with scores of local chapters—a sign that today’s heightened parental activism represents not just the latest skirmish in the nation’s culture wars but a more permanent change in the education policy landscape. Unlike some single-issue parent campaigns of the past—such as the push for school vouchers in Milwaukee in the 1980s and 1990s—many of the new groups are putting down deep organizational roots, posing a formidable challenge for superintendents,

Parents’ Rights Legislation, by Topic



SOURCE: FutureEd analysis of state legislation prefiled or filed for 2022 legislative sessions.

school board members, city council leaders, and state legislators nationwide.

This report examines the rise of the new generation of parent organizations in public education, the people behind the movement, and its consequences for education policy and policymakers.

National PTA Shrinks

For 125 years, the primary voice of parents in public education has been the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, as the National PTA was long known, and its state and local affiliates. Founded in 1897 as the National Congress of Mothers by Alice McLellan Birney and Phoebe Apperson Hearst, the mother of publisher William Randolph Hearst, it 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.³ Membership in the local parent groups, which have long relied on volunteer mothers, has been as American as apple pie.

But the National PTA has shrunk considerably over the past few decades, 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 organization still has 3 million members and 20,000 local chapters across the country, making it larger than any of the new parent groups. But its membership has dropped about 75 percent since the 1970s and early 1980s, from a high of 12 million in 1966.⁴ Though the group was designed to serve all students, it has found, unsurprisingly, that it can't be all things to all people. Some parents believe it's not doing enough for traditionally underserved students, and they reject its top-down financial model. "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.

Anashay Wright of Decatur, Georgia, is a former elementary and alternative high school teacher who became president of her son's high school Parent Teacher Student Association in 2020. She argues that the National PTA needs to promote more agency, autonomy, and impact in local communities, particularly communities of color like her own. Some 30 percent of revenue generated by local groups now flows to regional, state, and national offices. The National PTA might be more appealing, she says, if it taught local groups how to form their own nonprofits "and then got out of the way."

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. 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, "*everychild.onevoice*," the organization has had to take largely non-confrontational stances such as the expansion of kindergarten, improved school cafeteria food, increased arts education, and 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.

Personal Journeys

Many of the new-generation 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.⁵ After he 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, who was sexually abused as a young girl, 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

These new parent organizations have taken a much more aggressive stance toward their work than local PTAs typically did, using tactics ranging from rallies to drafting legislative language. Some have federal tax status that enables them to 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 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4), which allows it 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

and 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.⁶ He's also spoken out against the L.A. teacher union.

"Because we've got five years behind us," says Katie Braude, Speak UP's founder and CEO, "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 greater taxes on commercial properties, raising more money for public schools, including those in LAUSD. But the initiative failed.

In Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Parents Union successfully 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. "We literally write our own legislation, get it passed, and then implement it."

Like Speak UP, National Parents Union is not afraid to take on teacher unions. 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.⁷ 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 culturally affirming, 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.”

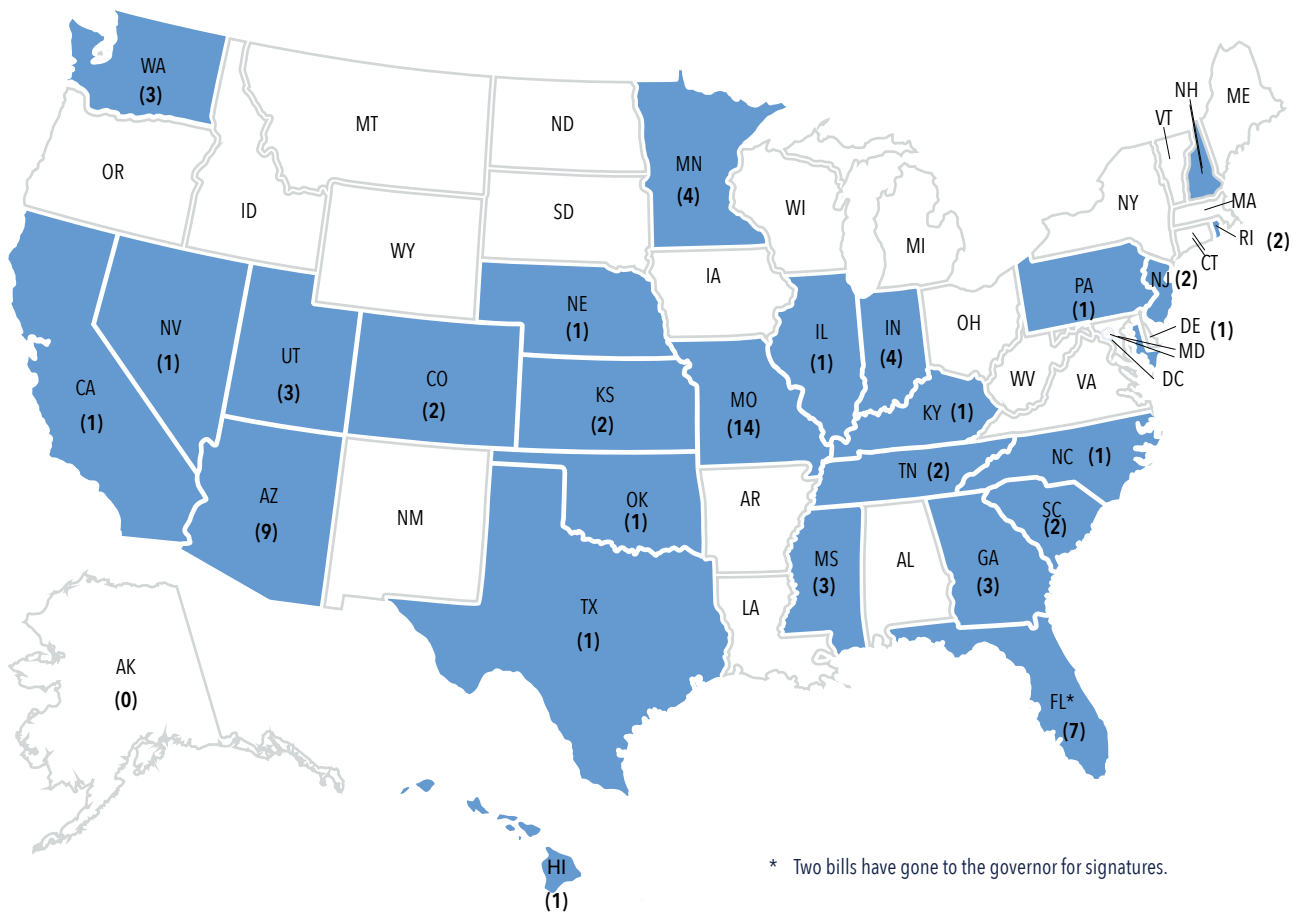
Conservative Voices

As a measure of the potential power of the new parent organizations, three current and former Florida school board members launched Moms for Liberty, the largest of the conservative parent groups in early 2021. A year later, it has nearly 80,000 members in 177 chapters in 34 states.

Tina Descovich co-founded the organization after losing her seat on the Brevard County, Florida, school board in 2020, where at one point she cast the sole vote against mandatory masking in her 71,000-student Orlando-area district. She says she watched parents in her district and beyond petition school boards to relax Covid regulations, but the groups were small, disorganized and easy for schools to dismiss. “We felt there was a huge imbalance of power, the ‘educurtain,’ as we call it,” she told us. “Parents were showing up individually, on their own and complaining, but were just getting shut down because they didn’t have any power by themselves.”

Descovich, along with Tiffany Justice, a like-minded former Indian River County school board member in north Florida, and Bridget Zeigler, a Sarasota County

Parents’ Rights Legislation in 2022 State Legislatures



* Two bills have gone to the governor for signatures.

SOURCE: FutureEd analysis of state legislation prefiled or filed for 2022 sessions.

school board member, set out to organize the disaffected parents. All three are registered Republicans and Zeigler, who has since left the organization, is married to the vice chairman of the Florida Republican Party.

The organization's core philosophy is, "We don't co-parent with the government," says Descovich. Members are required to learn how to read school board agendas and understand the district's budget to make better arguments for change. Like Speak UP, Moms for Liberty is a nonprofit. It's seeking 501(c)(4) federal tax status, which, when granted, would allow it to lobby lawmakers.

Descovich says the group helped push for the recently signed "Parents' Bill of Rights" in Florida, meant to prohibit the state or any other governmental entity or institution from infringing on the fundamental rights of a parent to manage the upbringing, education, health care, and mental health of their child.⁸ The organization had less than a half million dollar budget in 2021 but has asked chapters to pay dues, according to Descovich, with \$5 going to the national organization annually. Former Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly headlined a June 2021 fundraiser for the organization, and Republican Governor Ron DeSantis recently nominated a Moms for Liberty member to the Florida state board of education.⁹ Descovich claims that dozens of candidates nationwide won local school board races in November 2021 with the group's support.

One 3,200-member local chapter of Moms for Liberty, in Williamson County, Tennessee, enlisted some 30 parents to conduct 1,200 hours of research on the county school district's curriculum—much of which was available online—flagging texts they felt were age-inappropriate, including books on Ruby Bridges and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The Williamson County school board subsequently restricted the use of seven texts and removed one altogether, *Walk Two Moons*, by Sharon Creech, a Newbery Medal-winning book for middle-grade students.¹⁰ Since then, book-banning efforts have sprung up in other Tennessee school districts and Robin Steenman, the president of the Williamson Moms for Liberty chapter, who kept her daughter out of public

kindergarten over a local mask mandate, has launched a political action committee, Williamson Families to support conservative school board candidates.¹¹

Parents Defending Education, a national nonprofit organization launched in 2021 by Nicole Neily, a former manager of external relations at the libertarian Cato Institute, is working, it says, to reclaim schools from "activists...at war with basic American values."¹² To help fight "indoctrination in the classroom," the Arlington, Virginia-based organization publishes an interactive 50-state IndoctriNation map that locates "incidents" of "destructive practices" in schools that parents share with the organization, including the Norman (Oklahoma) Public Schools' purchase of a course on "Unconscious Bias in the Workplace" from a consultant.¹³ The organization also provides advice for parents on "understanding woke jargon," how to run for school board, and how to file a Freedom of Information Act request.¹⁴ "We're building an army of Davids," the organization writes.

Powerful Catalysts

The twin forces of technology and Covid have proven to be powerful catalysts for parental organizing. Online learning has given 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 West Side of Los Angeles—home to the whitest and most affluent schools in LAUSD—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.

Moms for Liberty is similarly active on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Gab, YouTube, and Rumble, which Descovich defined as “where people go when they’re kicked off Twitter.” The group sends out a weekly email and receives free media coverage without any effort. “We don’t send out massive press releases, but our moms show up and it’s powerful,” says Descovich. “A few have gone globally viral with millions of hits with no effort on our part other than giving them a shirt and telling them to go forth.”

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

National Funders

Funding from national foundations has powered many of the new parent organizations, 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*.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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 parental 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.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.”²²

“In communities where parents are connected to each other and deeply engaged, public schools tend to be more effective.”

Carnegie Corporation of New York

Some, including Campbell F. Scribner, an assistant professor and educational historian at the University of Maryland, view philanthropic funding of parent advocacy as “stalking horses” for school choice and, in their words, the privatization of public education. Scribner points to examples such as the Bradley Foundation’s support for private-school vouchers in Milwaukee in the 1980s and early 1990s and the well-known charter supporters who have funded Parent Revolution in Los Angeles, an organization that helped win passage of a so-called parent trigger law allowing families to move against low-performing public schools, including replacing staff or turning schools over to charter operators. But that assessment doesn’t account for the wide range of foundations supporting the new parent organizations or the organizations’ divergent agendas, especially their frequent focus on racial justice and strengthening traditional public-school systems.

In 2014, for example, Bruce Reed, then president of the Broad Foundation and now deputy chief of staff to President Joe Biden, urged Peter Cunningham, a former 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.²³ 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 like-minded 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 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 won’t 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.²⁴

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.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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 proactively 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 co-creation that results in better district policies, reduces resistance, and supports sustainability over time,” says Doannie Tran, who focuses on family and community empowerment as a lever for systems change at the Center for Innovation in Education.

“We’re not just trying to build a movement of like-minded people. We’re trying to see what parents want.”

Peter Cunningham
Brightbeam board member

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 belongingness priority, their 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 this year and the district is now assembling a group of community members to regularly review project plans, 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.

While some of the more politically motivated parent activists—including conservatives who see education as a means to push back against what they view as damaging cultural shifts—might withdraw after the 2022 elections, the broader 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.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ed Kilgore. October 13, 2021. Why Republicans May Go All In on Parental Rights. *Intelligencer*. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/opinion/why-republicans-may-go-all-in-on-parental-rights/ar-AAptl8E#:~:text=Youngkin%20has%20shrewdly%20positioned%20himself%20as%20the%20champion,September%2C%20as%20reported%20by%20the%20New%20York%20Times%3A> See also Bella DiMarco. March 2022. Legislative Tracker: Parents' Rights Bills In the States. Washington, D.C.: FutureEd. <https://www.future-ed.org/legislative-tracker-parent-rights-bills-in-the-states/>
- ² Staff. December 10, 2021. National School Board Association Has Lost 17 States, 40 Percent of Its Budget. *World Tribune*. <https://www.worldtribune.com/national-school-board-association-has-lost-17-states-40-percent-of-its-budget/>
- ³ Thomas Toch. January 7, 2001. The Plight of the PTA. Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-plight-of-the-pta/>
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Rebecca Klein. January 15, 2022. The Other Angry Parents: What a New 'Parents Union' Is Demanding (It Has Nothing to Do with CRT). New York: The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/the-other-angry-parents-what-a-new-parents-union-is-demanding-it-has-nothing-to-do-with-crt/>
- ⁶ Rob Kuznia. June 8, 2017. Pro-Charter Majority to Take Power on Los Angeles School Board. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/pro-charter-majority-to-take-power-on-los-angeles-school-board/2017/06/07/68562a5c-416d-11e7-adba-394ee67a7582_story.html
- ⁷ 2019 National Parents Union Statement. National Parents Union. Accessed April 9, 2022. https://nycparentsunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/Walton_AstroTurf_NewOrg.pdf
- ⁸ HB 831: Parents Bill of Rights, Bill Summary. 2021. Florida Senate. <https://www.flsenate.gov/Committees/BillSummaries/2021/html/2475>
- ⁹ Anika Exum and Meghan Mangrum. January 25, 2022. Williamson County School Committee Removes Book from Elementary Curriculum. *Tennessean*. See also: National Parents Union Pens Open Letter to Education Secretary Miguel Cardona. January 18, 2022. National Parents Union. https://nycparentsunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/Walton_AstroTurf_NewOrg.pdf
- ¹⁰ Anika Exum and Meghan Mangrum. January 25, 2022. Williamson County School Committee Removes Book from Elementary Curriculum. *Tennessean*. https://www.williamsonherald.com/news/local_news/williamson-county-schools-committee-removes-book-from-elementary-english-curriculum/article_16575a86-8066-11ec-8691-b7c02ce14808.html
- ¹¹ About Us. Williamson Families. Accessed April 9, 2022 <https://williamson-families.org>
- ¹² Parents Defending Education. Accessed April 9, 2022 <https://defendinged.org>
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ National Parents Union Pens Open Letter to Education Secretary Miguel Cardona.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Jeff Archer. October 2019. Funders' Playbook: Tools for Thinking About Family and Community Engagement, A Resource from the Parent and Community Learning and Action Network. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Who We Are. New Venture Fund. Accessed April 9, 2022. <https://newventurefund.org/who-we-are/>
- ²¹ Grants Data Base. Walton Family Foundation. Accessed April 9, 2022. <https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/grants-database>. Gifts to parent organizations compiled by FutureEd.
- ²² Mackenzie Scott. March 23, 2022. Helping Any of Us Can Help Us All. Medium <https://mackenzie-scott.medium.com/helping-any-of-us-can-help-us-all-f4c7487818d9>
- ²³ About. Brightbeam Network. Accessed April 9, 2022 <https://brightbeamnetwork.org/about/>
- ²⁴ LearningHeroes. December 8, 2021. Parents 2021, Going Beyond the Headlines: Responding to What Parents, Teachers and Principals Really Want. Alexandria, VA: Learning Heroes. <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/parents-2021-going-beyond-headlines/>
- ²⁵ Alex Cortez. 2020. Systems Change and Parent Power. Boston: New Profit. <https://www.newprofit.org/go/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Systems-Change-and-Parent-Power.pdf>



LEANING IN
THE NEW POWER OF PARENTS
IN PUBLIC EDUCATION