



#3 IN THE SERIES

Building Parent Power

A Case Study on GO Public Schools

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Series Overview

Parents' should be a school district's most powerful partners. They know their children deeply and have a profound, personal stake in their children's education. Yet too often in school systems across the country, parents are left out of decision-making. They aren't in the room when decisions are made about policy and funding. Frequently, they aren't even invited into the building.

Efforts termed "parent engagement" often fall short because they dictate an ask to parents, or at best seek parent input on a predetermined agenda. True parent organizingⁱ and movement building starts by acknowledging that parents from all communities have an innate power that they should be able to exercise — individually and collectively — to create and sustain the change they believe is right for their children and their school system. However, many school systems disenfranchise parents — particularly parents who are low income, first-generation immigrants, and/or Black, Latino, or Native American.

Fortunately, there are strong examples of organizations across the country that are working to alter this power dynamic. These groups, which we call "parent power" organizations, inform and organize parents so they can exercise their innate power.

As new parent power organizations emerge in communities across the country, there is an opportunity to support them by sharing lessons — some very hard won — from more established parent power organizations that have a track record of success. What makes these organizations successful? How do they inform and organize parents? How do they structure themselves internally? What have been their biggest successes, and what challenges have they overcome? How have their approaches to building power, internal organization, and fundraising changed as they have grown?

To lift up strong examples and lessons for emerging parent power organizations, and for funders supporting this work, we have researched and written case studies on five parent power organizations from around the country. Each organization is unique in its origin, structure, and impact, but what they all have in common is an unwavering belief in the power of parents and a tireless dedication to helping parents build and unleash that power. A handful of themes emerged across the five case studies:

- Leaders must develop a strong mission and vision that provides clarity about the work and facilitates decision-making.
- Leaders must establish structures to build power among parents and support their success.
- Leaders must approach staffing and organizational structures with a flexible mindset and a willingness to make changes over time.
- Leaders must build strategic relationships with funders and diversify revenue streams.
- Funders must think differently about how to support parent power organizations as strong allies and partners.

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Insights From the Field

FaithActs for Education

GO Public Schools

Innovate Public Schools

Kids First Chicago

Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)

3 i We use the term "parent" to refer to any family or community member taking responsibility for the education and future of a child, including grandparents, foster parents, legal guardians, and other family members.

ii We use "organizing" and "advocacy" interchangeably throughout this document.

Each case study provides a deeper dive into the design, structure, and work of a particular organization. This case study highlights California-based **GO Public Schools**. Key lessons include:

- A menu of programmatic levers and strategies supports locally driven campaigns.
- Widely available resources help families build knowledge and power.
- A sharpened mission leads to a clearly defined state-level platform.
- Organizational restructuring leads to greater staffing alignment across local teams.
- An evolving fundraising strategy keeps pace with a growing organization.
- Ensuring GO's 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) work is mutually reinforcing and sustainable in the long term is a work in progress.

The lessons and practices highlighted, as well as the themes that surfaced, can be adapted to a variety of contexts and used by leaders and funders of parent power organizations in communities across the country.

"Before I met GO, I felt like I was blindfolded. Whatever the school told me, I would say, 'Okay.' But since I started to work with GO, I know for sure I can advocate for the needs of my children."

—GO PARENT LEADER

"GO is like a bridge between families and the district. GO has given me the hope to know there's somebody I can count on to support me if I need something from the district."

—GO PARENT LEADER

"GO has taught me how to persevere. Changes don't happen overnight. You have to do the advocacy at the school and in the community. If we want to see changes, we have to keep working, keep listening, keep supporting each other, and keep communicating. It's not easy to do. But GO will support us throughout."

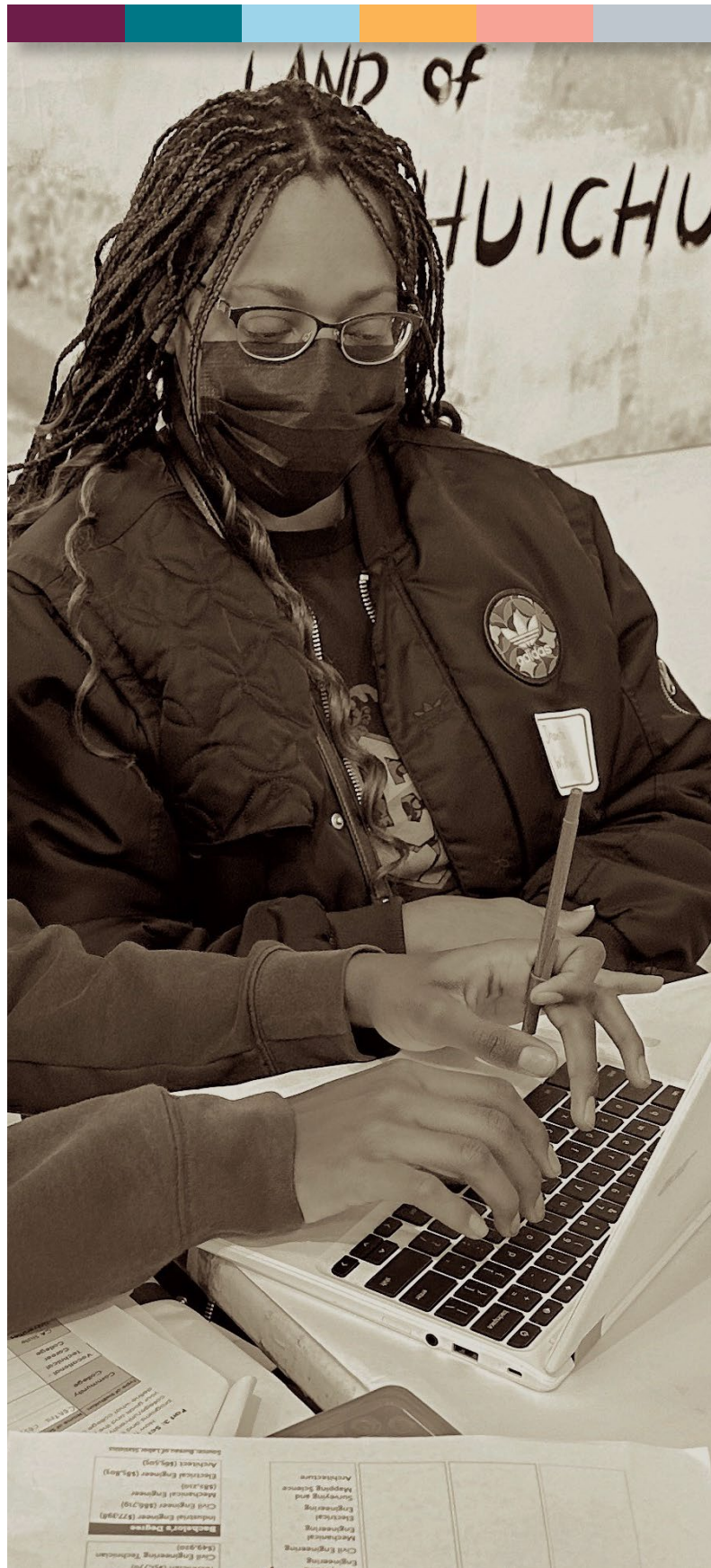
—GO PARENT LEADER



An Oakland-Based Organization Expands

In 2003, California Governor Gray Davis approved Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) request for a \$100 million emergency bailout loan. In exchange for the funding, the state took over the district, firing the locally elected superintendent and appointing a state administrator to oversee the district until the loan was paid back.¹ Five years later, a team of state evaluators issued a report clearing the way for OUSD to return to local control.² The board hired an interim superintendent who, given the district's recent history, was primarily focused on the district's fiscal sustainability.³ The interim superintendent immediately drew up plans to close or consolidate many of the district's small, autonomous schools,⁴ 48 of which had opened between 2000 and 2008 to address overcrowding and as a result of policy OUSD adopted following months of community organizing and public actions.⁵ Many of these schools outperformed the district's older, larger schools,⁶ and teachers felt they benefited students.⁷ Even so, it was expensive to operate so many schools, especially as OUSD's enrollment was declining and the district was still facing a financial shortfall.⁸

The organization leading Oakland's small schools movement in the early 2000s was Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), a neighborhood-based organizing nonprofit founded in 1977 that focuses on various issues affecting systemically marginalized communities.⁹ In 2009, Jonathan Klein co-founded Great Oakland Public Schools (which changed its name in 2011 and again in 2015, ultimately reorganizing as GO Public Schools) with Hae-Sin Thomas, a longtime OUSD teacher, principal, and district administrator. Prior to co-founding Great Oakland Public Schools, Klein had held a variety of roles in and around Oakland's education system and had learned about community organizing from participating in the small schools movement with OCO.¹⁰



Klein became the organization's first executive director. He explained that, as OUSD was gaining local control back from the state, "There was a need to support community members in neighborhoods across the city to build power around protecting and sustaining the reforms [that OUSD had undertaken] and to say to the school board, 'We want to keep moving in this direction.' The thought was GO could be a place where families and allied educators could build that power together."

Unlike OCO and many other local organizing organizations, Klein and Thomas launched GO as both a 501(c)(3) (GO Public Schools) and a 501(c)(4) (GO Public Schools Advocates). They saw the 501(c)(4) as a critical component of the organizing work, enabling the organization to support its network to engage in school board elections and other public policy issues.¹¹

Over the next seven years, GO built deep relationships with parents, teachers, and other stakeholders throughout Oakland. To engage more broadly in electoral politics, GO created Campaign Action Teams (CATs), committees composed of many stakeholders, including parents and families, teachers, school leaders, and community-based organization partners. GO's organizing and advocacy work led to a variety of important wins for Oakland's students and families. In 2012, for example, GO's advocacy around greater school autonomy resulted in a school governance policy expanding the role of local school governance teams and empowering them with greater authority over school improvement decisions.¹² In 2013, GO worked with its network of partners to ensure OUSD developed an effective teaching framework and evaluation system focused on teacher growth and development systems.¹³ That same year, GO informed the development of OUSD's Quality Schools Development Policy, which focused on prioritizing and transforming the district's underperforming schools.¹⁴

In 2014, advocacy and support from GO resulted in a new contract between OUSD and the Oakland Education Association that included raises for teachers, more flexibility in hiring, and an agreement around improved teacher development systems and supports.¹⁵

GO also helped bring community voices to the 2014 OUSD superintendent search and selection process. In 2012 and 2014, GO's 501(c)(4) arm endorsed candidates for key school board races. In both elections, five of the six GO-endorsed candidates won seats on the board.¹⁶

GO's organizing and advocacy have also resulted in millions of dollars for OUSD students. In 2012, GO campaigned for Measure J, which included \$475 million in bonds for OUSD to upgrade and modernize the district's facilities. The measure passed with the support of more than 84% of voters.¹⁷ In 2014, GO helped pass Measure N, which secured a 10-year annual parcel tax of \$120 per parcel on each taxable parcel in the city. The funds were earmarked to reduce dropout rates by adding programs designed to support students' college and career readiness. The measure passed with nearly 77% of voters in favor.¹⁸ In 2022, GO's support helped secure a win on Measure H, renewing that tax for another 14 years.¹⁹

With so much success in Oakland, Klein and his team set the goal of building a network of five local GO sites by 2020.²⁰ In 2016 GO opened its second local site in West Contra Costa (WCC). The expansion there was driven by both family and community need for advocacy support and by the availability of philanthropy. Klein hired Natalie Tovani-Walchuk, a WCC parent and former OUSD principal he'd met in the early days of GO Oakland, to be GO WCC's founding leader.

"There was a need to support community members in neighborhoods across the city to build power around protecting and sustaining the reforms [that OUSD had undertaken] and to say to the school board, 'We want to keep moving in this direction.'"

—JONATHAN KLEIN
Co-Founder, GO Public Schools

The following year, GO expanded into Fresno, citing the district's long-standing low performance and the need to build demand from parents, students, and educators for high-quality schools as well as to increase the supply of operators able to meet that demand.²¹

In 2020, after leading GO for more than a decade, Klein transitioned from his role as CEO. The board selected GO's chief operating officer (COO), Darcel Sanders, as the new CEO (Sidebar 1). Under her leadership, GO is looking to its next chapter as it expands into more California communities and engages more deeply at the state level, "envisioning a day when all schools prepare every child regardless of skin color, family income, home language, or neighborhood to succeed in our rapidly evolving world."²²

"A day when all schools prepare every child regardless of skin color, family income, home language, or neighborhood to succeed in our rapidly evolving world."

—GO PUBLIC SCHOOLS VISION

SIDEBAR 1

Leader Profile: Darcel Sanders

Growing up in California's Central Valley as one of four children, Darcel Sanders saw firsthand the vastly different educational experiences and outcomes afforded to Black children by the community's public schools. She recalls vividly the moment her high school guidance counselor told her she wasn't college material, that "college would be both a waste of time and money ... that I was just a good test taker." This conversation took place after Sanders scored in the top 5% of Black students nationally on the PSAT. After she decided to withdraw her applications from a handful of schools, a cadre of educators rallied to support her through the admissions process. She ended up at Dominican University as an honors student, earning dual degrees in political science and psychology and playing volleyball and basketball.

Through Dominican's partnership with the Panetta Institute for Public Policy at California State University Monterey Bay, Sanders had the opportunity to intern for Rep. Barbara Lee, focusing on education issues. She said, "That experience helped me realize that Congress wasn't the place for me. I wanted to be closer to kids in the classroom and to on-the-ground solutions." In 2009, Sanders joined Teach For America (TFA) and returned to Lee's district in Oakland, where her uncle had been an educator. There, she encountered GO as it was getting off the ground. After transitioning from the classroom, Sanders entered the Capitol Fellows program on the staff of California state Sen. Carol Liu, who hired her on after that fellowship year and eventually promoted her to legislative director. Sanders worked on three of Liu's legislative priorities for education: early childhood education, community schools, and the Local Control Funding Formula.

As Liu termed out in 2016, TFA recruited Sanders to be the chief of staff in its Central Valley Region. While leading its policy work, she crossed paths with Klein and GO. At the time, Klein was looking for a chief operations officer for GO and brought Sanders on board.

When Klein transitioned in 2020, GO's board selected Sanders as the interim CEO and in March 2021, as full CEO.

Campaign and Agenda-Setting Structures Allow Families to Lead

As GO expanded in the late 2010s, it found itself operating in new political and social contexts with communities facing different challenges. Klein's approach to expansion provided local leaders considerable autonomy to build their teams and develop organizing and advocacy structures that best fit each local community. While this approach created some challenges for the organization (discussed in the following section), it has also meant that each of GO's subsequent local teams can learn from the teams that came before and adapt and expand upon successful strategies. This learning over time resulted in rich and varied approaches to organizing and advocacy for GO's 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4). In 2023, Sanders and Tovani-Walchuk, with the support of their teams, codified these approaches into a formal "menu" to support alignment and growth across the organization.

Key Lessons Learned

- 1. A menu of programmatic levers and strategies supports locally driven campaigns.** As GO expanded into new communities, each new team developed programs, tools, and strategies to help them meet the needs of their communities. Over time, these varied strategies have come together to create a rich and varied menu of approaches from which local teams can select to design a strategy tailored to the needs of their families.
- 2. Widely available resources help families build knowledge and power.** In addition to the parent leadership and advocacy strategies GO has developed over time, GO offers families a variety of resources, including data briefs, publications, trainings, and workshops.

- 3. A sharpened mission leads to a clearly defined state-level platform.** Sanders is working to streamline much of GO's work, including redefining the organization's mission to focus on families, rather than on multiple stakeholders (teachers, community members, etc.). This process has led to a clearly defined state-level platform that Sanders and her team can use to identify where to engage on state issues and, critically, where not to engage.



A menu of programmatic levers and strategies supports locally driven campaigns.

GO's program menu allows local teams to select among various levers and strategies to develop a localized approach that will best meet the needs of communities, families, and students. Much of this menu has evolved organically, out of the localized work that GO's Oakland, WCC, and Fresno teams have taken on over the past several years. In terms of community leadership strategies, Oakland paved the way for the CATs, establishing them in GO's earliest days to bring together parents, students, teachers, school leaders, and community-based organizations around a common issue (Table 1).

When GO WCC launched, founding leader Tovani-Walchuk wanted the parent-specific organizing work that Oakland was doing to be even more prominent in WCC. She explained: "GO WCC's founding staff included a lot of moms who had navigated a really challenging educational system, and we thought that we could create a model where effective policy change comes through parent empowerment." Tovani-Walchuk and her team led the development of the curriculum for both the Family Leadership Program (FLP) and Family Leadership Action Group (FLAG) and, more recently, the Community-led Committee (CLC), a learn-by-doing approach that blends leadership development with real-time campaign creation. When GO Fresno launched, the team adopted the FLP and FLAG curricula. Currently, the Fresno team is expanding on those curricula to create the Advanced Professional Parent Leadership in Education (APPLE) program, which provides parents with deeper leadership development training and opportunities.

These various community leadership structures (FLP, FLAG, CATs, CLC) serve as the primary means through which GO locals identify campaign and agenda items.

The menu also includes a variety of strategies and tactics that GO's state and local teams can use to advocate for policy change, implementation, and accountability (Table 2). Because each community has unique needs,

the GO team's strategies vary. In Oakland, where GO's 501(c)(4) work has been most successful, CATs frequently opt for electoral tactics. Most recently, an Oakland CAT led the successful campaign for Measure S, which allows immigrants who are not citizens to vote in school board elections. As Lindsey Bird, education leadership coach at Teach Plus California and current GO board member, said, "What I heard from the Oakland staff when we were celebrating the win was, it wasn't lawn signs or the mailers that [led to the measure passing], it was literally that parents who had a relationship with GO through previous programming were knocking on doors and telling their personal story as to how this measure would change them and their ability to have a voice."

"GO WCC's founding staff included a lot of moms who had navigated a really challenging educational system, and we thought that we could create a model where effective policy change comes through parent empowerment."

—**NATALIE TOVANI-WALCHUK**
Founding Leader, GO WCC

"... Parents who had a relationship with GO through previous programming were knocking on doors and telling their personal story as to how [Measure S] would change them and their ability to have a voice."

—**LINDSEY BIRD**
Board Member, GO Public Schools
Education Leadership Coach, Teach Plus California

TABLE 1: GO'S COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

Lever	Strategy
<p>Community Leadership: Empowering communities through information sharing and strategic communications, and developing leaders through a variety of cohort-based fellowship models.</p>	<p>Advanced Professional Parent Leadership in Education (APPLE): Gives parents an opportunity to acquire new professional skills and deepen their knowledge of the role education plays in the health of the community.</p>
	<p>Campaign Action Teams (CATs): Creates diverse committees of district leaders, teachers, parents, and community partners that focus on a specific policy or electoral objective.</p>
	<p>College Early & Often (CE&O) Family Engagement Planning: Provides students and families with supportive and age-appropriate experiences focused on college and career exploration.</p>
	<p>Community-Led Committees (CLCs): Gives community members the opportunity to set the policy direction, lead solutions generation, and conduct an advocacy campaign from start to finish.</p>
	<p>Family Leadership Action Group (FLAG): Enables FLP graduates to come together to lead policy advocacy campaigns.</p>
	<p>Family Leadership Program (FLP): Introduces families to the inner workings of the education system and supports their journey as education advocates.</p>
	<p>House Meeting Series: Provides small-group meetings that allow organizers to build relationships with families, identify potential new leaders, and surface issues arising within the community.</p>
<p>Non-Cohort Capacity Building: Facilitates workshops and other opportunities to support families in deepening their understanding and mastery of content.</p>	

TABLE 2. EXAMPLES OF GO'S POLICY, IMPLEMENTATION, AND ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGIES

Lever	Strategy
<p>Policy, Implementation, and Accountability: Executing high-impact advocacy campaigns designed and led by parents and community members.</p>	<p>Board Resolutions/Presentations and Corresponding Board Action: Documents or other actions that declare the board's stance on an issue and set forth standards or goals the board agrees to fulfill.</p>
	<p>Coalition Membership: Flexible groupings that correspond to GO's policy and program priorities.</p>
	<p>Grass Tops One-on-One Campaigns: GO leaders working directly with decision-makers to change priorities, programs, or practices in service of children.</p>
	<p>Legislative Lobby Day: In-person visits with legislators and government officials to provide context on issues important to GO's network and/or influence the outcome of bills or regulations.</p>
	<p>Op-Eds: Featuring an opinion piece in a news media outlet on a topic aligned to GO's priorities.</p>
	<p>Sign-On Letter (local): A mechanism to elevate a local advocacy issue by demonstrating community interest in a proposed solution.</p>
<p>Testimony: Advocacy action where network members offer comments at local and/or state board or commission meetings.</p>	

In Fresno, parent leaders are focusing on supporting English language learners (ELLs) and increasing access to dual enrollment (Sidebar 2). In WCC, parents have previously worked to access more funding for the district's Black students (Sidebar 3).

Sanders and her team recognize that GO's local work may look very different across communities, depending on families' needs, the community's politics, and the availability and capacity of local partners. To allow for this variability, GO's primary role is to support families in understanding the breadth of the issue(s) they identify as well as the different levers they can pull. Once families identify the action they want to take, GO staff help them execute it. One WCC parent leader said, "They're not just throwing us out there without any knowledge. They give us trainings depending on what we're going to advocate for. And those trainings help us understand, step-by-step, what actions we need to take, how to be successful in those actions, and what changes we can achieve." A parent leader in Fresno agreed: "They help us figure out how to advocate. For example, we go to board meetings and talk to our representatives within the district. And GO supports us through the whole process."

GO's local leadership councils, which are made up of local community leaders and members, play an important role in ensuring that, amid the varying community needs and the different tactics each local team is pursuing, local teams' work remains aligned to GO's mission, vision, and overall organizational health. Creating a local leadership council is one of the first things GO does as it expands into a new community, and the leadership council's role evolves as the local team becomes more established. "We build the leadership council to meet the needs of the moment in time," said Sanders. In the earliest stages of establishing a new local team, the leadership council works closely with the founding leader and drives foundational activities that seed the ecosystem, such as power-brokering, building relationships, and fundraising, effectively serving as the early external face of a new GO local. As the local team becomes more established, the leadership council shifts into a more consultative and supportive role, offering thought partnership, guidance,

SIDEBAR 2

Story of Success: Improving Access to Dual Enrollment in Fresno

Addressing inequitable access to dual enrollment opportunities – opportunities that enable high school students to take college courses and earn college credit – has been at the top of GO Fresno's parents' agenda for several years. Many of Fresno's schools had little to no dual enrollment opportunities; where they did exist, many families were finding out about them too late to participate. Jeremy Ward, assistant superintendent of college and career readiness at Fresno Unified School District (FUSD), elaborated on the challenges: "The way students were being identified and encouraged to enroll in dual enrollment courses was different from high school to high school. There was no common process. And so a lot of families were being left out. But beyond that, there was a general recognition that we [the district] needed to do more."

GO helped families understand the breadth of the issue and the variety of actions they could take to address it. With GO's support, GO Fresno's family leaders landed on advocating for a board resolution between the Fresno school board and the local community college to expand the number of dual enrollment opportunities available to the district's high school students.

For nearly two years, GO Fresno parent leaders worked with leaders from FUSD and Fresno City College to co-create the resolution, which the FUSD Board of Trustees voted to adopt in December 2021. The resolution includes six priority areas "for the equitable expansion of dual enrollment" to ensure that, by the 2024-25 school year, each Fresno student can graduate high school with 12 college credits.²³ The six priority areas are:

1. Strategic and intentional communication to increase awareness of dual enrollment opportunities.
2. Provide equity of access to dual enrollment opportunities.
3. Expand dual enrollment course offerings that are aligned with graduation requirements.
4. Create a more seamless registration process.
5. Support students to ensure successful experiences in dual enrollment courses.
6. Develop a data system to capture and monitor student success criteria.

Following the adoption of the resolution, Ward says the district is focused on two foundational pieces of dual enrollment expansion. First, every high school has an advanced coursework coordinator. Previously, staff in these roles were focused on Advanced Placement classes. Their roles have been expanded to include dual enrollment courses so that each high school has someone to facilitate expanded dual enrollment opportunities. Second, and what is proving to be more challenging, is the district's focus on upskilling its teachers, who must have a master's degree to be able to teach dual enrollment courses. FUSD has gotten some grant funding to support upskilling teachers, primarily in math and English, but this remains a work in progress. Ward said, "We have to double and triple the number of teachers with the right credentials if we're going to be able to get to where we want to be."

and support to the team leader and GO's leadership team and ratifying the issues and tactics on the agenda that families create.

Widely available resources help families build knowledge and power.

In addition to the two levers outlined in Tables 1 and 2, GO has three other levers it uses to support parents. The first is data reporting and information sharing. GO regularly publishes reports on student achievement data in the districts serving its local communities. These reports include achievement data on both summative statewide standardized assessments and formative assessments like the iReady. GO breaks down these data by student demographics (race/ethnicity, income, disability status, etc.) to highlight inequities in outcomes.

GO's toolkits and resources lever ensures that content created by local teams is accessible to the rest of the organization. GO's Parents' Guide to College Conversations, for example, helps families understand how to decipher and compare financial aid award letters and college choices. GO supported parent leaders in WCC to create a special education guidebook to "give parents tips and resources for their students who have disabilities, such as how to prepare for the initial [individualized education program or IEP] evaluation," according to one parent leader. This guidebook is now available to all of GO families.

Finally, GO holds events and gatherings, such as webinars, small-group sessions, and education fairs, to ensure families have the information they need to navigate their local school systems. A parent leader in Fresno said, "GO held a workshop for parents to help us learn about what our children need to do to be ready for college and what we need to be advocating for at their schools. They gave us information about the credits students need when they're in high school so they can be ready for college, and also about how to budget for college."

SIDEBAR 3

Story of Success: More Funding to Support Black Students in WCC

The WCC Unified School District (WCCUSD) educates nearly 30,000 students, 12% of whom are Black.²⁴ Since 2015, the percentage of Black students meeting or exceeding standards on statewide assessments has ranged from 19% to 22% in English and 8% to 12% in math — smaller percentages of students than any other racial or ethnic group in the district.²⁵ Black students in the district have a 10% chance of graduating ready for college.²⁶

With support from GO WCC, in January 2020, WCCUSD's African American School Advisory Team (AASAT) declared an educational state of emergency and issued a resolution to the WCCUSD board demanding change.²⁷ "We have a crisis on our hands," said AASAT member Yolanda Vierra Allen. "And so far, the district has gotten away with not having to deal with it. No more. We have waited long enough."²⁸

The AASAT's resolution laid out several recommendations for the board, including:

- Establishing an Office of African American Student Achievement focused on compiling and analyzing performance data, advocating for and monitoring the impact of interventions, and serving as a resource for families.
- Offering weekly intervention to African American students who are below grade level.
- Providing African American students with mentorship opportunities.
- Hiring school-based mental health clinicians and academic counselors to support African American students.
- Providing anti-bias training to educators and staff.
- Enhancing accountability and transparency of the services being delivered to African American students.²⁹

The board unanimously approved the resolution, agreeing to direct more than \$7 million in funding to implement the recommendations to better support WCCUSD's African American students.³⁰



A sharpened mission leads to a clearly defined state-level platform.

GO's work to create a comprehensive menu of strategies and tactics is part of a broader effort to streamline GO's work internally and externally. During the most recent strategic planning process, Sanders and her team sharpened GO's mission, vision, and priorities. One critical shift resulting from this work is that GO has moved from multi-stakeholder language in its mission, which historically included families, educators, and community allies, to focusing specifically on families as the priority demographic. GO has always worked, and will continue to work, with anyone who believes that families' voices should be centered. However, the primary focus and beneficiary of its work is now families. This clarity has helped sharpen the organization's agenda-setting process to focus more explicitly on families and their needs.

This clarity in mission, vision, and priorities has helped GO expand its state-level work. GO began engaging on state-level issues in the late 2010s. When Sanders joined GO as COO, part of her job was to strengthen and expand the organization's state work. However, the COVID-19 pandemic hit shortly thereafter, so the processes around GO's state work are still evolving. That said, the policy issues on GO's state-level agenda are aligned with the needs of its local teams and families. GO has an evergreen priority on equity and two organization-wide priorities that will be reevaluated each legislative session. Currently, those two priorities are college access and affordability, and funding equity, adequacy, and accountability. While those priorities show up in different ways at the local level, they are consistent themes across GO's state and local work.

GO recently added a director of state and local policy to "be the glue" between the state work and local issues, tracking issues at the state level and highlighting when a local team is focused on an issue related to something happening at the state. GO WCC, for example, is focused on special education, creating a guidebook to help parents understand the IEP process. Meanwhile, a bill is working its way through the California legislature on translating students' IEPs to ensure that speakers of



other languages can fully participate in the IEP process.³¹ Because the bill is aligned with GO's local work, GO supports it. The director of state and local policy will track the bill, ensuring that GO WCC understands how it's progressing and that GO is aware and able to engage as necessary.

One of the biggest lessons Sanders has learned about doing state work as a grassroots nonprofit is to have a clearly defined state policy platform. "Now that we have it," she said, "it makes it so much easier to decide when and where to engage. There's so much coming at you from the state level, and having the guardrails of our policy platform has made it easier to bump up what's in the bill against what we have prioritized for the current session and make decisions quickly." That, and to "cut yourself some slack. There's so much to do, and everything can't be on the list. As leaders, we have to be able to say no and deprioritize. Every organization can't be on every bill, which is one reason why working in coalition is so important. We have to be honest with ourselves about how many bills we can substantively support."

"Now that we have [a clearly defined state policy platform], it makes it so much easier to decide when and where to engage. There's so much coming at you from the state level, and having the guardrails of our policy platform has made it easier to bump up what's in the bill against what we have prioritized for the current session and make decisions quickly."

—DARCEL SANDERS
CEO, GO Public Schools

Fundraising and Organizational Structure

As GO continues to build a strong base of parents and looks to expand beyond Oakland, WCC, and Fresno, Sanders has changed GO's organizational structure to address challenges and ensure the staffing structure is aligned, equitable, and able to meet the needs of a growing organization. She's also working to create a fundraising strategy that fits the organization's evolving needs.

Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Organizational restructuring leads to greater staffing alignment across local teams.** GO is streamlining its staffing model, moving away from independent local teams toward a cluster model with greater consistency in how teams are staffed and in the responsibilities across like roles.
- 2. An evolving fundraising strategy keeps pace with a growing organization.** GO's early funding came from a few large funders in Oakland or interested in Oakland. As the organization has expanded into new communities and undergone a shift in leadership, its funding strategy is shifting. Sanders is focused on diversifying funding streams and identifying ways to ensure funding stability as GO grows and expands.
- 3. Ensuring GO's 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) work is mutually reinforcing and sustainable in the long term is a work in progress.** Operating both a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) means operating two separate organizations. Now that she's settling into the role of CEO and is nearly through a major restructuring on the 501(c)(3) side, Sanders is focused on ensuring the 501(c)(4) work is meaningful, sustainable, and supportive of GO's broader goals.



Organizational restructuring leads to greater staffing alignment across local teams.

When GO launched in Oakland, Klein built an Oakland-based team to lead the work, staffing it over time with all the functions needed to run an organization, ranging from on-the-ground organizers to directors of finance, policy, and communications. As GO expanded into new communities, local leaders had considerable autonomy over how they built their teams. Some local teams chose, for example, to hire staff to focus on communications or data analysis, while others did not. Where there were gaps, GO used a “push-in” model in which GO’s central team would provide additional support and capacity where needed. For example, if a local team lacked an analyst to pull and make sense of local data, GO’s central data team member would step in and do that work on behalf of the local team. Jack Holzman, GO’s former director of policy and data, said: “I thought about my role as, ‘How do I plug in and support the campaigns that the teams are doing? What are the parents interested in, and what are the opportunities to engage?’ I would do things like help generate policy recommendations or craft board comments, whatever was related to the policy side of their work. Content-wise, the executive directors were typically equipped to do some of that, but they didn’t always have the time or capacity.”

This model of relatively autonomous local teams supported on an as-needed basis by the central team had some benefits. It allowed local leaders to staff their teams in a way that they felt would best meet the needs of their community. It also resulted in the diverse menu of tactics and strategies discussed in the previous section. The approach created some challenges, however. One of the biggest was the mismatch between what local executive directors were doing and what they could do well. While each team set goals and budgets through an organization-wide process, direct communication between local teams and an understanding of what other GO teams were working on was limited, as each team was primarily focused on their local context and functioned relatively independently. Additionally, having an executive director for each local GO was an expensive approach to growth.

Sanders addressed these challenges in GO’s most recent strategic planning process. To address the mismatch in expectations for role-alike staff, local executive director roles will transition to a managing director- or director-level role based on the size and complexity of a given team. These local leaders will primarily be responsible for programming, while responsibilities that local executive directors sometimes held, such as fundraising or budgeting, will now be held by centralized senior- and executive-level staff. The alignment of local leaders’ roles and expectations was coupled with a compensation study in partnership with Edgility Consulting to align on equitable compensation and performance expectations. Sanders created a new position, vice president of local impact, to lead and coach the local leaders; for fiscal year (FY) 2023-24, she is promoting Tovani-Walchuk to the role. Tovani-Walchuk will also help improve communication among the local teams by supporting the cross-pollination of ideas, tactics, and strategies.

In addition to reconfiguring the local leadership role, Sanders is working to streamline the local staffing structure so that teams are similarly staffed with the same skills and expertise. Each team will include a leader and staff focused on community leadership, organizing, and advocacy. A central support team will mirror the current state team, including Sanders and staff focused on development, finance, operations, communications, and state policy. Creating more similarity in staffing for each local team will also ideally facilitate more communication among staff in similar roles.

Finally, rescoping the executive director role will result in a much leaner executive team moving forward, especially as GO expands. Historically, the first hire in a new community was the executive director, who spent the first year or two organizing parents, forging relationships with key local stakeholders, and building a reputation in the community. Given the background work new executive directors needed to do, GO saw limited impact in terms of reaching families during that first year-plus of a new local team. Relying more heavily on the local leadership council to lay some of that initial groundwork, coupled with hiring a leader with a more

targeted programmatic focus, will help GO continue to expand in a fiscally conservative way. This approach will also enable GO to hire more on-the-ground organizers in earlier phases of an expansion, enabling founding teams to begin building relationships with families from day one.

In addition to these staffing changes, GO is making a major shift in how it approaches the geography and scope of its work. Beginning in FY23-24, local teams will be organized into clusters of districts and communities rather than individual districts. In California, cities and districts are arranged in a variety of ways, with some being coterminous, others with multiple districts existing in a single city, and in still others, districts overlapping multiple cities. The cluster model will help leaders organize parents in multiple communities, surface themes across regions, create economies of scale, and, ultimately, expand impact. GO board member Bird explained: “Transitioning from the city model to a more regional model allows us to have bigger impact in terms of the parents we touch and the number of school districts we influence while also being more efficient with our resources, by sharing communications or operations staff, for example.”

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—LINDSEY BIRD

Board Member, GO Public Schools

Education Leadership Coach, Teach Plus California

Amid the transition to clusters, GO currently has 11 full-time staff, five part-time staff, and a variety of contractors who continue to be organized by state and local teams. The current state team includes Sanders and five other staff members focused on development, finance, and state and local policy. The three local teams currently differ in structure but generally include an executive director plus staff focused on policy, advocacy, communications, and/or community leadership. GO plans to hire an additional seven to 10 staff members in the upcoming fiscal year to support its shift to the cluster model and growth to other communities.

While Sanders and her team are excited about the path forward and its potential to expand GO’s impact, it has not been an entirely smooth process. Sanders noted the difficulty of maintaining a local identity for each of GO’s local teams as they simultaneously strive for greater alignment. The feeling of losing local autonomy has been difficult to navigate among staff. “The hard part has been illustrating prior to the transition how we’ll maintain a local identity, because we’re still a very local, grassroots-driven organization — that’s not changing even though our org chart is. I think we have done a good job of designing for local needs by maintaining dedicated community leadership staff in each community.”

This shift toward greater coherence requires shifts on the executive board as well. For a long time, GO’s 501(c)(3) board was primarily composed of individuals from and interested in Oakland. Diversifying the board along gender, income, and racial lines has been a top priority for many years, and for Sanders, geography is also on that list. Recruiting board members with geographic diversity — representing the broader East Bay Area and Central Valley as well as the statewide perspective — have been top priorities. Sanders has added six women, four of them women of color, to GO’s 501(c)(3) board, with half of them representing the Central Valley.

An evolving fundraising strategy keeps pace with a growing organization.

GO's initial funding came from a small number of national and local, Oakland-based education reform funders who supported GO with large gifts. The reliance on a few large, issue-specific funders proved challenging for GO when Oakland's funding landscape shifted, as some of those large funders chose to sunset operations or to change their issue or geographic focus (Sidebar 4).

Under Sanders' leadership, GO is transitioning its 501(c)(3) fundraising strategy and working to diversify its revenue streams. In FY23, GO's 501(c)(3) revenue was approximately \$2.8 million (Figure 1).

In terms of expenses, in FY23, GO's 501(c)(3) spent nearly \$2.8 million, with three-quarters of that going to personnel costs (Figure 2).

As GO's work has evolved and its footprint has expanded, its fundraising approach has also needed to evolve and expand. Sanders made several shifts early in her tenure as CEO and is continually evaluating what works for her and how best to fundraise for GO's next chapter. Nationally, research shows that leaders of color are awarded smaller grants with more strings attached, which Sanders and her board were cognizant of as she stepped into the CEO role.³² Sanders said, "I'm a Black woman, and I'm often treated differently by philanthropy. I'm working every day to determine what doors will open for me, which are sometimes different than the doors that were open for my predecessor."

Although Sanders acknowledges that much of GO's funding will likely always be philanthropy, the organization is exploring ways to diversify GO's funding streams. First, Sanders and her team want to grow the organization's base of individual donors and are thinking through how to grow their networks and connect with individuals who are interested in and want to support GO's work.

SIDEBAR 4

The Importance of a Diversified Funder Base

In the mid-2000s, OUSD leaders embraced two primary levers to address chronic low performance: small schools and charter schools.³³ By 2010, OUSD was California's most-improved large urban district.³⁴ It was also among the cities with the largest number of students attending charter schools nationwide.³⁵ Philanthropic dollars flooded Oakland-based organizations in support of continued academic improvement and charter school growth.³⁶ Just a few years later, however, the charter landscape began to shift locally and nationally. Tension between district and charter schools increased,³⁷ and charter enrollment slowed.³⁸ In 2016, the NAACP called for a national moratorium on charter schools, citing a need for more accountability and transparency.³⁹ This shifting context forced stakeholders — advocates, funders, education leaders, politicians, teachers, and families — to pick sides.

GO, which has always been staunchly agnostic about school governance and advocated for high-quality seats for students regardless of their operator, was caught in the middle. Many of GO's early funders were supporters of charter schools, and when Oakland's charter school landscape shifted, so, too, did the focus of some of those funders. GO's revenue took a hit even though its programming, which had never been specifically charter focused, was still achieving impact for families and students in traditional district and charter settings.

As Sanders develops a new fundraising strategy to support GO into the future, she's doing so with an eye toward diversifying GO's funder base. GO's agenda will evolve as the needs of its families and communities change. Focus areas of funders will also shift as their staffs and boards change amid an evolving education sector. As those evolutions progress, having a diverse base of funders — with various issue areas, interests, goals, and approaches — will help ensure that GO is able to withstand those changes, adapting seamlessly as some funders sunset and others emerge.

Second, as GO has solidified its state policy platform and becomes more streamlined in how it talks about the work its local teams are doing, Sanders sees an opportunity to engage with a variety of content- and issue-specific funders. For example, as GO runs campaigns related to ELLs or higher education access, it has identified and built relationships with, and secured funding from funders focused specifically on those issues.

Corporate giving is another funding stream Sanders is exploring. She's in the process of listening to and learning from her nonprofit advocacy peers about how corporations can support GO's work. She said it's often hard for corporations to fund advocacy, but they "can support events that recognize our families and educators, like school champion awards and our school supplies giveaways, or sponsor some of our family leadership programming."

In addition to philanthropy, Sanders is currently exploring opportunities for earned revenue streams, such as partnerships around data reporting where GO could produce data reports that would be useful to multiple organizations and groups of stakeholders.

GO's mix of deep local- and state-level advocacy work sometimes proves challenging on the fundraising front, especially as Sanders drives toward greater consistency and equity between regions. Historically, local teams fundraised autonomously, which meant that there were inequities in the financial resources each team could access (although GO fundraised nationally to try to offset these inequities and subsidize local teams' work). The Oakland team has historically had a larger pool of local funders than WCC or Fresno and thus has had a larger team and more resources, even though GO Fresno serves more stakeholders than Oakland or WCC when measured by the number of students enrolled in the districts. As Sanders restructures the

organization, financial equity across local teams is a major point of focus. That means that GO wants to build a bench of local funders interested in supporting its local teams' work — but it also needs a deep bench of funders interested in supporting the work more broadly, including state-level work.

FIGURE 1: GO 501(C)(3) REVENUE BY TEAM, FY23

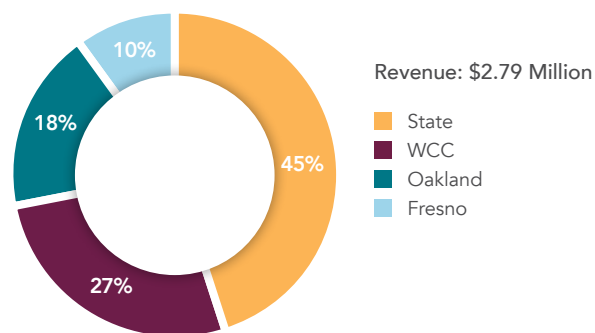
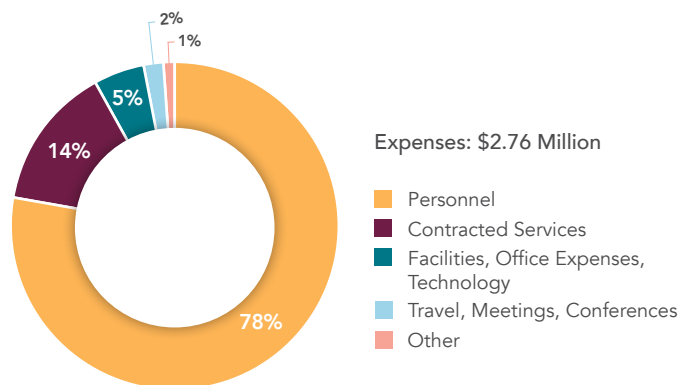


FIGURE 2: GO 501(C)(3) EXPENSES BY CATEGORY, FY23



Sources: FY23 financials provided by GO Public Schools.

Along these lines, Sanders and her team are grappling with who ought to be out in front of funders and who is the right “frontline” given the expansiveness of the organization. Local executive directors have historically held local funder relationships. But as GO continues to expand while simultaneously driving for greater consistency within and across the organization and rescoping the local leader role, Sanders knows this practice must evolve alongside GO’s restructure. Sanders and her board recognize the considerable logistics and time commitment involved if she were to take on primary responsibility for meeting with every funder. That is why GO’s board is prioritizing the growth of GO’s senior operations and fundraising capacity for the upcoming fiscal year. It is worth noting that in addition to running two organizations, GO’s 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4), Sanders has also been operating as both CEO and COO since she was promoted to interim CEO in 2020. The organization originally left the COO role vacant, expecting that Sanders would return to it following her time as interim CEO. That role has remained vacant since Sanders took on the full CEO role. While Sanders doesn’t plan to add a COO role to the head count in the upcoming fiscal year, she is looking for senior operations capacity that will join her and the vice president of local impact in guiding GO’s strategy going forward, freeing her up to focus more on frontline fundraising.

One final, major change Sanders recently made related to fundraising is a shift in the language around board member expectations. GO’s policy had long been to ask board members for a “personally meaningful” gift. Under Sanders’ leadership, board members now have fundraising expectations. However, that expectation is focused on equity. As Sanders explained: “Most people don’t have the ability to write five- or six-figure checks, and I don’t expect that from our board. But everyone has skin in the game — some are storytellers, some take coffees with people, some make introductions over email or join Zoom calls; everyone donates what they can. There are different roles that board members take in service of fundraising.” In arranging this shift, Sanders and the board co-constructed goals. The board now has a collective goal of raising 5% to 10% of the

organization’s operating income, which Sanders hopes will grow to 20% soon. Each board member also has an annual goal document that details their personal gift, how they will participate in GO’s annual fundraising appeals, and what donors they will steward and solicit throughout the year. Sanders said, “A former GO board member and mentor reminded me earlier this year in a check-in that systems are my superpower. Leaning into that strength has allowed us to evolve the board’s role in fundraising fairly quickly. Before we closed the second quarter, we had our first two board-solicited grants. This spring, one board member put together their own event, down to designing the invitations and curating an invite list. All I had to do was show up. That’s how I know the new strategy is working.”

Ensuring GO’s 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) work is mutually reinforcing and sustainable in the long term is a work in progress.

When Klein and Thomas incorporated GO Public Schools in 2009, they did so with both a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) arm. Klein had seen the model work in successful organizations like Stand for Children, and the GO network wanted to be able to influence local elections. Fall 2012 was the first time GO engaged in campaign work, endorsing members for the OUSD board and successfully getting candidates elected. Holzman, GO’s former director of policy and data who ran many of these campaigns during his time at GO, said, “The school board elections — getting the right people in those seats — really matters. It feels so tangible as a way for people to engage. And even if you set aside actual board seats, the other 501(c)(4) work we’ve done, like advocating for ballot initiatives, is so important. Measure N in 2014, for example, resulted in \$120 million over 10 years for college and career readiness and pathways programs. It was an impactful win.” Since then, GO’s 501(c)(4) has won several important victories. In 2022, GO successfully advocated in Oakland for both Measure H — which renewed the tax authorized by Measure N in 2014 for another 14 years — and Measure S, which allows immigrant parents without citizenship to vote in school board elections.

As Sanders has settled into her role as CEO and gotten through a major reorganization on the 501(c)(3) side, she's excited to focus on the 501(c)(4) piece of the work. However, that work will likely look different moving forward. "We are getting ready to turn up the volume. We can't keep doing two-year sprints focused on candidates. It's expensive, and the work is just not sustainable." In 2022, GO tested a "third way" campaign strategy, winning on Measure S in Oakland with less than \$50,000. This strategy included work like piggybacking on other organizations' polls or getting onto other organizations' mailers and contributing to their costs; getting into voter guides and other cost-free activities; and cutting things that they didn't believe would bring high returns, like robo-texts or door knocking. Instead, they focused on being present for community events like farmers' markets and supporting other organizations to leverage their platforms. "Doing lower-cost campaign work like this is important so that communities that are usually overlooked in our state have access to the campaign work," explained Sanders. Looking ahead, Sanders hopes to test more of these third way strategies and focus on values-aligned campaigns, not just candidates or a slate of candidates. "We're only going to focus on candidates who need us, and we have to be strategic about where and when we get involved. That's the only way to make this sustainable."

Running an organization with 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) entities is anything but simple. Internally, the work amounts to running two separate organizations. It's also incredibly expensive to do both. There's a lot of compliance work, on the 501(c)(4) side in particular. As Sanders and her team get ready to turn up the volume on the 501(c)(4) work, they're grappling with several sustainability questions, including:

- What is the best staffing model to make the internal work manageable?
- How is senior leaders' time split between the 501(c)(3) and the 501(c)(4), and which pieces of the work for each organization does each leader own?
- How can you do campaign work more affordably and sustainably, outside of running candidates in two-year sprints?



- How can GO partner with other organizations to save time and money and create economies of scale?
- What other funding sources exist for this work, outside of those who care about particular candidates? How can GO bring in funders who care about GO's long-term, community power-building strategy, particularly the role of the 501(c)(4) in that strategy?

While Sanders and the rest of the GO team are still working through these questions, there's no doubt for them that continuing to operate both a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) is the right strategy for their mission and vision. And for organizations contemplating running both a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4), Sanders offers two foundational pieces of advice. First, determine a clear value-add for the 501(c)(4). There are many things that organizations can do as either a 501(c)(3) or a 501(c)(4), so leaders must make sure they need the 501(c)(4) to do what they want to do. And second, decide which organization — the 501(c)(3) or the 501(c)(4) — is going to lead. Is the work primarily political with some 501(c)(3) support? Or, is the 501(c)(3) work the bread and butter of the organization's mission and vision, with the 501(c)(4) supporting that work?

Ultimately, operating both a 501(c)(3) and a 501(c)(4) means that an organization has more tools at its disposal — but it's also much more work. For GO, the benefits continue to outweigh the added complexity.

Conclusion

GO's successes over the past decade and a half can be attributed to its ability to evolve and meet the growing needs of California's families. From its early days in Oakland to a multicity organizing institution with a state policy platform, GO has accomplished a variety of wins for families in Oakland, WCC, Fresno, and across the state. Now, with an even clearer mission and vision and a more tightly aligned internal organizational approach, GO can continue to expand and reach even more California families in the future. ✦

"... We're still a very local, grassroots-driven organization — that's not changing even though our org chart is. I think we have done a good job of designing for local needs by maintaining dedicated community leadership staff in each community."

—**DARCEL SANDERS**
CEO, GO Public Schools



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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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