



#4 IN THE SERIES

# Building Parent Power

*A Case Study on Innovate 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 organizing<sup>i</sup> 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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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 a California-based nonprofit, **Innovate Public Schools**. Key lessons include:

- Local Parent Leadership Teams (PLTs) create opportunities for parents to grow in organizing, advocacy, and leadership skills.
- Proactively address barriers to facilitate parents' participation in training and leadership development opportunities.
- A strong policy and research team strengthens parent-led organizing and advocacy.
- National trainings make Innovate's organizing model accessible to parents and communities across the country.
- Trends in parents' needs across PLTs catalyzed initial state-level advocacy.
- An organizational restructuring clarifies staff roles and drives organization-wide mission alignment.
- Diversifying funding and leveraging existing programs help make Innovate self-sufficient.

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.



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"I love Innovate. Before, it felt like I was fighting for kids on my own or with just a couple of parents, whereas now there's a group and we're all on one accord and we all want to see the same things happen."

—INNOVATE PARENT LEADER

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"I went to an Innovate event where we, as parent leaders, were being trained on how to communicate and advocate and connect with other parent leaders. One of the things I love about Innovate is that it teaches us how to do something for ourselves, instead of relying on others to do it for us."

—INNOVATE PARENT LEADER

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"Innovate really listens. They get information from parents within our communities, find out our likes and dislikes about our district and schools, or anything else that parents want to have conversations about. Innovate creates safe spaces for parents to come and really unload. We break bread and get down to business."

—INNOVATE PARENT LEADER

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# Parent-Driven Organizing in Redwood City Expands Statewide

In 2012, Jose Arenas and Matt Hammer started Innovate Public Schools with the vision of melding the traditional, rigorous community organizing model with the added “bells and whistles” of research and data. They believed that local, parent-driven education reform organizing efforts blended with high-quality, transparent data and research could lead to systemic change for historically marginalized communities. Arenas, Innovate’s current executive vice president of organizing and strategy, explained his vision for Innovate: “We really wanted to put parent leaders at the center of the work, which is something I saw fade away in the field of grassroots organizing and politics.”

To understand the issues that parents and families were facing and to begin to build the kinds of relationships that lead to large-scale, local power, Arenas and Hammer relied on hundreds of one-on-one meetings with parents and community members in the California Mid-Peninsula (Redwood City, Belle Haven, and East Palo Alto). Through those one-on-ones, Arenas heard stories of parents struggling with their children’s educational outcomes and being unable to access specialized programming, such as gifted and talented. After nearly a year of one-on-ones, Arenas met a group of Latino immigrant parents in Redwood City who had purchased a church van so they could take their children to a charter school in San Jose. It was then that Innovate’s initial agenda was set: opening a new, high-quality school in Redwood City. Arenas recalls that while he personally would have preferred not to focus on charter schools, that was what the parents wanted and needed. So Innovate followed their lead. Arenas said, “They [the parents] were very interested in having choice and options in Redwood City, and that was our first campaign, to open a Rocketship school” (Sidebar 1).

## SIDEBAR 1

### Expanding High-Quality School Options in Redwood City

In 2012, Arenas met a group of Latino immigrant parents in Redwood City who were carpooling their children to a Rocketship charter school in San Jose and who were eager to have Rocketship open a school in their community. While Arenas was organizing parents and building momentum around opening a new charter school, in 2013, Innovate published a research report, *Broken Promises: The Children Left Behind in the Silicon Valley*, which found that two of California’s lowest-performing elementary schools for English learners and Latino students are in Redwood City.<sup>1</sup> This report provided quantitative data and research to back up the qualitative stories Arenas was hearing from parents and students about the need for more high-quality school options in Redwood City.

Over the next two years, Arenas trained and organized hundreds of Redwood City parents, who testified at school board meetings, met with school board members and district leaders, and hosted community meetings. One of the most powerful events was a Parent Action Meeting in March 2014. More than 400 parents came to voice their support for the charter schools, share their stories, and seek commitments from local elected officials to allow two new charter schools in Redwood City.<sup>2</sup> One Innovate parent leader spoke at the meeting about the need for more school options: “Our children are failing. Why our children? Why Latinos? Why in Silicon Valley? ... The vast majority of our children are going to struggle in high school and that’s heartbreaking for us. We want more options, better options, and we cannot wait.”<sup>3</sup>

Arenas also developed relationships with key city and district officials, who helped propel the work forward. He recalled that one school board member’s support had a big impact: “She was tired of not being respected by her colleagues from the more progressive white power structures in the Peninsula. She wanted to do something. She introduced me to hundreds of parents. She would literally call me with names of people to contact.”

After two years of parent-led advocacy, in June 2014 the Redwood City School Board unanimously voted to approve two new charter schools (one operated by Rocketship Education and the other by KIPP Bay Area Schools) in the district.

Both schools opened in 2015 and are still serving students today.

After Innovate’s initial success of opening high-quality charter schools in Redwood City, a parent in East Palo Alto, who had attended one of Innovate’s events, reached out to Arenas and explained that she and a few other parents who were in a similar situation — lacking accessible, high-quality schools in their community — wanted to do the same thing. Arenas described this type of organic parent-led connection and expansion as the “ideal situation”: “Parents hear or see what we are doing, and then they are the ones who brought us in. And from that we built our second effort in the Peninsula.”

According to Arenas, the grassroots, parent-led campaigns in Redwood City and East Palo Alto to bring high-quality charter schools into those areas demonstrate how actions and campaigns can lead to expanding the work: “That’s the magic of campaigns. Once you do a campaign or two, no matter the genesis of the campaign, if you do the research meetings and you keep doing them then there will be opportunities to do something bigger. Everything becomes a proxy for bigger and broader work.”

To complement its parent-led work to expand high-quality school options in Redwood City and East Palo Alto, Innovate launched the World-Class Schools Fellowship in fall 2013. Through the program, Innovate partnered with and supported leaders from both district and charter schools to open new charter schools and redesign existing, chronically low-performing schools. Innovate operated the program for nearly a decade and trained more than 60 fellows who opened or led more than 20 schools.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, after some organizational restructuring, Innovate decided to sunset the program.<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, Innovate took a more internally driven, strategic approach to expansion when it launched teams in both San Jose and San Francisco. Arenas explained the rationale for expanding into San Jose: “San Jose is our headquarters, so we deliberately explored and then decided to poke around San Jose Unified and where there was a need and interest from the community for building power.” While organizing and advocacy in San Jose has had its challenges through the school district, Innovate has built power at the city, county, and



state levels and seen some recent wins on high-quality tutoring, mental health services, and getting the city to engage in education issues (Sidebar 2).

The expansion into San Francisco proved even more challenging. At the time, Innovate was still primarily focused on expanding high-quality school choice options. It decided to take the same approach in San Francisco as it had in previous expansions: spend the first year meeting with parents and listening to their needs, publish a report highlighting the district's achievement gaps, then organize parents to open new, high-quality schools. In October 2017, Innovate published *A Dream Deferred*, which found that among similar districts in California, San Francisco ranked near the bottom in student achievement for Black, Latino, and economically disadvantaged students. Innovate scheduled a press conference on the steps of City Hall to provide an overview of the report's data and findings while surrounded by supporters, including the state senator for San Francisco. However, it didn't go completely as planned. Arenas said, "On the morning of the press conference, we had a bunch of cancellations and calls from people and groups that had supported us saying that they weren't allowed to attend."

Facing a much more organized charter opposition movement in San Francisco than it had elsewhere, Innovate shifted the focus of its work in San Francisco to a variety of other issues that were impacting parents, including high-quality tutoring, Black student achievement, and translation and interpretation services.<sup>6</sup> It saw a number of successes on these issues, which Arenas attributes to Innovate's organizing model and a pandemic-induced opportunity to build relationships with San Francisco school board members. "The thing with traditional organizing approaches is that they are built to last. The [COVID-19] pandemic inconvenienced middle class and primarily white families who then took seriously the issues that we have been highlighting for years. This opened the door for us to make progress in the district." Board members who had staunchly opposed Innovate's efforts on charter schools became key partners on many subsequent campaigns.

## SIDEBAR 2

### Pivoting Strategy and Taking Advantage of Policy Windows to Secure Wins in San Jose

When Innovate launched its work in San Jose in 2016, as it had done in Redwood City and East Palo Alto, it started with one-on-ones to understand what parents wanted and needed. Here, too, parents were interested in bringing high-quality charter schools to the community. Parents also surfaced special education as an issue. Innovate ran a few campaigns on these topics but struggled to make headway with the leadership and administration at the district. The lack of political movement with the district forced parent leaders and the Innovate staff to rethink their strategy in San Jose. Arenas explained: "Right before the pandemic, we began to switch our strategy to the [San Jose] city and county board. We didn't abandon the district, but we wanted to see if that would get the district to engage with us, or at least react, if they had pressure from the city or the county."

The pivot to focusing on the city and county board proved to be successful. In January 2021, Innovate parent leaders organized and advocated at the city and county board level around getting more high-quality tutoring, summer school, after-school, and summer enrichment programs for their students. In 2022, Innovate published a research brief, *Students in San Jose Need More High Quality Tutoring Options Now*,<sup>7</sup> which included data illustrating parents' concerns about the adverse effect that the pandemic and school closures had on San Jose students — particularly students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

As a result of these efforts, in 2022, the City of San Jose approved a \$2 million grant to fund a new grant program, run by the San Jose Public Library Foundation, to expand access to high-quality tutoring programs across the city. San Jose's mayor, Matt Mahan, commended the efforts of Innovate's parent leaders, saying, "This program will change lives. And we are proud and thankful to partner with fierce parent advocates like the families that Innovate Public Schools serves to put the focus on our students, particularly our most vulnerable students, and empower them to achieve their full potential."<sup>8</sup>

Looking to broaden its impact at the state level, Innovate decided to expand into Los Angeles in 2018. Hannah Gravette, Innovate’s vice president of Los Angeles and San Jose, explained some of the motivation behind that expansion: “In California, if you have the Bay Area and Los Angeles, then that gives you some ability to have impact at the state level. While it wasn’t our parent leaders who were telling us to go to Los Angeles, they did tell us that we needed to be in more places that are influential so we can expand Innovate’s influence and power.” The goal of building state power through the work in Los Angeles was specifically written into the team’s founding five-year goals — marking the first time Innovate put that vision into writing and built it into a region’s strategy. In addition, Innovate had funder support to start doing work in Los Angeles. According to Gravette, “Funders were supporting and encouraging us to expand into Los Angeles, which also helped us make the decision. We wouldn’t have gone if we wouldn’t have been able to get funding.” Over the years, the Innovate team in Los Angeles has achieved much success, particularly around Black student achievement and addressing COVID-19-related inequities.

In early 2021, after serving as Innovate’s founding CEO for nearly a decade and overseeing its expansions into East Palo Alto, San Jose, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, Hammer brought board member Michelle Vilchez on as co-CEO (Sidebar 3). The following year, Hammer left Innovate and Vilchez took the helm as sole CEO. Over the past year, Vilchez has led the organization through a refresh of its mission and vision, a program streamlining process, and a reorganization of its staffing structure.

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“We really wanted to put parent leaders at the center of the work, which is something I saw fade away in the field of grassroots organizing and politics.”

—JOSE ARENAS

Executive Vice President of Organizing and Strategy, Innovate

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### SIDEBAR 3

#### Leader Profile: Michelle Vilchez

Michelle Vilchez was born and raised in Southern California in an immigrant family of farm workers and faith leaders who were deeply rooted in service to others. Growing up, her father would tell her stories of the implicit and explicit racism he faced as an immigrant in the South, including seeing signs like “No Mexicans or Dogs Allowed.” Her father also relayed stories about how helpless he felt when he saw the conditions facing Black communities in the South, emphasizing to Vilchez that their family’s trials and tribulations were not that different from others who didn’t look like them.

After her father’s family settled in California, he decided to go into the ministry and was constantly giving back to his community. This upbringing had a large impact on Vilchez both personally and professionally, influencing her to lead a life of service: “My father and mother were always reminding me that if we had a voice, we needed to use it.”

Early in her career, Vilchez worked for the San Mateo County Health Department, but she found that the work didn’t allow for enough flexibility to meet the needs of the people she wanted to serve. She went into the nonprofit space and ended up working for the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center (PCRC), a nonprofit that supports individuals and organizations to have difficult conversations and resolve conflict, for more than two decades. She started as a managing director of community engagement programs and worked her way up to executive director. During this time, she doubled the staffing and budget and helped the organization expand from a regional to a national focus. In her various roles at PCRC, Vilchez brought together community members, faith-based groups, schools, and local governments to address issues like civic engagement and community violence.

Before being named Innovate’s CEO in 2021, Vilchez served on its board of directors for four years. She said, “I joined Innovate’s board because education is so deeply interconnected with issues of economic opportunity, health, and because I believe building the power of communities is what is needed to shift systems. I feel like my experience to date has been training for this moment. ... I’m excited to be a part of growing Innovate’s impact.”



Today, Innovate’s mission is to “build the capacity of parents and families to organize, advocate, and demand high-quality schools for their children.”<sup>9</sup> To achieve that mission, Innovate leverages two primary strategies:<sup>10</sup>

- **Parent Leadership and Advocacy:** Build organizations led by parents in high-need communities and provide parent leaders with ongoing training and coaching, so they can effectively advocate for better schools and sustain long-term community efforts.
- **Data Transparency:** Publish easy-to-understand school quality data and research to inform the public about which schools are excelling or struggling, and to highlight effective solutions for the latter.

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“To build the capacity of parents and families to organize, advocate, and demand high-quality schools for their children.”

#### **INNOVATE MISSION**

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“I joined Innovate’s board because education is so deeply interconnected with issues of economic opportunity, health, and because I believe building the power of communities is what is needed to shift systems. I feel like my experience to date has been training for this moment. ... I’m excited to be a part of growing Innovate’s impact.”

—**MICHELLE VILCHEZ**  
CEO, Innovate

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# Parent Leadership Structures, Advocacy Events, and Agenda Setting

Core to Innovate's work are the organizing and leadership structures through which parents are trained to use their power to drive change within their communities. These structures and processes have led to many major wins across the Peninsula, San Jose, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and statewide.

## Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Local PLTs create opportunities for parents to grow in organizing, advocacy, and leadership skills.** At Innovate, PLTs are the heart of parent leadership. Through these teams, Innovate provides extensive organizing and advocacy training while also implementing structures that help parents collaboratively create agendas, facilitate meetings, and identify which campaigns to work on.
- 2. Proactively address barriers to facilitate parents' participation in training and leadership development opportunities.** Innovate identifies and proactively addresses barriers that can keep parents from participating in leadership opportunities. Through a "flat" leadership structure in PLTs, translation services, and meeting basic needs, Innovate makes it possible for as many parents as possible to actively participate in leadership and advocacy.
- 3. A strong policy and research team strengthens parent-led organizing and advocacy.** Innovate mixes high-quality research and data analysis with parent voice and experiences, which has helped to accelerate its work and secure policy wins.
- 4. National trainings make Innovate's organizing model accessible to parents and communities across the country.** Through the Parent Leadership Institute (PLI) and the Community Organizing Training Program (COTP), Innovate provides parents and communities across the country with the tools they need to organize and advocate for change in their communities.
- 5. Trends in parents' needs across PLTs catalyzed initial state-level advocacy.** Innovate's expansion to state-level advocacy was largely driven by a common need for tutoring supports during the pandemic that emerged across Innovate's local PLTs.



## **Local PLTs create opportunities for parents to grow in organizing, advocacy, and leadership skills.**

Central to Innovate’s work are its PLTs. Each of Innovate’s five locations — Redwood City, East Palo Alto, San Jose, San Francisco, and Los Angeles — has a PLT composed of local parents who work together to create systemic change in their communities. PLTs meet biweekly. A subset of PLT members works with Innovate’s local organizers to set and facilitate the agenda for each meeting. That subset of parents changes each meeting, allowing all PLT members an opportunity to develop their leadership and meeting facilitation skills. One parent leader described how this design builds parent leaders’ skills: “Innovate has taught us how to host our own meetings so we can start engaging within our own schools within our communities and having conversations with other parents that we weren’t already engaging with. We started with doing one-on-ones with other parents that we already knew and then brought them to the larger meetings at the Innovate office and engaged parents in that way. And all of these are parent-led meetings where we are in charge of the agenda. Every parent got a chance to host a meeting. Innovate helped us engage in meetings so that we didn’t feel lost.” While the issues on each PLT’s agenda are different, relevant to their community context and local needs, this structure remains the same.

The PLT is critical for both building parent knowledge and power and identifying what education issues Innovate is going to work on. Once a PLT has built a culture of shared leadership, the group sets the strategy and determines how to make an impact in the community. One-to-one meetings are central to this agenda-setting process. Gravette said, “One of the foundational pieces of our organizing model are one-on-ones. The truth is, decisions aren’t made in meetings; decisions are made in one-to-ones with individual parents. Those decisions are then affirmed in meetings. But parents come to meetings with all of the information they need and have already made a decision.” PLT members meet with parents, community members, and other stakeholders to learn more about the potential impact that their campaign could have.

It is through this process that Innovate has been able to successfully pivot its focus as new issues arise in communities. Innovate’s early days were focused on supporting parents to advocate for new charter schools in communities that lacked access to high-quality public school options. As parents’ and communities’ needs have evolved over time, so too have the issues Innovate focuses on and the campaigns its parents undertake.

## **Proactively address barriers to facilitate parents’ participation in training and leadership development opportunities.**

Effective parent leadership requires reducing barriers, whether those barriers are the result of hierarchical structures, language differences, or logistical challenges. Arenas and Innovate staff took deliberate steps to design PLTs so that there were no “gatekeeping structures.”

One way they’ve accomplished this is by establishing a flat leadership structure; PLTs do not have traditional officers like a president or a treasurer. One parent contrasted her experience in a PLT to that of her local school’s parent-teacher association (PTA): “There’s a stark difference between how you are trained with Innovate compared to how you are trained with, for example, the PTA. With the PTA, they train you on how to be a good member to support the organization, with their goals, and to comply with their policies and procedures. And, even though you are part of, and I’m saying this in quotes, an ‘advocacy organization,’ you’re never actually taught how to advocate. With Innovate, on the parent leadership team, you’re determining as a group what your goals are, what your why is, and how you’re going to accomplish it. You also have space to figure out what your individual why is, which is important to build in your own leadership.”

In addition to training parents to become content experts and engage in organizing, Innovate proactively addresses barriers that could potentially prevent a parent from participating in a PLT. One way Innovate does this is by ensuring that both English- and Spanish-speaking parents have access to meetings and information. One Spanish-speaking parent explained how important the translation services are for her:

“The most overlooked people are the most important people to listen to. It can be frustrating when we have the language barrier. But Innovate makes sure there are translators so that our voices can be heard.” An English-speaking parent echoed this sentiment: “A few months ago, we were taking an action for [Los Angeles Unified School District] to get translation for everyone, whether you’re an English or Spanish speaker, everyone had a headset, and then you were able to speak in your native language and it would translate into the non-native language for people who were experiencing the translation. It was really powerful because, as an English speaker, typically I go into a place and I don’t need translation. It helped me to better understand what it’s like for Spanish speakers when they are in a setting where the primary language isn’t their own.” When possible, Innovate ensures this same language support is available in meetings with local and state officials, as well.

Innovate also removes potential barriers to basic logistical needs, like child care. One parent leader conveyed how important this was to them: “There are a lot of parents who have younger kids, and they can’t be engaged in what’s happening because they need to watch the kids. Innovate provides child care, pays for food, and invests in translation. They address the things that would stop someone from coming to a meeting or participating.”

### **A strong policy and research team strengthens parent-led organizing and advocacy.**

Having internal capacity to produce high-quality research and data analysis has been a critical component of Innovate’s model since day one. Arenas explained: “It was really foundational for Innovate that we began with good, strong, local traditional organizing along with rigorous high-quality research. This is a powerful formula, both for local campaigns and for optics. We have been able to accelerate our work because of the mix of organizing strategy and research and policy that isn’t totally top down or bottom up, but there’s a deliberate symbiosis.”

Innovate relies on its research team to publish external reports that contextualize the issues parents identify and speak to a wide variety of audiences, including district, city, and state leaders. These reports, such as *Broken Promises: The Children Left Behind in the Silicon Valley*, *Students in San Jose Need More High Quality Tutoring Options Now*, and *A Dream Deferred*, are important components of Innovate’s issue campaigns.

In addition, Innovate’s research team provides its teams on the ground with data on the issues they’re seeing in their local communities. Jennifer Perla, Innovate’s director of research and policy, said that they see themselves as “the people’s research team” and that their goal is to “provide parent leaders, organizers, and the broader community with research and data to really drive forward their campaigns.”

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“The most overlooked people are the most important people to listen to. It can be frustrating when we have the language barrier. But Innovate makes sure there are translators so that our voices can be heard.”

—INNOVATE PARENT LEADER

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“On the parent leadership team, you’re determining as a group what your goals are, what your why is, and how you’re going to accomplish it. You also have space to figure out what your individual why is, which is important to build in your own leadership.”

—INNOVATE PARENT LEADER

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## **National trainings make Innovate's organizing model accessible to parents and communities across the country.**

In 2015, Innovate decided to take its parent organizing trainings to the national level, making them accessible around the country. It launched two training programs, the PLI and the COTP.

The PLI invites parent leaders from across the country to participate in a three-day institute, which provides intensive organizing trainings and helps parents build their leadership skills to make transformational change in their communities. Arenas described how he developed the PLI: "When I designed it, I used the model that the large national networks do. They generally do a seven- to 10-day national training, and they've been doing that since the '70s. We picked what we thought would be most powerful and condensed it into three days and two nights. The training goes over the basics of communicating organizing, philosophy, and practice. We have iterated over the years. We've added and amended stuff. And we've usually tapped incredibly experienced people who are the best and brightest in the field."

Charlene Mack, Innovate's vice president of national partnerships and training, explains the impact of PLI for parents: "The PLI is a way to strengthen the everyday leader and ground them in an understanding of what's possible. We work closely with them throughout the weekend to surface their understandings of power as well as expose parents to what is possible if they engage more deeply in civic life. The PLI serves as a magnifier of what impacts education while also lifting up that one is not alone as they gather with parents from around the nation."

Many of Innovate's PLT members have participated in the PLI. One spoke of its impact: "The Leadership Institute is important because that's where they provide you with all of the information on how to be an organizer. They teach us how to do one-on-ones, talk with neighbors or other parents about what's happening in their schools and their concerns. That training is where they build our leadership."

As it does with PLTs, Innovate's staff proactively addresses barriers to maximize parents' ability to participate in the PLI. One participant explained: "All of the expenses were paid, our children were allowed to come with us, and we were given lodging. They even offered to give us rides to get down there if we didn't have cars. They really thought out everything and covered all of the reasons why a parent may not attend. The organizers we had were amazing and they answered any questions we had. Even two months before the seminar, they were just engaging us to say, 'Don't worry about money.' 'Don't worry about the kids. They can come because there's going to be child care every day.' They told us not to worry about anything."



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“The PLI is a way to strengthen the everyday leader and ground them in an understanding of what’s possible. We work closely with them throughout the weekend to surface their understandings of power as well as expose parents to what is possible if they engage more deeply in civic life. The PLI serves as a magnifier of what impacts education while also lifting up that one is not alone as they gather with parents from around the nation.”

—CHARLENE MACK

Vice President of National Partnerships and Training, Innovate

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The COTP is designed to provide organizers with a foundational understanding of community organizing theory and practice. Mack explained: “Power building requires that you try the learning on. Our team has done tremendous work in shifting learning from being a spectator sport to one where learnings are applied in real time. What does this look like? For our most recent cohort, it looks like over 200 individual meetings, over 20 research actions, a host of house meetings, and actions. It looks like learning applied.” The COTP is an eight-month commitment that includes four, three-day virtual sessions, two in-person gatherings, and small-group coaching. Participants shadow local political campaigns for in-person gatherings as well.

Many graduates of the trainings have gone on to launch their own local parent power organizations. Both Maya Martin Cadogan and Jamilah Prince-Stewart, for example, who launched Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) and FaithActs for Education — two of the other organizations profiled alongside Innovate in this project — participated in Innovate’s training programs.

### **Trends in parents’ needs across PLTs catalyzed initial state-level advocacy.**

Innovate’s current focus is on building state power. This work was formally built into Innovate’s strategy in 2018 when it expanded into Los Angeles. Then in 2020, Innovate created a statewide PLT. Perla explained that the decision to create structures to support work at the state level emerged from trends across local PLTs. In particular, during the pandemic, parents in all five of Innovate’s locations expressed a need for more academic supports and tutoring opportunities for their children. Parents wanted to have a say in how the state was going to spend its federal COVID relief funding, specifically wanting the state to use those funds for tutoring. Perla recalls that in Los Angeles, several parents were hiring private tutors — a costly investment — because they weren’t able to get the support they needed from the district. She said: “Tutoring was emerging as a resource parents wanted and needed to see more of for their students. At the same time, we saw a lot of funding coming down from the federal



government to address learning loss. However, we were talking with parent leaders who were realizing that they weren't being involved in decisions about how the state was going to use that funding." Innovate staff realized that they were at a key moment where they needed to make sure that state leaders were hearing from Innovate parents.

Once the Innovate staff knew they needed to expand to state-level work, they took action. Perla said, "We started trying to reach out to Assembly members and [state] senators just trying to learn more. We started doing a bunch of research meetings just to learn more about the statewide budget and identify how to best lift up parent priorities."

During the first two years of the pandemic, the statewide PLT structure was informal. Perla said, "It was two to four parent leaders from each region who were more engaged and wanted to do work at the state level. It was more organic. We [Innovate staff] would meet with them regularly and provide trainings and information to build up their knowledge." During this time, the statewide PLT focused on expanding access to tutoring and after-school learning opportunities, as those had been the two issues driving Innovate's expansion into state-level work.

Innovate staff decided to formalize the statewide PLT after two years. The initial list of potential statewide priorities was determined by Innovate staff, but it was based on what the local PLTs were focused on. Perla said, "All of our staff had an awareness of what was going on locally across each of our parent leader teams. We started with a broad list of all of the issues that were coming up across each of our parent leadership teams, and then we narrowed it down based on cross-regional themes and policy opportunities." Innovate staff identified six priorities that the statewide board could potentially work on. Through a formal voting process, the statewide PLT then decided which three they'd focus on. For the 2023-24 year, those issues are high-quality tutoring, Black student achievement, and individualized education program interpretation and translation.

The expansion into state-level work has been fruitful, but it has not come without challenges. Gravette explained that forging relationships with legislators was challenging: "Initially, the work was a bit overwhelming. We didn't realize how challenging relationship building with legislators can be. Typically, organizations have a lobbyist or a whole lobbying department, and we don't have any of that." However, Innovate staff were strategic in identifying and developing relationships with key legislators who were deep in the decision-making spaces and who were also open to meeting with parents. Gravette noted the importance of forming relationships with staffers: "We also met with a lot of staffers and they really appreciated hearing directly from parents. We realized that the staffers were not used to talking to folks on the ground and who are most impacted, and so we brought at least one parent leader into all of our meetings. And these meetings were happening virtually because of the pandemic, so that was pretty easy to do."

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"We also met with a lot of staffers and they really appreciated hearing directly from parents. We realized that the staffers were not used to talking to folks on the ground and who are most impacted, and so we brought at least one parent leader into all of our meetings."

**—HANNAH GRAVETTE**

Vice President of Los Angeles and San Jose, Innovate

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# Fundraising and Organizational Structure

Innovate has grown its parent leadership communities and scaled its work across five different California cities and to the state level. Doing so has required its leaders to be agile and flexible, making changes along the way to maximize resources to serve families. In the past two years, Vilchez has led the organization through a major restructuring that included streamlining its programming, diversifying its funding, and redesigning its staffing structure.

## Key Lessons Learned

- 1. An organizational restructuring clarifies staff roles and drives organization-wide mission alignment.** Vilchez led Innovate through a staffing reorganization and sunset programs, including the World-Class Schools Fellowship, to ensure that Innovate was mission-aligned and set up to best serve its parents and families. Through the reorganization, staffing responsibilities and decision-making processes have been made clearer, which has helped boost staff morale.
- 2. Diversifying funding and leveraging existing programs help make Innovate self-sufficient.** Due to a changing funding landscape, Vilchez and her staff have been thinking strategically about ways to capitalize on some of Innovate's existing programming, as well as how to take on new funding without adding new programming commitments that are not directly aligned to Innovate's goals.





## **An organizational restructuring clarifies staff roles and drives organization-wide mission alignment.**

Innovate launched in 2012 with four staff members — its founders Jose Arenas and Matt Hammer, a superintendent-in-residence to advise on its district-focused work, and an administrative assistant. Innovate soon added a director of schools to lead school-based work, and a director of research to lead the data and research work. Over the next five years, Arenas and Hammer added staff slowly as they saw proof points in their work and were able to raise money to build out the various departments.

During that time, Innovate remained centralized and lean in terms of senior leadership, even as it expanded into new cities. Following the expansion into Los Angeles, however, Innovate shifted to a more decentralized model, creating a “mini Innovate” in each of the geographies where it was active. This meant that each location had its own dedicated staff for organizing, research, communications, and other functional areas.

As the funding landscape has changed in the wake of the pandemic, this decentralized approach became less financially feasible. Under Vilchez’s leadership, in 2022 Innovate made the shift back to a more centralized staffing model. She said: “It started from a need to adjust to the funding environment, but we also weren’t sure it was a sustainable model to have everything be regional and duplicated. We weren’t able to take full advantage of the wisdom and expertise across regions with each geography acting like a hub of its own. With a more centralized approach, we can learn from each other more quickly. We’ve already been starting to see some of those benefits.”

Vilchez didn’t embark on this restructuring process immediately upon accepting the role of co-CEO, however. She spent her first year-plus listening and learning. She reflected: “I needed to be listening to the needs of parent leaders. I needed to be listening to the issues that they were raising. It would have been more costly if I moved in a direction that wasn’t congruent with our mission, vision, or outcomes. I needed to listen first. I needed to wait.”

After more than a year of listening and learning, Vilchez met with Innovate’s leadership team and restructured the organization to address two primary pain points. First, Innovate was running some programs, such as the World-Class Schools Fellowship, that were no longer directly aligned to the organization’s mission and vision. Vilchez and her team decided to sunset these programs to create more capacity for mission-aligned programming.

Second, as Innovate added staff over the years and became more decentralized, it became top-heavy and lacked sufficient staffing capacity on the ground. Vilchez said, “I decided we needed to restructure and really focus more resources on organizing and strategy work we were doing.” Vilchez shrunk the leadership team and reorganized the staff so that there were more touch points with parent leaders and the regional campaigns. She said: “When we did the reorganization, some of the staff had to shift in their roles. For example, one vice president now oversees both San Francisco and the Peninsula. The organized canvassers report directly to him, so he has direct contact with parent leaders and can fully understand their campaigns, strategies, challenges, and what parents are saying in the regions.”

Even though the reorganization took time and considerable change management, Vilchez believes it has succeeded in clarifying team members’ roles and responsibilities and resulted in better organizational culture. She said: “I’ve seen a lot less turnover. Folks are feeling more valued, even though we’re still working out some of the details. Everyone’s workflow and work plans are in alignment to our mission, and I think that our morale and culture has improved.”

Vilchez has also been intentional about creating more opportunities for staff to engage in affinity groups and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. In the reorganization, Innovate created a new position, the vice president of equity and learning, who is charged with providing in-house coaching and training, as well as experiential learning opportunities for Innovate’s staff, leadership team, and board of directors in their DEI efforts. This position also facilitates Innovate’s employee affinity groups and its Equity Working Group, which comprises a cross-section of Innovate staff who provide

feedback on organizational policies and procedures and help ensure everyone has an opportunity to have their voices heard.

In addition to the organizational restructure, Vilchez led a process to codify the organization’s objectives and key results (OKRs) — which had never been done. Vilchez reflected, “Innovate had been around for 10 years. We were at a place where we had a ton of infrastructure and systems in place, but we didn’t have any OKRs. Our outcome measures had been based solely on output, and not on impact. So, it’s been a huge change.” To help manage the change, Vilchez developed a process to create the OKRs as a team, which she believes helped create buy-in and consensus. She explained, “It started with the team leaders and then it went to every single team in the organization. Those teams then engage the parent leaders in their region to get their feedback. That feedback came back to the leadership team and then we did a couple of iterations with the leadership team.” The resulting OKRs reflect considerable input and feedback from staff and parent leaders. As Innovate continues to evolve into the future, the OKRs will provide guideposts for its work and ensure data-driven evaluations of the team’s impact.

### Diversifying funding and leveraging existing programs help make Innovate self-sufficient.

When Innovate was founded in fiscal year (FY) 2013, it had initial revenues of about \$2.6 million. Nearly all that revenue (98%) came from grants and contributions. In FY22, Innovate’s revenues have grown to nearly \$9 million — more than triple its initial revenue. During that same time period, Innovate has diversified its revenue, though more than three-fourths still comes from grants and contributions (Figure 1). Innovate has also built up a sizable reserve of about one year of expenditures (Figure 2).

Changes to funding streams in recent years, in particular national funders and individual donors who have shifted their priorities or states of focus, has meant that Vilchez and her team have had to be deliberate about diversifying Innovate’s revenue streams. In doing

this, Vilchez had to evaluate Innovate’s relationships with funders and where it could potentially grow its revenue streams: “I needed to really think creatively and thoughtfully around how we could get different types of gifts. What foundation and individual donor support that we’ve received had lapsed that we can renew again? What are some foundations where we’ve never received funding from? I can do a little research and figure out why it’s in alignment. Where are we in terms of corporate gifts?”

FIGURE 1: INNOVATE REVENUE, FY22

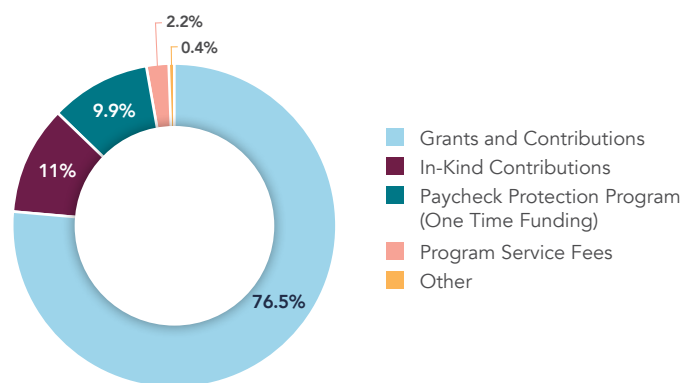
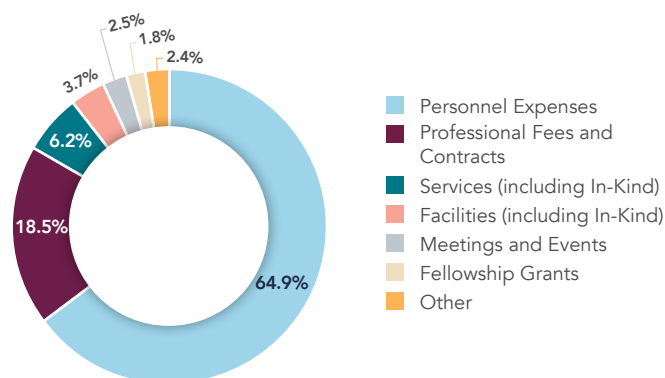


FIGURE 2: INNOVATE EXPENSES, FY22



Sources: FY22 financials provided by Innovate Public Schools.

One of the ways Innovate has been looking to diversify its funding streams is to capitalize on programs that it has already developed, like its national training programs, to grow its earned revenue streams. Vilchez explained, “We feel like we have such a good product and an even stronger team delivering that product that we really need to think about how we can move them outside of California and think strategically about generating revenue from those trainings. How can we deepen strategic partnerships in different states, where we’re helping others by coaching and going deep with multiyear relationships to really help build organizations? What are other great products within Innovate that we can lift as fee-for-service?”

Vilchez and her staff are also thinking about how they can leverage their policy and research and communication teams to support other nonprofits and earn additional revenue. “Not a lot of other parent power-building organizations have the benefit from those two resources, and so we are thinking about how we can make that available to more organizations and what it would look like.”

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“It started from a need to adjust to the funding environment, but we also weren’t sure it was a sustainable model to have everything be regional and duplicated. We weren’t able to take full advantage of the wisdom and expertise across regions with each geography acting like a hub of its own. With a more centralized approach, we can learn from each other more quickly. We’ve already been starting to see some of those benefits.”

—**MICHELLE VILCHEZ**  
CEO, Innovate

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At the same time, Vilchez has been thinking about how the board can support her in fundraising. Vilchez explained that in the past, Innovate’s board of directors was more focused on management and accountability than on fundraising and development, meaning that the responsibility of fundraising rested on the shoulders of the CEO. According to Vilchez, “Sometimes there would be board members who would act as a facilitator or relationship connector, but the heavy lifting was done by the [Innovate] organization.” To get the board of directors more involved in fundraising, Vilchez is considering a fund development committee, which could be composed of members from the board of directors and, possibly, advisers who are not board members but have experience in fundraising. Vilchez is also considering whether the board of directors should have some degree of fundraising responsibility.

The staff reorganization has helped to streamline and clarify responsibilities for specific members of the leadership team as it relates to fundraising. The vice president of advancement and external relations, for example, now oversees Innovate’s business and fund development. According to Vilchez, “This role is about generating revenue. She helps to centralize the funding and business development so that there is clarity in strategy and in how Innovate communicates what our pitches and aims are for the next three to five years and makes sure they are in alignment to our broader mission and vision.”

However, while Innovate is working to diversify its funding, there are certain lines Vilchez has drawn. One of those lines is accepting public funding. Vilchez explained, “When you organize and hold entities accountable, it’s harder when they’re actually funding you.” Vilchez is also working to diversify and grow Innovate’s funding without taking on new projects that would further stretch the staff or move them away from their mission. Vilchez explained what had happened previously when Innovate would sometimes take on new grants or funding: “We would have to add to our scope of work. And even though it would appear to be unrestricted funding, there were still some promises made that we had to keep. So, on paper it acted as general support, but it really was more restricted in terms of the expectations.”

# Conclusion

Innovate’s growth and successes over the past decade are a result of strategic decisions made by its leadership and staff to structure and support parent-led organizing and advocacy efforts in cities throughout California. Innovate has been nimble when it needed to make pivots in strategy due to the local political landscape, has taken advantage of windows to form partnerships and expand its work, and has done the challenging work of restructuring its internal organization to make sure it is mission-aligned and can better serve families and communities. While Innovate is looking to expand its impact at the state and national levels, the deep local work that its parents are doing to raise student achievement and create better conditions for historically marginalized students is critical to ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education. ✦

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“We are proud and thankful to partner with fierce parent advocates like the families that Innovate Public Schools serves to put the focus on our students, particularly our most vulnerable students, and empower them to achieve their full potential.”

—**MATT MAHAN**  
Mayor of San Jose

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MISSION  
RE DEDICATED TO BUILDING  
CITY OF PARENTS AND FAMILI  
TO ORGANIZE, ADVOCATE, A  
EMAND HIGH QUALITY SCHO  
FOR THEIR CHILDREN



VISION  
HIGH QUALITY SCHOOL  
PERIENCE FOR ALL STUDENT

# Endnotes

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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](http://bellwether.org).

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The contributions of these individuals and entities significantly enhanced our work; however, any errors in fact or analysis remain the responsibility of the authors.



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