



#5 IN THE SERIES

Building Parent Power

A Case Study on Kids First Chicago

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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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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 a particular organization's design, structure, and work. This case study highlights the Chicago-based nonprofit **Kids First Chicago (K1C)**. Key lessons include:

- Parent leadership boards drive local and citywide change.
- Parents need a variety of regular opportunities to engage with, learn from, and build relationships with one another.
- A systematic approach to understanding what families want and need ensures parents are driving the agenda.
- Strong partnerships with local leaders and organizations help effect change.
- Build a meaningful cash reserve and thoughtfully diversify the funder base.
- Maintain flexibility in hiring and staffing.

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.



“No one is going to advocate more than a parent. We know what’s best for our children. Organizations like Kids First Chicago empower us to continue partnering with schools to find the best route for our students. Schools are concerned with and focused on a lot of things. And sometimes they need a little push from the parents who can help them get on the right path.”

—K1C PARENT LEADER

“There is only so much you can do on your own. There comes a time when you get tired. I’ve felt that. Kids First Chicago is an oasis. When I get tired and get pushback, I go to that oasis, and they help me. They say, ‘Let’s look at [the problem] from this angle.’ I know that without that support, I would have given up. I would have gotten tired. An organization like Kids First Chicago is essential. With Kids First Chicago, it’s only about what parents want and what we want to work on. Without Kids First Chicago, the agenda would have already been set for us.”

—K1C PARENT LEADER

From New Schools to Parent Power

Kids First Chicago emerged from the Renaissance Schools Fund (which changed its name to New Schools for Chicago in 2011), an organization founded in the early 2000s to help open 100 new district-managed and charter schools in the city. But with declining enrollment and the associated slowdown in opening new schools, the organization paused its operations in 2013.

In 2014, the New Schools for Chicago board of directors wanted to revitalize the organization and approached Daniel Anello, who was the chief of strategy at the Chicago International Charter School, to lead the organization (Sidebar 1). Anello didn't jump at the opportunity immediately — he made it clear that he wasn't interested in leading the organization if it retained its primary focus on charter schools and school choice. He wanted its focus to be on the parents and families served by Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

Anello wanted to elevate the voices and power of parents of color, akin to what happens in predominantly white and affluent communities: Parents and community members are engaged by local government and have a say in what's happening in their schools. In communities that are more economically disadvantaged and predominantly home to Black and brown students and families, parents are not often seen as valuable partners; they are disenfranchised and ignored. Anello explained: "I wanted to give parents the microphone. The intent was for them to be in the driver's seat of the organization."

In January 2015, Anello became the CEO of New Schools for Chicago. Although the board agreed with his initial plan, they didn't fully realize how his vision of parent engagement differed from what was already happening in Chicago. Anello said, "There was this idea about what parent engagement was, which is you go find the parents that agree with your ideas and you activate them, instead of listening to the parents and then doing what they tell you." Anello conceded that he, too, lacked a full picture of what he was getting into:

SIDEBAR 1

Founder Profile: Daniel Anello

Daniel Anello's personal educational experiences shaped his career trajectory and had a huge impact on the work he is doing at K1C. He was born in upstate New York to an interracial couple who were both teachers. The public schools he attended were very under-resourced — no college prep, no Advanced Placement courses, and no student support. Anello was one of only three students in his high school class to immediately go on to a four-year college.

When he started at Williams College, he struggled with academics and the culture shock. Nonetheless, he graduated from Williams with a bachelor's degree in mathematics, went into the private sector, and then earned an MBA from the University of Chicago. After that, Anello participated in the Broad Residency and joined a charter school network. While there, he saw how families of color who were advocating for their kids were deemed "problematic" and ignored by the system. He also saw a lot of tokenization of families' voices to validate what an organization had already deemed was correct, without authentic engagement from families and parents.

These experiences made him want to get parent engagement right. In his words, "Parents are the truth serum. They have the solutions for all these binary fights that are usually just politics and have nothing to do with their children, because the most important thing they are thinking about are their own kids."

“I don’t think I fully understood what it meant to put parents in the driver’s seat and what it would take to actually do that. And, frankly, I didn’t understand how controversial that idea would be to some people.”

Anello pushed forward. Within his first six months as CEO, Anello hired four staff members focused on school improvement, external affairs and fundraising, and operations. The organization’s policy and advocacy work accelerated in 2016 after Anello hired a staff member to focus on those two areas. Anello also hired an external firm to conduct a representative poll of parents to help the New Schools for Chicago team identify core issues facing Chicago’s parents and families. This poll pointed to three primary policy areas: education funding, data transparency, and access to high-quality schools. To supplement the survey results, Anello and his team conducted parent focus groups. They consistently heard from parents on the South and West Sides of Chicago that their children were not getting access to the same high-quality schools as in other parts of the city, reinforcing the polling data.

The organization decided to tackle the school access issue to help parents navigate the complex public enrollment process. New Schools for Chicago launched the Kids First Chicago campaign to support parents in researching and selecting schools for their children.¹ Over the next year, the New Schools for Chicago team worked closely with parents and CPS officials to identify a solution to families’ enrollment challenges. The result of this yearlong effort was the district’s single high school application, GoCPS, which launched in fall 2017 (Sidebar 2).

GoCPS was New Schools for Chicago’s first big win — proving that their model of inclusive policy design and giving parents the microphone could produce real, meaningful change. Anello explained: “GoCPS is a testament to our inside-outside approach. We had good relationships with the district and had found champions inside the district, like then-Chief Education Officer Janice Jackson, who were as keen as CPS parents on getting this done. The parents were also showing up at board meetings, we were helping them to place letters in the newspaper, and we were doing the advocacy that supported what parents needed.”

SIDEBAR 2

Story of Success: GoCPS

Through public opinion polling and focus groups in 2016, parents identified access to high-quality pre-K, elementary, and high schools as a major challenge; New Schools for Chicago launched a series of workshops to help.

The enrollment workshops proved to be a critical piece of New Schools for Chicago’s model. First and foremost, Anello and his team wanted to be service-based and work directly with parents and families on what was impacting them. Moreover, these workshops allowed Anello and his team to foster meaningful relationships with parents — a key component to building a robust parent network.

Through the workshops, Anello and his team continuously heard from parents that the current enrollment system was broken and challenging to navigate, and that it kept students of color out of high-performing schools. Rather than relay those messages to CPS leaders himself, however, Anello helped parents voice their concerns directly to people in positions of power: “I would tell parents that we don’t want to put words in their mouths and asked them if they wanted to go downtown to attend a board meeting and say exactly what they had just said to me. And they did. That was the start of our work to help parents capitalize on their power, and it has evolved tremendously since then.”

At the same time, Anello and his team were having conversations with CPS officials, many of whom also recognized the challenges with the existing system. In January 2017, New Schools for Chicago organized focus groups and published a report of its findings, which concluded that CPS’ process for applying to schools was “cumbersome and complicated” and that parents were unhappy with the methodology by which the choice results were determined and communicated.² One solution the report presented, which had broad support among parents, was for the district to adopt a Universal Application and single-best-offer process for seat allocation, in which a student applicant ranks schools and is offered a seat based on a combination of assessment scores, lottery, and points system.³

In April 2017, the CPS Board of Education voted unanimously to adopt a single application for all public high schools in Chicago. The platform, GoCPS, launched that fall and, in its inaugural year, achieved a 93% application rate and enabled more than 26,000 students to apply to schools they wouldn’t have otherwise been able to access.⁴

As of 2023, GoCPS remains the primary mechanism through which families apply to and enroll in Chicago schools.

By the following fall, it was clear that Anello and his team's work with parents had evolved significantly from its origins in opening new schools. In August 2018, New Schools for Chicago formally became Kids First Chicago (K1C), adopting for the full organization the name of its successful parent campaign.⁵

Today, K1C's mission is to "dramatically improve education for Chicago's children by ensuring their families are respected authorities and decision-makers in their children's education. K1C partners with families to help them gain the resources, information, access, and voice they need to achieve their vision for their children."⁶ They use three primary strategies to achieve their mission:

- **Activate Parent Power:** They bring parents to the decision-making table by providing transparent and digestible information that builds parents' knowledge, and grows and activates their leadership. As K1C works with parents to understand their experiences and identify barriers to a high-quality education, they also collaborate on solutions to address those barriers.
- **Co-Design Policies That Put Kids First:** Each of K1C's policy priorities has been identified by parents and is rooted in their lived experiences.
- **Steward the Facts:** K1C produces issue reports and briefs that provide unbiased analysis and data that supplements and strengthens what the organization is hearing from parents.

The organization also develops everyday resources for CPS parents to better understand and weigh in on complex education policy issues. The organization shares its parent-informed findings with policymakers and system stewards by helping parents share their experiences, concerns, and goals from the grassroots level.



"To dramatically improve education for Chicago's children by ensuring their families are respected authorities and decision-makers in their children's education. K1C partners with families to help them gain the resources, information, access, and voice they need to achieve their vision for their children."

K1C MISSION

"I wanted to give parents the microphone. The intent was for them to be in the driver's seat of the organization."

—DANIEL ANELLO
CEO, K1C

Parent Leadership Structures, Agenda Setting, and Partnerships

Anello and his team have worked tirelessly to develop structures through which parents engage with K1C, learn about the city's school system, and drive change in Chicago. Coupled with a thorough parent-driven agenda-setting process and strong external partnerships, K1C has developed structures to support parents to create meaningful change in Chicago's schools.

Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Parent leadership boards drive local and citywide change.** The Parent Advisory Board (PAB), Parent Leadership Fellowship (PLF), and Parent Leadership Teams (PLTs) offer opportunities for parents to build their leadership skills and advocate for change.
- 2. Parents need a variety of regular opportunities to engage with, learn from, and build relationships with one another.** Structured leadership opportunities alongside more informal gatherings ensure parents can connect in multiple settings and build strong, trusting relationships while also learning about emerging education issues.
- 3. A systematic approach to understanding what families want and need ensures parents are driving the agenda.** Polls, surveys, focus groups, in-person and virtual training, and one-on-one meetings are helpful tools to gather input, but the process for using that information to inform decision-making and agenda setting is even more important.
- 4. Strong partnerships with local leaders and organizations help effect change.** Partnering with aligned organizations and local leaders can help ensure the parents' agenda is accomplished.



Parent leadership boards drive local and citywide change.

Core to K1C's work is activating parents' innate power. As Dr. Natalie Neris, K1C's chief of community engagement, explained: "This isn't parent empowerment work — parents are already powerful. Our work is to activate that power by making complex policy accessible and growing parent leadership capacity. Ultimately, we want to open the system to ensure parents are co-designers of policy that impacts their children." Parents have several different opportunities to engage with K1C.

The PAB was the first parent leadership structure K1C implemented in 2018. The organization invites parents who are leading in their respective communities to join the PAB, which today consists of 34 parents and caregivers representing 21 Chicago communities, primarily on the city's South and West Sides. Anello explained: "If we were going to create policy agendas and do advocacy work, we needed a way to consistently talk to parent leaders in our network. And we needed to give them legitimate power to make decisions on where we go as an organization."

All PAB members meet monthly and help ensure that the ideas, insights, and needs of parents are driving K1C's work. Members are compensated with a stipend for their time, though the amount of this stipend varies based on the type of leadership responsibilities to which they commit. The PAB members also organize families and facilitate focus groups in their communities, which is critical to understanding the concerns and experiences of families throughout the city.

In addition to informing K1C's policy agenda, the PAB is an opportunity for parents across the city to learn from one another and strengthen their collective and community power. As one PAB member said, "The connections we have been able to make across neighborhoods in Chicago enables us to support one another. We have been able to understand, learn, and educate ourselves in other people's struggles and support them."

Members can also expand their leadership by joining a six-member Executive Committee, which provides oversight to the PAB, representing other members in their region, occasionally leading PAB meetings, and serving as a liaison to K1C's board. Executive Committee members are elected to a two-year term. There are two types of members:

- **Regional Committee Members:** Represent members of their region (South, West, Southwest, and Northwest) and build relationships with other PAB members in their community to support the work of the PLTs and Regional Collaboratives.
- **At-Large Committee Members:** Represent the issues and interests of the entire PAB and serve on the K1C board, where they are full voting members.

The organization launched its PLF in September 2021 as a nine-month, intensive professional development training program to grow parent power, build solidarity between and among communities, and cultivate collective parent leadership. The first PLF cohort included 12 parents from six community areas who sent their children to 17 different schools.

The PLF supports parents in developing their leadership and advocacy skills and builds strong, trusting relationships among participants. Anello said, "We needed a way to help parents go from zero to 60 in their knowledge, and their belief in agency and their ability to shape education reform in the city. We also needed them to be regionally based so that they have their own support network. We want them to be knitted together, feel connected to each other and to [K1C] and know we can help them along the way."

Parents who participate in the PLF go on to use their leadership skills in a variety of ways. One example is the West Side Impacting Neighborhood Change (West Side I.N.C.), established in 2022 by the initial PLF cohort. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) had updated its safety agreement with the school district to include school-level COVID-19 safety committees to monitor and enforce safety measures — but these committees did not include any parents.

As a response, throughout the 2021-22 school year, West Side I.N.C. undertook a variety of advocacy efforts to ensure that parent voices and perspectives were included in decisions related to COVID-19 and school safety measures. Then, in January 2022, CPS shut down several schools due to a spike in COVID-19. In response, West Side I.N.C. and the K1C PAB held a virtual press conference on the importance of including parent voices and perspectives in school closure decisions. On the same day as the press conference, the district and CTU ended their impasse over returning to in-person instruction. When the parent leaders graduated from the PLF in June 2022, West Side I.N.C. parents decided to continue their collective work and transitioned to a PLT format.

In spring 2022, K1C launched PLTs to support parents in leading independent initiatives tailored to their local communities and contexts. In the first cohort of PLTs, K1C has eight teams totaling more than 100 parents across seven neighborhoods, including the PLF parents who launched West Side I.N.C.

To launch a PLT, parent leaders identify an issue in their community or school and work with K1C staff to develop a solution and advocacy plan for addressing it. K1C staff provide support to PLT leaders as they engage with other parents to address the issue, such as coaching on meeting facilitation, budget support (PLT leaders receive a \$1,000 stipend along with a \$1,500 budget for other PLT-related expenses), or coaching and additional capacity for external communications efforts.

One example of a successful PLT comes from the Back of the Yards neighborhood, where two parent leaders co-led parents and community members to advocate for a new public library.⁷ Together, they formed the Luchando por la Biblioteca de Back of the Yards (Luchando),⁸ which engaged with parents and the broader Back of the Yards community through paper and online petitions. One of the Luchando parent leaders said of how K1C supported them, “Kids First Chicago are supporting us with a lot. They are guiding us to see how we can better advocate to get the library. They support us, even with interpretation services, and help connect us with different people and officials so we can get this done.”

In late May 2021, State Rep. Theresa Mah secured \$15 million in state funding for capital projects to help fund a library in Back of the Yards.⁹ However, city officials have yet to identify a location for the library. According to one Luchando parent, “Our kids still don’t have anywhere to properly study. We want the library to be a shared public space that’s completely independent and a resource for our students and for us parents.”

In addition to helping parents address a local need, PLTs are part of K1C’s strategy to generate 1,000 parent champions over the next four years. K1C asks PLT leaders to bring 10 to 12 new parents into their network through local advocacy efforts.

Parents need a variety of regular opportunities to engage with, learn from, and build relationships with one another.

K1C also has two other, less formal structures to engage parents. The first is The Living Room/La Sala Series, which launched in October 2020 at the height of the pandemic so parents had a regular, informal space to learn about different education policy issues. Every month, K1C hosts two virtual sessions — one in Spanish [“La Sala”] and one in English [“Living Room”] — where experts speak on a variety of topics such as CPS’ transition to an elected school board, preparing for parent-teacher conferences, and how parents can get involved in K1C’s parent leadership teams.

In fall 2022, K1C launched a rapid response panel (RRP) to quickly assess parents’ perspectives on timely education issues that require immediate action. K1C worked with a polling agency to build out the RRP to include a representative sample of more than 400 Chicago parents. K1C now has a formalized process in which they can ask the RRP three questions per month. Most recently, K1C used the RRP to get feedback from parents on back-to-school issues like starting the school year two weeks early or concerns over COVID-19 safety protocols.

Describing the purpose of the RRP, Anello said, “We have deep engagement efforts with families, but it’s hard to do our model in a world where there are a lot of backroom deals and fast politics. We needed a way to

react quickly in those situations and provide authentic parent perspectives.” The RRP allows K1C to hear from and elevate the perspectives of a broader subset of Chicago parents beyond its core parent leaders.

A systematic approach to understanding what families want and need ensures parents are driving the agenda.

While K1C has always let parents lead in setting the organization’s priorities, the process has evolved as the organization has grown and matured. When K1C established its initial list of priorities in 2016, it did so through a poll (conducted by an outside firm) and focus groups with parents. In identifying and developing a policy and advocacy agenda for its next five years, K1C undertook a much more robust process, capitalizing on the various parent leadership structures they now have in place. As Anello explained: “Everything we do is through a co-designed approach. We have committees of parents that we compensate for their time and expertise, and we are co-developing policies and systems with them.”

That process spanned two years, from fall 2020 to fall 2022, ultimately aligning on three policy priorities that will guide K1C’s work over the next five years: high-quality teaching, equitable school funding, and social-emotional learning (Figure 1). With those guiding policy issues in place, K1C is now launching a task force for each issue. Each task force includes PAB members and parent champions. Task force members identify the specific issues within the broader topic that they will focus on, including identifying the goals and outcomes they hope to achieve. K1C plans to bring in subject-matter experts to help the task force better understand the issues and provide them with information to help guide advocacy goals.

One PAB member reflected on K1C’s agenda-setting process: “It took a long time to decide what we were going to focus on. We got together, had a lot of meetings, got a lot of firsthand information from one-on-one meetings. ... We did a lot of brainstorming about what was most important collectively. It was a long process, but it was worth it because we worked through it until we agreed on what was most important for everyone.”

FIGURE 1: K1C’S MOST RECENT AGENDA-SETTING PROCESS

Fall 2020

Through polls and one-on-ones with parents, K1C developed a definition of a “world-class education.”

Spring 2021

The PAB ratified the definition of a world-class education, which acted as the North Star for the rest of the agenda-setting process.

Summer 2021-Spring 2022

K1C staff chose an initial set of policy issues that would need to be addressed to move CPS toward parents’ definition of a world-class education. Through in-person and virtual training, written materials, and one-on-one conversations, K1C staff provided parents with information about these policy issues to ensure they understood all sides of the issue and openly discussed potential implications of addressing it — good and bad. Parents also added new issues to the list for consideration.

Summer 2022

Parents completed a survey, including a pairwise comparison analysis, where they ranked the importance of the various policy issues they had discussed. The survey data resulted in an initial list of policy priorities. K1C staff then worked with PAB members to understand the experiences that led parents to prioritize these issues over others.

Fall 2022

PAB members and K1C staff reviewed the additional feedback and ultimately aligned on three priorities that would guide their work for the next five years: high-quality teaching, equitable school funding, and social-emotional learning.

Strong partnerships with local leaders and organizations help effect change.

The organization is successfully building a base of “knowledgeable, insightful, independent” parents ready to lead change on behalf of Chicago’s kids, but they cannot do their work alone. Policy and systems change require building relationships and working in concert with a variety of stakeholders over the long haul, including government agencies, community organizations, nonprofits, and individuals in positions of formal and informal power.

When partnering with another organization on a policy issue or campaign, the K1C staff considers three key things: voice, alignment, and expectations.

- **Voice:** The organization is clear with external partners that it does not speak for parents. Anello said they are often approached by politicians or their staff who ask, “What do parents think about X?” Anello explained: “Parents aren’t one mind, which is another bias people carry. We know that parents have different opinions, but it’s convenient for the people in power to think they don’t. That’s why the power needs to shift.” Ultimately, K1C prioritizes partnerships with organizations and individuals who truly want to know and consider what parents think, want, and need, rather than groups that simply want a talking point.
- **Alignment:** The K1C organization works with partners that have overlapping or aligned priorities — even if those priorities aren’t always 100% aligned. Sometimes organizations reach out to K1C directly. For example, CPS reached out to K1C to lead stakeholder engagement for the Accountability Redesign initiative, a multiyear process to design the district’s new school accountability policy.¹⁰ In other cases, K1C may contact an organization to support them in its work. For example, K1C asked the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to support its knowledge-building on social-emotional learning, one of K1C’s three current parent-led policy priority areas.



- **Expectations:** K1C is intentional about setting expectations from the outset, especially around transparency. Hal Woods, K1C's chief of policy, said, "We are very clear from the get-go in terms of what our nonnegotiables are and what we have to do to operate with integrity, and we won't deviate from that. We are not going to put out a sanitized report of what stakeholders said. Having those candid conversations up front is important."

K1C has an established track record of success.

K1C has a variety of easily observed successes. Citywide initiatives like GoCPS and Chicago Connected and community-based projects like the Back of the Yards library and COVID-19 safety measures are clear indicators that K1C's approach to parent organizing works (Sidebar 3).

Beyond these obvious, large-scale wins, however, lie equally important successes for the individual parents in K1C's network. The organization helps parents find and activate their innate agency and power — especially in communities that have long been oppressed. Woods offers one example: "We had a parent speak at a CPS board meeting, and they were recognized for being incredibly knowledgeable. CPS invited them to be on the CEO's parent advisory council. To me that's a win, even if the thing that they were advocating for hasn't been accomplished yet."

One PAB member explains how parents have learned to embrace their power: "When we all first joined Kids First Chicago, we were timid and unsure and hesitant. But [K1C] has made us feel welcomed. They have empathy, they reach out to us and ask how they can support us. They have motivated us, helped with training so we grow as a person and can help other parents, too. All of the staff show great appreciation for us. All those small things add up and motivate us so much."

Moreover, there is the collective power that comes from hundreds of parents recognizing their agency. As another PAB member said, "We are being heard. I have these moms telling me that they tried to do this on their own and then tell me that they couldn't have done it

SIDEBAR 3

Story of Success: Chicago Connected

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, K1C staff made hundreds of phone calls to CPS parents to understand how to best support them. A common issue emerged: lack of access to the internet. To better understand the scale of the problem, K1C dug into the U.S. Census data and found that one in five children in Chicago lacked access to in-home internet. These gaps in access were worse in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods on the South and West Sides. K1C released these findings in an issue brief, "Digital Equity in the Coronavirus Era."¹¹ That issue brief included a recommendation for the City of Chicago to partner with internet service providers on a subsidy program to make in-home internet affordable.

The issue brief and the specific recommendation for establishing a community-led internet service subsidy program got the attention of the City of Chicago, CPS, and philanthropy. Ultimately, K1C partnered with CPS, the City of Chicago, philanthropic partners, and various community-based organizations (CBOs) to create Chicago Connected, a first-of-its-kind program that provides no-cost, high-speed internet services and digital learning resources to CPS students and families.¹²

K1C played a variety of critical roles in the development and execution of the Chicago Connected initiative:

- K1C developed the selection process for and managed the 35 CBOs that worked with CPS to help eligible families sign up and provided families with digital learning support.
- K1C leveraged their PAB and monthly Living Room/La Sala sessions to ensure parents knew about the program.
- K1C surveyed more than 8,000 families to gather input on the program's effectiveness and advocated for changes to address issues that surfaced in the survey.
- K1C worked with CBOs to implement digital literacy training and technology support, generating over 30,000 learning hours for CPS parents and caregivers.
- K1C worked with nonprofit device refurbishment partners to donate thousands of free laptops to CPS families in need.
- K1C drafted the initial plan for the program and has served as a leading voice on the project team since launch.

To date, Chicago Connected has served more than 100,000 students in over 60,000 households. The program serves as a national model. More than 20 cities have reached out to K1C and its public-private partners to learn more about the program's creation and model, and Miami and Philadelphia have both launched initiatives modeled after Chicago Connected.

without the support of Kids First Chicago. Being heard makes a big difference.” Another PAB member shared similar sentiments: “We know that getting more parents in all neighborhoods to participate and advocate for more programs in Chicago altogether is important. One of the biggest achievements is to get more parents involved in each neighborhood. We see new parents who become leaders. That’s good for all of us. Our voice can grow when we petition for something together.”

“We know that getting more parents in all neighborhoods to participate and advocate for more programs in Chicago altogether is important ... We see new parents who become leaders. That’s good for all of us. Our voice can grow when we petition for something together.”

—K1C PARENT LEADER

“Parents aren’t one mind, which is another bias people carry. We know that parents have different opinions, but it’s convenient for the people in power to think they don’t. That’s why the power needs to shift.”

—DANIEL ANELLO
CEO, K1C



Fundraising and Organizational Structure

The organization has established a strong base of parents who lead K1C's agenda, while also developing relationships with key organizations and power brokers. Combined, this has led to tangible and meaningful success for Chicago's students. Anello's deliberate approach to fundraising and building a cash reserve, coupled with his flexibility in building the staff he needs to do the work, has created a strong underlying organization that can achieve its goals.

Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Build a meaningful cash reserve and thoughtfully diversify the funder base.** Having several months' worth of cash on hand (or more) helps ensure that K1C is on strong financial footing to continue paying its employees in the event of fundraising challenges. This also helps the organization maintain its independence from the individual agendas of funders.
- 2. Maintain flexibility in hiring and staffing.** Being willing to adapt job descriptions allows organizations to prioritize culture and mission fit alongside skills and knowledge.



Build a meaningful cash reserve and thoughtfully diversify the funder base.

When Anello took over New Schools for Chicago in 2015, the organization still had close ties to Chicago’s Civic Committee, and he was able to leverage that relationship to raise \$1 million in initial funding. Since then, K1C has diversified its funding streams and grown its budget. From fiscal years (FY) 2017 to FY 2022, K1C’s revenue streams grew eightfold — from \$746,000 to \$6.4 million.¹³ Increases in funding from foundations drove much of the overall budget increase, though corporations, individual donors, and in-kind donations play an important role in K1C’s revenue (Figure 2).

In terms of its expenses, K1C spent approximately \$3.8 million in FY22 (Figure 3).¹⁴ Almost half of K1C’s expenses (45%) went to community engagement, and nearly one-third (28%) went to policy. The remaining quarter went to general and administrative costs, fundraising, and other programming.

The organization’s revenue and expenses reflect several strategic approaches to fundraising and budgeting. K1C has brought in more revenue than it spent in recent years, but this has been deliberate. K1C seeks to secure multiyear commitments that enable it to conduct the long-term relational work needed to transform Chicago public education. The budget surpluses that K1C realized in FY19 through FY22 have allowed it to grow with some confidence despite broader economic uncertainty and political headwinds.

Its healthy cash reserve also helps to solidify K1C’s organizational independence, giving the team some budgetary freedom to say no to funders who want K1C to do work aligned with their agenda, rather than the agenda set by Chicago parents. As Kristin Pollock, K1C’s chief of development and external affairs, said, “We’re focused on selling our model and not getting distracted by individual pet projects.”

The cash reserve also helps K1C maintain private revenue streams. K1C has never been paid by CPS or any other government entity to work on their behalf. Pollock explained: “If we were to be some sort of paid consultant with our public partners, CPS, and the City of Chicago, that would change the nature of our relationship. We would rather be in the pro bono critical friend role, as opposed to being a paid consultant.” The organization’s healthy cash reserve helps make this razor-sharp focus on its mission possible.

FIGURE 2: K1C REVENUE, BY CATEGORY, YEAR END JUNE 30, 2022

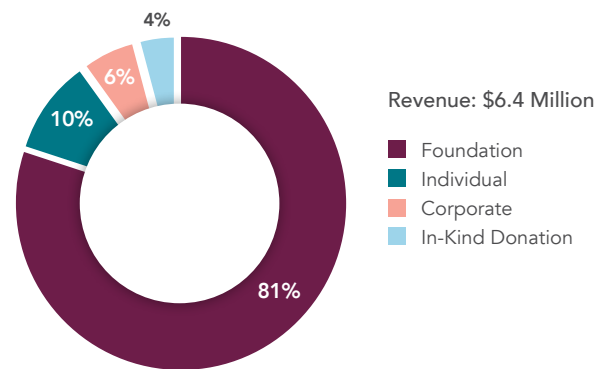
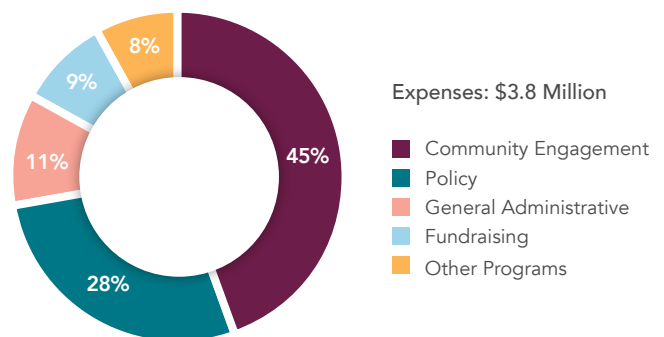


FIGURE 3: K1C EXPENSES, BY CATEGORY, YEAR END JUNE 30, 2022



Note: Totals may exceed 100 due to rounding.
Source: Kids First Chicago Impact Report, 2022.

Additionally, K1C is working hard to diversify its funder base. While philanthropy is likely to remain K1C's primary funding stream, Pollock and her team are building a deep bench of corporate and individual funders and are also engaging a broader set of foundations — local and national as well as private and community based. The organization also recently recruited a new data science and research lead, Dr. José Pacas, and as the organization's research agenda takes shape, K1C may be in a position to pursue public research grants in the years ahead. This broad approach to fundraising helps ensure that K1C is not overly reliant on any single funder so that it doesn't find itself in a tight spot financially if one funder's priorities or giving suddenly changes. Pollock said of her team's relationship-building with funders, "We've engaged with a lot of local education funders and either found a fit or not. The next stage of our growth is engaging with more national funders who understand the long-term nature of what we're doing, as well as deepening relationships with local individual donors to create a more diverse base of funding."

The national funding piece is proving somewhat tricky, given Chicago's reputation. Pollock explained that many national funders are hesitant to fund Chicago-based organizations because of a perception of toxic politics and an inability to enact systemic change — leading some to stop funding in Chicago altogether. However, Pollock hopes that perception will change as K1C continues to demonstrate the impact of its model. She said, "We would love for more national funders to realize that change is possible in Chicago. I think the proof is in the pudding with what Kids First Chicago has been able to do."

Regardless of whether a funder is national or local, in working with funders to secure philanthropic dollars, Pollock and her team focus on opportunities to secure large, multiyear commitments. These kinds of commitments provide "patient capital" that allows K1C to build relationships with parents and community members and engage quickly on new or emerging issues. Nurturing relationships with foundations that provide general operating dollars or "gifts," rather than

grants tied to specific programmatic outcomes, is also an important part of K1C's strategy, given that this type of funding provides greater flexibility.

Finally, Anello and his team have been thoughtful about the composition of K1C's executive board. Nonprofit boards often play a critical role in fundraising for an organization, with board members expected to bring in resources through individual gifts and/or connections to their networks.¹⁵ K1C's board, however, is more diverse than a typical nonprofit board. The K1C board is composed of 19 people, including current and former foundation staff, researchers from Northwestern University and the University of Chicago, PAB members, and individuals who work at banks and in private equity. In terms of annual board contribution expectations, Anello and his team "welcome a range of giving," with some board members giving \$100 and others giving more than \$100,000.¹⁶ There are important trade-offs to this approach. Not having the board stacked with wealthy individuals means that it brings in less funding — pushing more funding responsibility to the K1C staff. In addition, it's a large board to manage, both in terms of scheduling and logistics and from the perspective of aligning on vision. However, K1C is comfortable with these trade-offs because having broader representation on the board, including parents, ensures that the board as a whole believes in and supports K1C's parent-led work.

Anello and his team feel good about K1C's financial position, and more recently, they've noticed a change in how funders think about the organization's work. Anello said, "[After George Floyd's murder] there was suddenly this conversation about racism in this country — a recognition about something that I have been experiencing my whole life. It was like people realized we had a problem and then racial equity was being centered, as well as a centering of those who are directly impacted. So, the work that we had been doing since 2015 became more attractive [to funders and partners]." Even so, Anello and his team recognize that they cannot be complacent. Continuing to share their successes and bring in new supporters is critical to the long-term success of K1C's mission.

Maintain flexibility in hiring and staffing.

Over the past eight years, K1C's team expanded from five staff members to 25. Today, those staff are organized into four departments: community engagement, development and external affairs, operations, and policy/data and research (Figure 4). This organizational structure has helped K1C establish a strong service-oriented approach to working with parents and communities.

Over the past few years, Anello has focused on streamlining K1C's systems and organizational structure to increase its efficiency and ability to support the various parent leadership structures. For example, K1C hired a Salesforce associate to better track K1C's organizational and parent relationships and to ensure that nothing is overlooked. The team also hired a program manager for the PLF who will oversee alumni engagement, meeting scheduling and logistics, and organizing child care during meetings. As K1C's signature leadership programming and work across the city becomes broader and more complex, these internal coordinating roles are becoming increasingly important to ensure that even the smallest details are addressed. Over the next two fiscal years (FY24 and FY25), K1C hopes to hire up to 10 more team members to increase its reach and impact.

When it comes to hiring, Anello prioritizes hiring talent versus hiring for a specific role: "If there is someone who is a really good culture and mission fit and that can do 80% of the stuff in the job description, then we have to change the role a bit. I would rather go for someone who's good and who's committed to the mission, rather than looking for a unicorn that fits into a very specific job description."

Anello also considers a variety of approaches to filling gaps across the team. Hiring full-time staff members is one approach, but, depending on the need, the timing in the fiscal year, and other upcoming expenses,

contracting on a time-limited basis is also something he considers. In addition, Anello often looks internally first, to see if there are shifts he can make with team members to better capitalize on the existing team's strengths. This approach to hiring gives Anello some flexibility to find the right person to fill a gap on the team while ensuring his existing team is operating at full capacity.

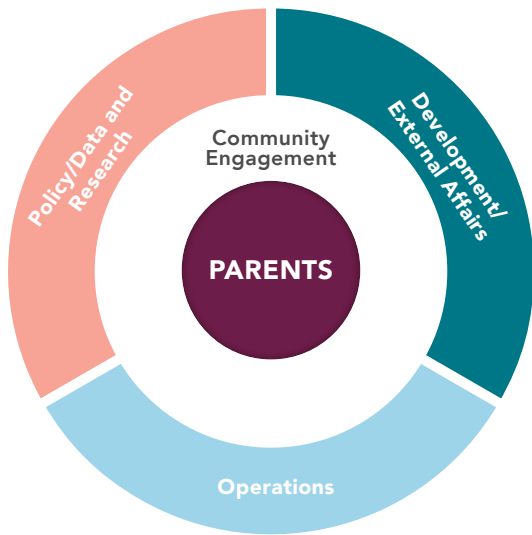
In terms of organizational culture, Anello emphasized how important it is for K1C to be a brave and welcoming space. He said: "We're a civil rights organization. Education is the biggest lever that we can use to change life outcomes. But changing education outcomes depends on us looking at the whole picture. Because of that civil rights aspect and because of who we are, if you look at our team demographics we are predominantly people of color, and many of us come from the neighborhoods that we're working in or have a lived experience that brings with it a history that connects us to the work. I can say this with being the privilege of the founder, but it's the first time I've worked in a space where I feel safe. And I want that experience to be for everyone who comes into our space."

"The next stage of our growth is engaging with more national funders who understand the long-term nature of what we're doing ... We would love for more national funders to realize that change is possible in Chicago. I think the proof is in the pudding with what Kids First Chicago has been able to do."

—KRISTIN POLLOCK

Chief of Development and External Affairs, K1C

FIGURE 4: K1C’S ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



Team	Primary Responsibilities
<p>Community Engagement (11 full-time employees)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building 1,000 parent champions who are deeply committed to one another, connected to K1C staff, and capable of demanding and achieving change. • Acting as facilitators and stewards of information between parents/communities and K1C staff.
<p>Development/ External Affairs (4 full-time employees)</p>	<p>Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritizing fundraising, including engaging with the executive board’s fundraising committee. • Building a strong individual donor portfolio and national supporters. <p>External Affairs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on telling K1C’s story. • Working to develop a powerful national profile. • Building a broad range of media contacts.
<p>Operations (4 full-time employees)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overseeing back-office operations, including strategy, budgeting, human resources, and performance management.
<p>Policy/Data and Research (6 full-time employees)</p>	<p>Policy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anchoring in the needs and desires of parents. • Driving policy change that augments parent power and drives better education outcomes. • Being a voice in local, state, and national education policy research and thought leadership. <p>Data and Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting research and data analysis to corroborate the parent-driven agenda. • Producing strategic data requests. • Polling parents on topical questions.

Conclusion

The K1C team's success over the past eight years are the product of several factors related to both the internal structure of the organization and how it organizes, trains, and builds power among parents. Chicago's schools are far from providing all of the city's students with equitable access to a world-class education, but the work that K1C's staff and parents do each day is making an immediate and lasting impact. From ensuring that students across the city have reliable internet access to helping parents see and capitalize on their innate power and agency, K1C is moving Chicago toward a better tomorrow. ✦

"Education is the biggest lever that we can use to change life outcomes. But changing education outcomes depends on us looking at the whole picture ... Many of us come from the neighborhoods that we're working in or have a lived experience that brings with it a history that connects us to the work ... It's the first time I've worked in a space where I feel safe. And I want that experience to be for everyone who comes into our space."

—**DANIEL ANELLO**
CEO, K1C



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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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