



#1 IN THE SERIES

Building Parent Power

Insights From the Field

By Kelly Robson Foster, Krista Kaput, and Alex Cortez

JUNE 2023



CONTENTS

3	Series Overview
4	Key Findings
	Organizations Profiled
5	Five Overall Themes
20	Conclusion
21	Appendix
22	Endnotes
23	Acknowledgments
	About the Authors
	About Bellwether

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. Collectively, they offer insights into different approaches that organizations can use to build a movement of parent power.

This report surfaces lessons from across the five organizations that are broadly applicable to other parent power organizations interested in expanding their reach and impact on behalf of parents, students, and communities.

CLICK TO ACCESS THE FULL SERIES

Insights From the Field

FaithActs for Education

GO Public Schools

Innovate Public Schools

Kids First Chicago

Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)

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

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

Key Findings

Each organization is instructive on its own. Collectively, they offer a versatile set of lessons and a diverse array of pathways for other parent power organizations to emulate. Our research surfaced 14 findings falling into five overall themes that hold true across the profiled organizations (Appendix).

The first four themes are instructive for organization leaders. Leaders must:

1. Develop a strong mission and vision that provides clarity about the work and facilitates decision-making.
2. Establish structures to build power among parents and support their success.
3. Approach staffing and organizational structures with a flexible mindset and a willingness to make changes over time.
4. Build strategic relationships with funders and diversify revenue streams.

The fifth theme is relevant for funders who support parent power organizations. Funders must:

5. Think differently about how to support parent power organizations as strong allies and partners.

These themes are based on in-depth interviews with organization leaders, board members, external partners, and parents, as well as analysis of each organizations' history, mission, agenda-setting processes, parent organizing strategies, staffing, and fundraising approaches. The specific findings that amplify each theme are discussed in detail below.

ORGANIZATIONS PROFILED



FaithActs for Education (FaithActs)

Founded	Locations
2015	Bridgeport, CT Hartford, CT New Haven, CT



GO Public Schools (GO)

Founded	Locations
2009	Fresno, CA Oakland, CA West Contra Costa, CA



Innovate Public Schools (Innovate)

Founded	Locations
2012	Redwood City, CA East Palo Alto, CA San Jose, CA San Francisco, CA Los Angeles, CA



Kids First Chicago (K1C)

Founded	Location
2015	Chicago, IL



Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)

Founded	Location
2016	Washington, D.C.

Theme 1

Leaders must develop a strong mission and vision that provides clarity about the work and facilitates decision-making.

Leaders of parent power organizations must develop a clear mission and vision to help stakeholders understand how the work they plan to do and their approach to building parent power is distinct from other organizations' parent engagement efforts. This mission and vision also serve as a litmus test for the work an organization says 'yes' to — and as important, says 'no' to — which can help leaders navigate power dynamics with funders and school and system leaders.

FINDING 1A

When preparing to launch a new parent power organization, be explicit about the initial agenda and purpose of the organization.

Leaders must be clear in their own minds about how their organization will be different from others operating in the ecosystem and offer clear language to ensure stakeholders understand that distinction. Daniel Anello, founding CEO of K1C, reflected on the importance of language clarity when he pivoted the organization into parent power: "When we first started, we had board members and funders with different definitions of advocacy and ideas about what we were going to be. We didn't have the language to articulate what we were trying to do, so it was difficult to distinguish ourselves from other parent engagement efforts, where people show up with an agenda and pluck parents who happen to agree with them."¹ Over time, as Anello and his team gained clarity about their work, they developed a definition of parent advocacy that captured their approach and differentiated K1C from other organizations. As K1C's approach proved itself through real-time changes to policy and practice, stakeholders were able to see how its approach differed.

Similarly, Jamilah Prince-Stewart, founding executive director of FaithActs, and her founding team of pastors spent nearly two years behind the scenes figuring out

what they would do and how they would talk about themselves. One of FaithActs' founding pastors, Bishop Derek Calhoun, said, "We were organizing clandestinely before we went public. That was critically important. An organization that's going to be a disruptor needs to have clarity of purpose before it's ready to go public."

FINDING 1B

Understand that one organization cannot do everything.

The work of building parent power and changing education systems is never-ending, and it can be difficult for leaders to say no to important work. Organization leaders often make hard choices to balance responsiveness to pressing needs in the community and staying true to an organization's mission and vision.

In some cases, that means gaining clarity about who your base is. For PAVE's Founder and CEO, Maya Martin Cadogan, this meant: "I've had to recognize that this isn't really a D.C. organization; it's a Black D.C. organization. A lot of decisions we'd made were based on that assumption, but we weren't naming it outright. It's not just that we're Black-led or have Black parents. This is really an organization about and for Black people. And I talk about it that way now, because our decisions about what we do are influenced by what is going to be best for, and what is going to reach and serve

Black people.” Other leaders need to give themselves permission to make decisions in the best interest of the organization’s mission and vision. According to Martin Cadogan, “It’s about being intentional. It’s okay to say, ‘This is who we are, and this is what we do.’”

In other cases, it’s about having a clear policy platform that guides decisions about where and when to engage on issues. For GO, having a clearly defined state policy platform has helped it navigate the rush of state-level work. GO’s CEO, Darcel Sanders, explained: “Now

that we have [a clearly defined state policy platform], it makes it so much easier to decide when and where to engage. There’s so much coming at you from the state level, and having the guardrails of our policy platform has made it easier to bump up what’s in the bill against what we have prioritized for the current session and make decisions quickly.” She urges leaders to “cut yourself some slack. There’s so much to do, and everything can’t be on the list. As leaders, we have to be able to say no and deprioritize.”



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

—GO PARENT LEADER

Theme 2

Leaders must establish structures to build power among parents and support their success.

Parent-led and parent-driven organizations must develop structures that facilitate an open feedback loop with parents, enabling them to take the lead in developing the organization's agenda for change. Organizations create opportunities for parents to develop leadership and organizing skills while learning how decisions are made in systems like city governments or school districts as well as where and how to effect change. In creating these opportunities, leaders must be cognizant of, and proactive in addressing, the barriers that make it difficult for large numbers of parents to be active on campaigns.

FINDING 2A

Build structures to regularly hear from parents to understand the issues their families are facing, and share tools, resources, and information to support them in crafting and executing issue campaigns.

For parents to drive the agenda for change, organization leaders must develop structures that enable parents to share and discuss important issues in their schools and communities. All five organizations profiled here conduct one-on-ones, conversations between organizers and individual parents, to gather input. And each one has tailored programming, like a parent board or training scope and sequence, that provide parents with leadership growth opportunities.

The parent advisory board at K1C convenes parents from across Chicago, and smaller parent leadership teams work on specific issues in particular neighborhoods. PAVE has ward-based boards that engage parents in their local communities, and a citywide board that brings together parents across the ward-based boards. Innovate has parent leadership teams in each of its local communities and a statewide parent leadership team that informs the organization's state-level work. GO has several structures that vary by local community, including campaign action teams,

the family leaders program, and the family leaders action group. FaithActs has an Organizing Institute that provides its members with tailored training in the fundamentals of organizing.

Several profiled organizations have additional structures in place to facilitate parent input. K1C, for example, created the Living Room/La Sala series to bring parents together on a monthly basis, and a rapid response survey panel that allows K1C leaders to poll parents when they need quick input on a fast-moving issue. PAVE hosts an annual Parent Policy Summit, where parent leaders share and discuss key issues and decide on the organization's agenda for the upcoming year, and it conducts periodic surveys to gather parent perspectives. FaithActs has monthly member meetings that provide training and allow parents to surface issues they and their children are facing.

The organizations also provide parents with context and background on how the school system or local government operates, who key decision-makers are, and how the policymaking process works. They also dig into specific education issue areas that are relevant to the needs and agendas of local parents and communities, such as special education, English language learners, school budgeting and finance, and/or social-emotional learning.

All five organizations also have programming to build parent leadership and organizing capacity. The exact topics and skills vary by local context and need, but generally include leadership development, public speaking, relationship-building and networking, organizing, advocacy, and campaign development.

Equipping parents with these tools, resources, and information enables them to access their innate power. As one FaithActs parent leader explained: “FaithActs has shown us the importance of research and coming to meetings prepared so that you can feel powerful when you are organizing and meeting with decision-makers. Passion can only get you so far. FaithActs helps us with the action that follows our passion, but they support us in what action to take, where to get information, and making sure that we are successful.”

FINDING 2B

Reduce barriers to parent participation and celebrate parents regularly.

Parents are busy balancing many responsibilities, so organizations must take concrete steps to reduce barriers to parents’ participation on leadership boards, campaigns, and other engagement opportunities. All of the profiled organizations allocate funding and resources to address common barriers to parent involvement, including time and location of programs, child care, transportation, meals, and language translation. Parents see these efforts and greatly value them. As one Innovate parent leader shared, “Something I really appreciate about Innovate is that they remove the barriers. They address the things that would stop someone from coming to a meeting or participating.”

In addition to removing barriers, the staffs across all five parent power organizations celebrate parents and acknowledge life milestones such as birthdays

or the birth of a child — a simple but powerful gesture that goes a long way toward building strong relationships. One K1C parent leader said, “K1C always celebrates you one way or another. They make you feel appreciated, special, and valued.” FaithActs clergy organizer Bishop Daniel Bland shared a similar sentiment: “FaithActs shows up personally for the people who show up for them. They attend birthday parties. When people are sick, they send cards. It’s not a one-sided relationship. They have created not just an organization, but a family.”

Compensating parents for the time they spend on parent leadership boards is another direct way to remove barriers and celebrate parents. Several of the organizations have a policy or process to compensate a subset of parents — typically those who are most active and/or who are putting in the most time and effort. For example, K1C provides a stipend to the parents who run parent leadership teams. Participating in FaithActs’ Organizing Institute is a paid experience. PAVE provided a stipend to all members of its ward-based and citywide boards throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, though it’s since returned to an all-volunteer model.

However, leaders must consider the trade-offs involved in providing parents with stipends. As Kerry Savage, PAVE’s director of policy, said, “There are a lot of moral reasons for a stipend, but implementation is hard.” Factors worth considering include the time it takes to track eligibility and process stipends, the dynamics of paying parents — in particular, what it means for the activities parents can legally engage in as members of a nonprofit organization — and, ultimately, whether providing a stipend is the highest return on investment when considered alongside other ways organizations directly support parents. Sometimes stipends are the right approach, and sometimes they aren’t.

“At PAVE, we have a collection of parents where it doesn’t matter what your background is; all that matters is that you are there for the betterment of children. PAVE has supported me in existing in spaces of leadership and in amplifying my voice. Now I get to be that example in my community, where we are often forgotten about because we don’t have certain credentials to be in spaces, but we absolutely belong there. I am so appreciative that PAVE has created that for me.”

—PAVE PARENT LEADER



Theme 3

Leaders must approach staffing and organizational structures with a flexible mindset and a willingness to make changes over time.

Organizational structure and staffing decisions are not one-time decisions; both tend to shift as an organization grows and evolves. Leaders must be willing to make changes when needs shift or something isn't working, whether that means cutting programs, creating or eliminating staff positions, shifting roles and responsibilities (including shifting tasks away from the leader), thinking differently about the skill sets of who they hire, and/or changing the composition of the executive board to better meet the organization's needs.

FINDING 3A

Staff need to have strong mission alignment and comfort with the intensive nature of organizing.

The leaders of all five organizations shared that two common challenges in staff fit and success are the fast-paced nature of organizing work and that it often takes place outside traditional working hours.

PAVE's Martin Cadogan said: "We're a parent organization, so we have to do meetings when parents can come, in the evenings or on weekends. That's always a challenge. And the other is, this work isn't slow-moving. People say they're good in a fast-paced environment and they come here and are surprised. It's double time. It can be hard to carve out work-life balance in community work."

Leaders say they've found success when they go into hiring with a flexible mindset, understanding the must-haves and being willing to let other pieces go. K1C's Anello explained: "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 is good and who's committed to the mission, rather than looking for a unicorn that fits into a very specific job description."

One way some organizations have chosen to access the expertise they need without committing to a full-time role is through contractors. FaithActs intentionally keeps its staff small and contracts out for certain services, such as accounting, so it can be a good steward of its resources and devote as much of those resources as possible to its core work of organizing. At GO, Sanders is considering contracting out for grant writers rather than continuing to do that work in-house, in order to free more of her time and that of the executive leadership team's time to focus on other aspects of leading the organization.

FINDING 3B

Understand and consider trade-offs in board member composition.

Typically, nonprofit governance boards are made up of business leaders, other nonprofit professionals, and donors who can provide access to networks of power and wealth. The leaders of parent power organizations often want one other group to be represented on their boards: parents.

Three of the five organizations profiled in this report have strong parent representation on their boards. In deciding to add parents to their boards, leaders have to weigh a number of trade-offs. On one hand, parents

already lead the organization's agenda and are running its campaigns, so having parents on the oversight body makes sense in terms of mission alignment and continuity. This also ensures that parents' perspectives are directly included in the board's decision-making processes around funding, strategy, and management. On the other hand, it can be a big ask of parents to join an unpaid governing board.

Leaders don't necessarily need to choose between parent-led boards and traditional board roles; organizations can simply choose to add parents in addition to more traditional board members. However, this can result in a larger board (K1C's is 19 people, for example), which requires more management. Adding parents in lieu of other types of individuals can help keep board numbers smaller but may mean that leaders have less of certain types of expertise, such as fundraising or legal counsel. At PAVE, Martin Cadogan had to shift away from her all-parent founding board as the organization grew to one that could help her "do some higher-level things, not just around fundraising but also strategy and risk management. The right people for the board are different for a bigger organization than when we were small and scrappy."

FaithActs' Prince-Stewart, whose board is primarily composed of pastors, is currently considering many of these trade-offs: "We are thinking about bringing people on our board who have greater funding capacity. However, our board is a sacred space and we're highly protective of this organization. So, the folks that we bring on need to be aligned with our people and connected to our work. It's going to take time to figure out."

FINDING 3C

Be unafraid to make bold changes when something isn't working as the organization grows and evolves.

An organizational structure that works well at one stage in an organization's life span may not work well in another. Leaders must make bold and, at times, uncomfortable or unpopular changes when something is no longer working. For Martin Cadogan at PAVE, this involved at one point disbanding PAVE's organizing department in favor of embedding organizing as a skill and responsibility held across all staff roles, as well as eliminating some school-based training for school leaders that was time-intensive and difficult to measure impact. After nearly a decade of work, both GO and Innovate completely restructured the internal workings of their organizations. GO's Sanders is working to streamline the local staffing structure so that teams are similarly staffed with the same types of skills and expertise. At Innovate, Vilchez downsized the leadership team and sunset several programs that were no longer mission-aligned. FaithActs launched its Organizing Institute in June 2022 and after one successful cohort, Prince-Stewart and her team hit pause, realizing they needed to step back, look at the data they had collected, and change to the program to better meet the needs of participants. At K1C, Anello revamped the organizations' agenda-setting process, establishing new structures, such as monthly meetings and a rapid response panel, to ensure greater opportunities for parents to engage.



“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

Theme 4

Leaders must build strategic relationships with funders and diversify revenue streams.

Philanthropic funders are a key — and often primary — source of funding for parent power organizations, as many deliberately avoid taking money from school districts, government agencies, and other institutions they're working to change. Given this reliance on philanthropy, it's important for parent power organizations to have a diversified base of funders to weather shifts in the funding landscape and in individual funders' strategic plans and priorities. Relying on a small number of large funders or individual donors can put an organization in a precarious position if a funder or donor decides to decrease or discontinue its funding.

While the profiled organizations are at different points in their fundraising strategies, all of them are focusing on diversifying funding streams to ensure the stability and independence of their organizations.

FINDING 4A

Have a strategy in place for identifying and building relationships with funders who align with the organization's mission, vision, and goals.

Fundraising is time-consuming, and there are many types of funders. Leaders will benefit from having a strong strategy in place to guide decision-making around which funders to approach. For example, leaders of parent power organizations must understand the distinction between gifts and grants. Grants are given with a specific agreement in place for the organization to complete a set of activities in exchange for a certain amount of money. Gifts, on the other hand, have few to no strings attached — the donor has little involvement in how the recipient uses the funds.² Individual donors and foundations can make either grants or gifts, although individual donors typically give gifts while foundations make grants.

Leaders looking for unrestricted funds, which allow an organization to determine how to use them, may want to prioritize donors and foundations giving gifts. The terms of grant agreements vary widely, and as leaders

seek grants, they ought to ensure they understand from the outset what's expected in terms of outcomes and reporting.

Fundraising is frequently relationship-based. FaithActs' Prince-Stewart realized early on the importance of relationships in fundraising: "I've learned people do things for people, not organizations. I understood I wasn't selling people on FaithActs, I was selling people on me as a leader and asking them to invest in me as a leader. I had to sell myself as a leader and my vision for getting change done." As a result, leaders must be thoughtful about building relationships with funders and about who in their organization owns those relationships.

Participating in conferences, panels, and other national or regional events can provide leaders with opportunities to meet funders, build relationships, and share their work. Prince-Stewart prioritized these events during FaithActs' early days. She recalled, "I had a lot of early opportunities to talk about work I had done, and so there was a lot of exposure at conferences, and I was asked to speak on panels. I remember being places and literally raising money because I was talking about

the work and a funder was there and came up to me saying they want to learn more about my organization.” PAVE’s Martin Cadogan has similar advice: “Say yes to participating in working groups or on panels to get in front of funders regularly. Funding happens through word of mouth.”

Decisions about who owns relationships with funders vary by organization and context. In some cases, as in PAVE’s, the founder or CEO is best suited for this role. Founder Martin Cadogan owns much of the fundraising responsibilities and relationships with funders. Those relationships have been cultivated over the years, some beginning prior to her launching PAVE. In other cases, founders may initially cultivate relationships with funders but, as the organization grows, choose to offload some of the fundraising work to a development director or other staff member. K1C, GO, FaithActs, and Innovate all have individuals or teams focused on development who support their respective leaders in cultivating new funders. These development teams free up the leader’s time to do the work of leading the organization. Organizations like GO and Innovate, which both operate in multiple cities, decentralize local fundraising to local leaders, while the CEOs predominantly focus on national funding.

FINDING 4B

When possible, identify ways to diversify the organization’s base of funders.

While the leaders of all five profiled organizations acknowledged that most of their revenue will likely come from philanthropy for the foreseeable future, there was a consistent desire to diversify funding streams. The priorities, interests, and strategies of philanthropic funders change over time, as do the needs of the families who drive the agendas of parent power organizations. This may result in an organization losing funding if their agendas no longer align. Having a diversified base of funders can help organizations weather those shifts. All five leaders indicated they are exploring different types of philanthropy, working to cultivate individual donors and corporate giving to complement their base of private foundations.

Several leaders are identifying earned revenue streams and opportunities to provide fee-for-service work. Innovate runs three national training programs that generate earned revenue. Innovate is building the capacity of its team to increase supports for other organizations in their strategy and execution beyond an initial set of training sessions, which could become an earned revenue stream. Charlene Mack, Innovate’s vice president of national partnerships and training, 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?”

At GO, Sanders is also exploring the potential for earned revenue streams, such as partnering with other organizations to produce external-facing data reports or offering opportunities for other organizations to tap into GO’s existing advocacy training and programming for parents. Innovate’s Vilchez is similarly considering whether and how to leverage her research and policy team’s work to create a new revenue stream.

All of the organizations have created materials to support parents in understanding how systems work and in building their leadership and organizing skills; several are considering whether there’s a market to package and sell these curricula to other organizations.

Even as organization leaders seek to diversify, they are careful to remain financially independent from the systems that they engage with and are working to change. None of the five profiled organizations has contracted with its local school districts. K1C’s Pollock explained this decision: “We don’t want to serve in a traditional contractor role with CPS [Chicago Public Schools] because that changes our focus. We work for the parents of CPS students first and foremost.” In the same vein, the organizations also don’t take money

from local municipalities or the state. Innovate’s Vilchez explained: “We tend to stay away from public dollars at a very local level because when you organize and hold entities accountable, it’s harder to do that if they’re actually funding you.” Brittany Coleman, FaithActs’ chief impact officer, had a similar rationale. “We’ve never received state, federal, or local funding. The reason for that is because federal and state and local officials are the decision makers on the issues that we are making demands around, and we can’t afford to be beholden to them.”

FINDING 4C

Be consistent and deliberate in navigating power dynamics and control of the organization’s agenda with funders.

What sets parent power organizations apart from other parent engagement efforts is that parents — not funders, school system leaders, politicians, or even the organization leader — set the organization’s agenda. Navigating the power dynamics of who controls the agenda for change can be challenging. K1C Chief of Development and External Affairs Kristin Pollock advised, “Be solid in what you’re doing. Lean into your model. We know the value of our model, and that’s what we’re selling. We’re not going to get distracted by individual pet projects.”

To do this, leaders must establish clear boundaries with philanthropic funders. At PAVE, Martin Cadogan has set a hard line that “when [a foundation] funds us, they also stay out of the work.” In some cases, this has meant pushing back against funders’ requirements, such as getting a seat on the board of the organizations to which they provide substantial amounts of funding. She explained: “When I started this work in 2016, many

funders required that they get a seat on the board of organizations they funded at high levels. I saw in a lot of other organizations, that when they had funders on their board, the funders were directing the work. So it was important to me to keep those separate. At PAVE, our work has to be driven by our community of parents, which means that even I don’t make the decisions about our policy priorities as the founder and executive director, so the board and funders can’t either. And it’s important that leaders are clear about those boundaries between who drives the programmatic work and who supports the organizational goals in parent-driven nonprofits like PAVE.”

Prince-Stewart has also stayed true to the organizational direction that FaithActs’ members guide their work, not funders. “I strategically didn’t ask for money from certain people. And we have walked away from funding because the funders were asking us to do things that we didn’t want to do or weren’t comfortable with.”

One trend that leaders have noticed is that as these organizations have demonstrated consistent success over time, the issue of funder involvement in the agenda has become less of a problem. This trend can be a challenge for new organizations but also encouraging for those able to grow. PAVE’s Martin Cadogan said, “We haven’t really had these issues because we’re doing a good job and have a good reputation locally and nationally. I’ve also built my relationships with funders in order to help them feel assured that investing in PAVE without trying to control the agenda will meet their own philanthropic priorities.” K1C’s Anello shared, “You need proof points to change people’s minds. It’s unfortunate that you have to build it first, but the conversation we have with funders is different now that we have so many proof points.”



“I love that FaithActs doesn’t just talk about the problem. FaithActs allows me to be part of the solution and the bigger picture. By myself, I felt powerless and that I couldn’t make much of a change. But FaithActs shows the importance of unity and power in numbers. I am on a team that is helping to find solutions.”

—FAITHACTS PARENT LEADER

Theme 5

Funders must think differently about how to support parent power organizations as strong allies and partners.

Philanthropy is the primary source of revenue for parent power organizations. Organization leaders recognize the importance of philanthropic support and are grateful for it. At the same time, leaders have identified several ways that funders can be even better partners in the work of parent organizing.

FINDING 5A

Think differently about milestones, deliverables, and funding timelines.

Parent organizing for systems change requires ongoing, long-term investment to build deep, authentic relationships with parents and stakeholders and to build an infrastructure of parent power to engage those stakeholders. However, funders tend to provide grants on narrow timelines (one to three years). As a result, leaders of parent power organizations often struggle with the cadence of milestones and deliverables that grantmaking institutions typically require. As FaithActs' Prince-Stewart shared, "Funders say they want to invest in parent organizing but then ask us to do something in a year that really takes five to 10 years to accomplish. They ask me what I'm going to accomplish in three years, but then they give me money for one year." Innovate's Vilchez noted a similar challenge, saying, "Regardless of the size of the gift, one year of funding is just so troublesome. Nothing can really be measured in one year."

One way for funders to better support the needs of parent power organizations is to think more broadly about desired outcomes, rather than specific outputs like numbers of press hits or how many people show up at an event. Prince-Stewart explained: "People who do organizing cannot chase outputs because if we do, we're not being strategically responsive to what it's going to take to win. We can get really clear on outcomes and

what we want to win on and we can share some outputs, but funders need to give us the ability to change and pivot as we learn lessons along the way, because the outcome is the true goal."

In addition, funders can provide unrestricted dollars. Leaders need this type of funding to support their internal operations and to have the flexibility to fund the variety of supports they may need to provide to parents to remove barriers to participation, such as child care, food, or transportation.

FINDING 5B

Support organizations through leadership changes.

Leaders of parent power organizations spend a significant amount of time building relationships with funders. K1C's Anello reflected: "So much about fundraising and what you have to do depends on who the leader is. It's so reliant on the relationships an individual has. If you have relationships with wealthy individuals and come into a network naturally, then you have a direct access point to the resources that are essential to building something. I didn't have those relationships, given my background, so I had to build them for the first time. That took a long time. I am still making up ground for not having that organic network, but everything has relied on establishing trust and connection with our supporters."

Funders naturally want to know and develop trust in the leader building a new or growing organization. Bisi Oyedele, CEO of Education Forward DC, a major funder of PAVE, said of Martin Cadogan during the early days of PAVE funding: “We saw PAVE, and in particular Maya [Martin Cadogan] as a unique participant in the space to bring parents to the education conversation more directly. Maya was uniquely poised to bring that vision to life.” K1C’s Anello shared a story of how K1C’s current board chair took an early bet on him: “I think I was maybe two years into the role, and he called me and said, ‘Hey, I have to make a decision between this other organization and you guys, and something about what you said to me just sounds more real. And I like you, so I’m making the bet on you.’ And his organization wrote us a check for \$250,000.”

However, leadership changes over time, and if funders focus only on the leader and not the organization, it could jeopardize the long-term sustainability and success of the organization. As FaithActs’ Prince-Stewart explained: “Funding the leader is a problem in organizing because the whole point of organizing is to not have heroes or villains and to be sustainable. We want to have multifaceted leadership structures. If you think of it as a snake, the leader can be seen as the head of the snake. When it comes to power and when it comes to campaigns, you don’t want a head. You don’t want something you can cut off. So we really, desperately want people to fund our work and our success and for the organization to be sustainable regardless of who is at the helm, because the funding is for what we do and what we can accomplish.”

Funding individual leaders rather than organizations can also create equity challenges when there are transitions in leadership. This is particularly salient for leaders of color, who consistently win less grant money than their white counterparts.³ GO’s Sanders explained her firsthand experience: “I’m a Black woman, and I’m often treated differently by philanthropy. I’m working every day to determine what doors will open for me, which are sometimes different than the doors that were open for my predecessor.” Innovate’s Vilchez shared a similar experience of navigating significant changes in funders after she became the new CEO. “Although everyone

gave verbal appreciation for my leadership and the transition, we had at least four or five major funders who basically said to us, ‘This is going to be the last year that we fund you.’”

Focusing on supporting the work of an organization more broadly, rather than the specific leader, can help create a more stable and reliable base of funding that honors the work these organizations do and transcends leadership changes.

FINDING 5C

Look for opportunities to be thought partners and allies to organization leaders and offer other types of support in addition to direct funding.

Funders are powerful allies for parent power organizations, not just because of the financial resources they provide, but also because of the knowledge, experience, and networks they have access to. Ideally, funders find opportunities to bring these other, non-financial resources to bear on the work they are doing with parent power organizations. This is especially beneficial for leaders, particularly leaders of color, who do not come from wealthy networks and may struggle to build them. As Innovate’s Vilchez said: “Funders need to realize that they have significant power potential to be partners, not just to be funders. Since day one, I have met monthly with the program officer [of a major funder]. I provide her with an update and share highlights of what we’re working on. But I also consult with her, I ask her opinion, and I get her thoughts about the things I’m thinking about. That type of influence and power, and ability to really come beside someone who is a new leader in this space, has been so significant. She’s connected me to other potential funders, she’s connected me to other organizations. There’s just brilliance and opportunity in thinking about the power beyond money, the power and influence that some of the funders have.”

Funders can be proactive in building these kinds of relationships with parent power organizations. Vilchez said: “I’ve got some funders who sit with me and say, ‘Michelle, what do you need right now? How can we

come alongside you? Is it around capacity building? Do you need a coach? Do you have one? How can we support you?" So that has been tremendously helpful, too. I think that there is this opportunity to come alongside organizations and be more than funders."

FINDING 5D

Let parents lead the way and trust they know what they need.

To truly support parent power organizations, funders must believe that parents know what they need and trust in their leadership and self-advocacy efforts. This is easier said than done, though, as efforts to catalyze, support, fund, and lead change are often caught up in the agendas or biases of funders (or other partnering organizations). As K1C's Anello shared, "Part of our fight has been trying to change people's intrinsic biases about where funding should go, where people should put their dollars, and how they should invest. There's a lot of racial bias that clouds perspectives on whether we should invest in parents. There's a hesitancy to give dollars in support of families versus putting dollars into

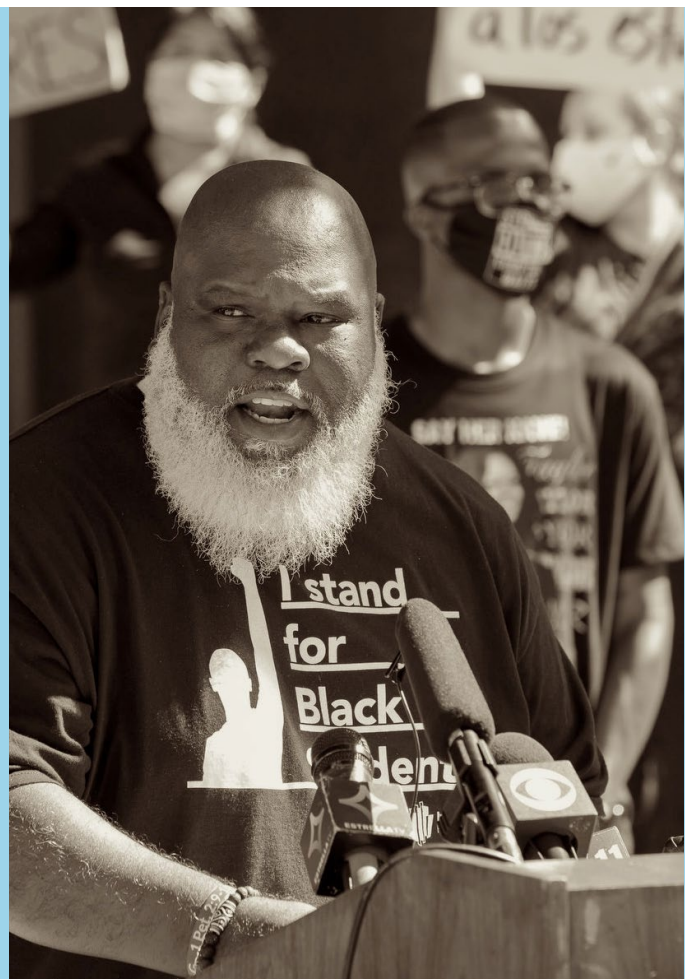
a tutoring program for kids or a school or some other effort that puts the resources in a place that is perceived as safer than directly supporting the families."

If and when funders do decide to invest in parent power organizations, there's the uncomfortable truth that they're investing in work they cannot control. As FaithActs' Prince-Stewart explained: "Funders say, 'We want to support parent organizing,' but then they ask me what I'm going to be doing five years from now. It's like, 'I don't know because our people haven't decided what they're doing.' I know what our core issues are, and what our mission is, but there is a degree of specificity that can't be known in parent-led organizations. For funders, I think there's a desire to control something that can't be controlled."

Leaders must be firm and consistent in the boundaries they set with funders and how they protect parents' agendas (see Finding 4C, Page 15). But more important, funders need to trust parents, fund the organizations that organize and support them to use their power, and get out of the way.

"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



Conclusion

Successful parent power organizations demonstrate strengths across several key domains: clarity in mission and vision; leadership, advocacy, and organizing structures that allow parents to lead; strong internal structures that can evolve with the organization; and strategic approaches to fundraising. Leaders of these organizations need to be both strategic and nimble, maintaining a clear vision and the ability to pivot as the landscape changes and parents' needs evolve. Funders that support parent power organizations also need to be flexible in how they assess organizational success and support organizations and their leaders, and, fundamentally, must trust parents' perspectives about what their children need.

The findings discussed here offer insight into how successful parent power organizations structure their work, internally and externally, and shed light on decisions that leaders grapple with every day. With consistent resources and support, parent power organizations have a potent opportunity to reshape schools and education systems for the better, in partnership with the parents and families who are most invested in their success. ✦



Appendix

LIST OF OVERALL THEMES AND RELATED FINDINGS

Theme	Related Findings
<p>1. Leaders must develop a strong mission and vision that provides clarity about the work and facilitates decision-making.</p>	<p>1A When preparing to launch a new parent power organization, be explicit about the initial agenda and purpose of the organization.</p> <p>1B Understand that one organization cannot do everything.</p>
<p>2. Leaders must establish structures to build power among parents and support their success.</p>	<p>2A Build structures to regularly hear from parents to understand the issues their families are facing, and share tools, resources, and information to support them in crafting and executing issue campaigns.</p> <p>2B Reduce barriers to parent participation and celebrate parents regularly.</p>
<p>3. Leaders must approach staffing and organizational structures with a flexible mindset and a willingness to make changes over time.</p>	<p>3A Staff need to have strong mission alignment and comfort with the intensive nature of organizing.</p> <p>3B Understand and consider trade-offs in board member composition.</p> <p>3C Be unafraid to make bold changes when something isn't working as the organization grows and evolves.</p>
<p>4. Leaders must build strategic relationships with funders and diversify revenue streams.</p>	<p>4A Have a strategy in place for identifying and building relationships with funders who align with the organization's mission, vision, and goals.</p> <p>4B When possible, identify ways to diversify the organization's base of funders.</p> <p>4C Be consistent and deliberate in navigating power dynamics and control of the organization's agenda with funders.</p>
<p>5. Funders must think differently about how to support parent power organizations as strong allies and partners.</p>	<p>5A Think differently about milestones, deliverables, and funding timelines.</p> <p>5B Support organizations through leadership changes.</p> <p>5C Look for opportunities to be thought partners and allies to organization leaders and offer other types of support in addition to direct funding.</p> <p>5D Let parents lead the way and trust they know what they need.</p>

Endnotes

- 1 Co-authors interviewed external parent power organizers in a range of in-depth interviews spanning January through April 2023.
- 2 "What's the Difference Between a Gift and a Grant?," Inside Philanthropy, <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:5ybf1XLNKVIJ:https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/explainers/whats-the-difference-between-a-gift-and-a-grant&cd=13&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>.
- 3 Jim Rendon, "Nonprofits Led by People of Color Win Less Grant Money With More Strings (Study)," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/nonprofits-led-by-people-of-color-win-less-grant-money-with-more-strings-study/>.

About the Authors



KELLY ROBSON FOSTER

Kelly Robson Foster is an associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at kelly.foster@bellwether.org.



KRISTA KAPUT

Krista Kaput is a senior analyst at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at krista.kaput@bellwether.org.



ALEX CORTEZ

Alex Cortez is a partner at Bellwether in the Strategic Advising practice area. He can be reached at alex.cortez@bellwether.org.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the many individuals who gave their time and shared their knowledge with us to inform our work, including The Barr Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative for their financial support of this project. We want to thank all staff, parent leaders, and external partners from FaithActs for Education, GO Public Schools, Innovate Public Schools, Kids First Chicago, and Parents Amplifying Voices in Education for being generous with their time and allowing us to tell their stories.

We would also like to thank our Bellwether colleagues Juliet Squire for her input on earlier drafts of this document and Alexis Richardson for her support. Thank you to Alyssa Schwenk, Andy Jacob, Zoe Campbell, Julie Nguyen, and Amber Walker for shepherding and disseminating this work, and to Super Copy Editors.

Some entities listed in this report are current or former Bellwether clients or funders; Alex Cortez is a current Innovate Public Schools board member. A full list of partners is available on our website. As with all Bellwether publications, authors had full editorial control.

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



© 2023 Bellwether

- © This report carries a Creative Commons license, which permits noncommercial re-use of content when proper attribution is provided. This means you are free to copy, display and distribute this work, or include content from this report in derivative works, under the following conditions:
- 📄 **Attribution.** You must clearly attribute the work to Bellwether and provide a link back to the publication at www.bellwether.org.
- 🚫 **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes without explicit prior permission from Bellwether.
- 🔄 **Share Alike.** If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a license identical to this one.

For the full legal code of this Creative Commons license, please visit www.creativecommons.org. If you have any questions about citing or reusing Bellwether content, please contact us.